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Making Time in Boise: Embracing the Befuddling City

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Robert Addison painting

Detail of Boise native Robert Addison's 1949 "View of Boise," the befuddling city bathed in light and shadow, progress and pastoralism.

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Boise has a penchant for being listed. In 2011, CNN Money listed Boise as the third-best retirement city. Last year, *Forbes* ranked Boise as the second-best city in the United States in which to raise a family. In July, the *San Francisco Chronicle* published an article stating that Boise was the seventh safest city in the U.S. According to the city's economic development team, since 2008, Boise has made it onto more than 50 top-10 lists. While some of these lists are just plain silly, others are an indication of the qualities that make Boise a remarkable city. And although these lists are subjective and not the result of independent scientific research, the sheer number of lists Boise finds itself on demonstrates the elusive intrigue of this isolated Western hamlet.

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Despite all this listmania, Jeff Speck, a national authority on walkable communities, told *Boise Weekly* in June that, "given the impediments that your downtown streets currently impose — including all the one-way streets—it is a bit befuddling to me that things are as good as they are." Add that to the list of lists: top-10 befuddling cities. But disheartening as it may be, a consultant of Speck's pedigree is unlikely to tell a client that the city's success is befuddling unless what he saw in Boise truly befuddled him.

Speck does have some solid planning ground to stand on. Look at a satellite map of Boise on Google and you will notice many surface parking lots, undeveloped parcels and the emergency exits out of downtown that are Front and Myrtle streets. Walk around and you cannot help but notice a lack of connectivity between different parts of downtown, a lack of signage for out-of-town visitors and opening hours at some downtown stores which are indeed befuddling. Throw in an anemic airport, suburban sprawl, troubling air quality and spotty cell coverage, and there's definitely enough fodder for befuddlement.

Despite all the things that Boise could have done better, despite all these things that don't quite work right — the little inconveniences of living “in the middle of nowhere” — the success of downtown Boise does not, in fact, befuddle.

Speck, in his short visit to Boise, realized that there is something that makes Boise work. In the interview with *Boise Weekly* he stated: “Quite honestly, I was not that hopeful that Boise would be the kind of place that could keep its millennials from going to Denver or Portland,” he said. “Now that I've been here, I feel entirely the opposite. Boise has what it takes.”

So what is it that makes Boise work, despite the obvious and not so obvious flaws? At a recent Congress for the New Urbanism Conference in Salt Lake City, a panel of faith-based community leaders inadvertently shed some light on it. They touched on qualities of cities that are typically not on the forefront of a planner's mind: The social and spiritual aspects of the city.

Bradford Houston, one of the panelists and the manager of architectural design in the Temple Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commented that a good city should provide you with time. For planners, this statement is somewhat puzzling: streets are about maximizing travel flow and efficiency and economic opportunity. The idea that a city exists to provide us with time to linger, rather than maximizing our efficiency, is... befuddling.

Yet it seems to describe life in Boise. Going to the Saturday market is part of an enjoyable routine that includes a cup of coffee at Flying M, tasting wine from local wineries and enjoying a freshly made “stroopwafel” at the market. While, the city is not intentionally manufacturing additional time, it allows residents to easily combine chores with free time and enjoyment. One rarely feels as though they are wasting time in the city.

There is surprisingly little written about “time” in the mainstream planning literature. In the 1970s, planners were concerned about increasing leisure time. Some even started thinking that with fewer hours spent at work, cities could be redesigned, the offices of the central business district replaced with amusement parks. More recently, Donald Shoup, distinguished professor of urban planning at UCLA, has argued that cities should charge more for on-street parking to increase business volume downtown, an argument with which Boise officials have flirted. In transportation planning, so called “congestion based pricing” and high occupancy lanes provide incentives to carpools and hybrids.

Douglas Kolozsvari and Shoup on “Small Change.”



Michael Brands
Planner and architectural designer Jeff Speck visited Boise June 24 to conduct a ‘walkability study.’

