

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

“Dennis, I was a participant in your workshop “Thinking About Place” and found many things to think about. Thanks for taking the time to share your thoughts and expertise. The area in Helena that most attracts my thought is the intersection between the city scape and the forests, especially Mt. Helena. Your guide gave me an opportunity to think about it in a new way. I’ve attached my notes and thank you again for this expanded perspective.” -- Marie Z. Bourgeois

Do you see the ingredients of topography, time, human presence, scale, complexity, and peculiarity coming into play in any of the neighborhoods or streets of Helena? If so, how? Where? Are there other ingredients of “place” that you think should be on this list? What are those and what experiences in Helena inspire you to add these to the list?

⇒ **Access to the natural world should be a part of the walking experience. I noticed that several access points to Mt. Helena had human-built barriers that served as abrupt barriers to the natural world. How can we build points of access that are gradual and serve to invite rather than deter?**

TOPOGRAPHY: Distant, within walking distance, and underfoot, Helena's topography always asserts itself. A distant rim of strong landforms (Sleeping Giant, Big Belt, Skihi, etc.) gives us our bearings in more than the merely directional sense. It wakens memories and suggests possibilities. Within walking distance, Mount Helena and the South Hills, always present, crowd and shape the town from two sides. Underfoot, the lay of the land is always entertaining -- giving us, among other things, a narrow crooked Main Street, Reeder's Alley, and all sorts of fun vantage points and places to walk.

⇒ **One of the things I love about this place is that mountains surround Helena Valley. The view towards Mt. Helena and the view towards the Helena Valley invites residents to include natural settings into their experience. This topography is welcoming.**

TIME: The temporal element works on at least two scales. There's historic time, our human history as present in our older architecture and urban layout (Reeder's Alley, Downtown, etc.), and deep (geologic) time present in our eloquent bedrock exposures and entertaining topography.

⇒ **One issue with time is that we experience the area in present time and need historical information to understand where each feature came from in the past. For example, Mt. Helena was without trees from the settlement of the city until the mid-70's when several tree plantings occurred.**

HUMAN PRESENCE: This presence, again, is felt in several ways. Most obviously, there's "street life" -- folks on foot mixing outdoors, a universally recognized essential ingredient of urban "place". Then there's what might be called "artisanal presence", the presence of craftsmen, builders, designers, etc.

as felt in the presence of their work -- architectural detail, for example, as employed to help create a setting for street life (think of Main Street); or the plain, legible workmanship at Reeder's Alley.

⇒ **The human influence I see when hiking around Mt. Helena is the signage. Right away I noticed that signs here usually articulate what can be done on the trail rather than what is prohibited. This differs from the city I used to live in and is a welcoming change.**

SCALE: This might best be thought of as our sense of physical position relative to the "stuff of place" suggested by those previous three ingredients. Are we "there", on foot, in the midst of it all, or are we riding through in a vehicle? Is "place" near enough to touch, or are we seeing it from a distance? I'll argue (as an old urban planner) that urban "place," to the extent that it evokes a sense of historic time and ongoing human presence (both kinds) must be scaled for walking. It depends on a sense of walkable proximity. It's pulled together by walkable sightlines. This gets complicated of course. Distant topography for example, not within walking distance, plays its place-making role by visual juxtaposition with the nearby stuff. Walkable sightlines usually involve a distant view. Walkable scale is key, but the whole range of scale is at play in urban "sense of place."

⇒ **The walkable sight line from the tubs Trailhead is a straight linear street, this affords a viewshed of the whole mountain. The approach to Mt. Helena in a more developed area features more abrupt entry to the Mountain.**

COMPLEXITY: This is the quality which engages curiosity and imagination and a pedestrian's freedom to explore and engage. At best it's a fine-grained mix of (at least) the four ingredients listed above. It's the stuff of walkable sightlines.

⇒ **Since Mt. Helena was replanted over several years in the 1970's, most of the trees are all the same age. The undergrowth is not very diverse, as in an old growth forest. This complexity would be much more interesting than the mono culture of organisms found on Mt. Helena. As time moves on, nature will fill in with more complex features.**

PECULIARITY: This happens when the ingredients come together in such a way as to evoke a sense that what we're seeing or walking through exists here and nowhere else.

⇒ **My initial view of Mt. Helena was from the downtown area. Once I saw the mountain from the west side of town, its large rock facing was impressive due to the uniqueness of the formation. Just like the fire Tower, Mt. Helena serves as an icon for the City.**