



Participants in the THINKING ABOUT PLACE project are invited to walk around in Helena and its surroundings, taking notes about "place", as experienced, so we can share our observations, questions, and ideas -- by email for now, and later at a group workshop. Here are Dennis' tenth set of notes inspired by some of the questions explored at our drive-in on Sept. 2nd 2021.

THINKING ABOUT PLACE IN REEDER'S ALLEY

~ Natural-Urban Landscape, Walkability, Sightlines, Human Presence, Artisanal Presence, Time, Complexity, Curiosity/Wonder ~

Reeder's Alley is a narrow irregular space defined by naked rock and little buildings, mostly conjoined, that follow the pitch and swerve of the terrain and seem to reflect the scale of the terrain. It's urban, but still reads as a natural gully. Both sorts of context are with me. They jostle agreeably. I "sense" both.

I get that sense of both -- urban stuff in a sort of dance with assertive natural topography -- in many parts of Helena. It's a central theme of "place" here, with variations. Main Street, much like Reeder's Alley, owes its narrow, crooked shape to the narrow, crooked gulch bottom it follows. Our South Hills and Mount Helena crowd and shape the town from two sides, always in sight, always right there, not letting me forget that I'm never more than a short walk from open-land. I'm entertained by the lay of the land.

That close dance of urban and open-land helps sustain another theme of "place" here -- a sense of walkable proximity -- exemplified at Reeder's Alley, Main Street, and the urban-open-land interface. Walking is fun and useful here. Stuff is immediate. There's a

fine-grained pattern of proximities, spatial and visual. There's a closely woven network of walkable sightlines.

This sense of (functioning) walkable proximity leads to a sense of human presence -- universally taken for granted as an ingredient of urban "place". There are two kinds of human presence here, (1) the obvious -- street life (folks not in cars), best found on those lively Main Street sidewalks and outdoor gathering places, and (2) what I think might best be called "artisanal presence."

Downtown's street life is sustained in part by Main Street's narrowness and crookedness -- which puts a damper on car traffic and facilitates jaywalking -- and also by a variation of that fine-grained pattern of proximities. Here it's a pattern of closely-spaced destinations lined up directly fronting the walkways at a right angle, like books on a shelf, skinny end forward. Again, stuff is immediate here.

There's a strong sense of "artisanal presence" in Reeder's Alley and elsewhere downtown. In the Alley I enjoy Louis Reeder's easy-going rapport with his tricky site; I like the way he uses rock found on site, but otherwise leaves those bedrock exposures alone. *I feel the presence of the builders in the logic of the brick and rubblestone work.* It's all fitted together by hand. The satisfaction shows.

Then those eloquent bedrock exposures bring a *sense of geologic deep time* to Reeder's Alley -- as real as the historic (human) time showing in those little buildings. Again, both sorts of context are with me.

Artisanal presence downtown is in the architecture -- skilled hand-work employed to express more than a century's worth of designers' creativity, eclecticism, and individuality -- local takes on Richardsonianism to Arts-and-Crafts to Art Deco, etc -- Stranahan's stuff, Paulsen's stuff, oddball stuff. What it all has in common is that those facades are built to be enjoyed up close at a walking pace. They're for street life.

When I think about my "sense" of the things mentioned above -- ingredients of place - - there are two things which seem to pull the whole recipe together. One is an overall sense of complexity -- "place" as the mostly-accidental result of 157 years of human ingenuity and wit on an assertive piece of terrain. The parts of town where my "sense of place" starts to wane are the parts where we've tried to ignore or counter that complexity -- where, for example, we've tried to straighten out the crookedness and flatten the bumps.

I recall the first question asked at the September 2nd Drive-in -- "Does appreciation of a 'sense of place' necessarily involve an understanding of the place? Or can it happen more organically with little or no knowledge about what's being looked at, experienced, etc?"

I'd answer that "sense of place" has less to do with understanding the place than with being *curious* about it. I value that "sense of complexity" because it engages my (organic?) curiosity and imagination, which I thoroughly enjoy, and which leads me to understanding without ever exhausting the mystery. "Sense of place" here, for me, is sense of wonder.

The other thing which pulls the recipe together for me is that "sense of walkable proximity." Walking is my natural way of moving around. Nature equips me to happily engage with whatever I meet while walking. To be on foot is to be present in a place. "Place" is pulled together by walkable sightlines.

(Check out [Dennis' 2nd set of notes](#), too, for additional thoughts on Reeder's Alley)

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