It appears that most of our planning considerations with regard to time are about streamlining and minimizing waste. Planners, like most people in modern society, see time as a scarce commodity. With clever designs and schemes, they try to make our use of time in cities more efficient. For many years, planning and architecture have been preoccupied with efficiency, trying to turn the city into a predictable, frictionless, scheduled environment. Different districts of the city were assigned different functions through zoning regulations. Space was homogenized and our daily activities were divided into buckets: work, live, recreate, shop, eat, etc. Each district was maximized for its designated use with ample parking for big retail, fast food courts in shopping malls and cul-de-sacs for suburbs with white picket fences. All this produced predictable landscapes where every activity has its own special, designated place.

Of course, creating different spaces for different activities during the day—"cities of places"—meant that we needed one additional district, the transportation corridor, to allow people in cars to move as quickly as possible between these different spaces. Over the years, our freeways became more and more efficient and safe. Unfortunately the cost was that roads increasingly resembled subway tunnels, a district as disconnected from its surroundings as possible.

In this context, Bradford Houston's remarks that a city should provide us with time starts making much more sense. Planners, designers and architects have been so concerned about creating efficient districts that are optimized for one specific activity that they ignored the time involved in the simple act of changing activities, which involves getting into the car, entering the transportation district and very efficiently wasting time en route to the next activity. In fact, any time you enter the transportation district you are effectively losing time.

So let's get back to Boise and Jeff Speck's befuddlement. The city's awkward mix of uses and abrupt changes between blocks is disorienting and certainly not efficient. Bike lanes that fade to nothing, the random one-way grid, the lack of signage, stores that open at random hours — Boise is a planner's worst nightmare. And yet Boiseans are blessed with the gift of time.

The sheer number of cyclists, unhelmeted and off-lane; cafes full of laptops and meetings; noon-hour and any-hour exercisers; and alternative and creative career seekers are part of what impressed Speck. Boise's natives and exiles from the coasts alike bask in the out-of-doors, out-of-the-rat-race culture that is Boise. Perhaps that is part of what Speck saw in his brief visit here.

We linger. We hang out. We extend the day downtown in local restaurants, listen to local bands, attend shows and free concerts and festivals. These numerous events are as important to Boise as the layout of its streets. Great cities, places that we want to call home, are not necessarily efficient, but they have some combination of place, people and programming. Downtown Boise might have vacant lots, difficult to cross streets and empty storefronts, but it feels like a place.

What makes this city work is not the orientation of its buildings, nor the width of its streets, nor the quality of the street furniture. It is the people and the way the people use the city. It does not matter that some things are somewhat awkward in its design. We simply enjoy it because it is home; it is comfortable; it is fun; it is where our past, present and future meet on a daily basis.

There is more to the success of Boise as a place than a refusal of its residents to waste time. Boise has a rhythm; there is a pattern to life in the city. We look forward to Bogus Basin opening for skiing, or the river for floating. We change

outdoor gear with the change of seasons. We eat in local restaurants with menus that reflect the seasons. We live in a city but still talk with the local farmer, the brewer, the rancher, the winemaker.

To understand Boise, planners must understand its people and the way they use and program the city. We do not necessarily look the same as other cities, we do not need the same street layouts, the same stores, the same street furniture, the same banks or the same restaurants. Many would argue that we do not want to be the same.

The city should be a place where we are comfortable, a place we like to come back to after a long trip. It is not an architect's model with clean lines and perfect stick figures, but a home — functional, comfortable, with its quirks and all kinds of bizarre little things that make it unique. In our quest to codify places with setback requirements, road widths and color schemes — often in an attempt to increase property values — we planners think about buildings, streets and economic development. We ignore the fact that the city is not just an economic engine; it is the place where we live, eat, drink, walk, listen to music or just hang around. Most planners and designers take ownership of the physical manifestation of the city — believing in the “if you build it they will come” refrain. But we ignore the city's rhythm, its people and its notions of time at our own peril.

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