five fundamentals of PLACE

Architecture is memory and civic identity. It is the dialogue between generations that translates form onto space.
Charles Hummel is the sort of man my father would have addressed with deference. Dad was a miner’s son who never graduated from high school. A modestly successful businessman by dint of self-education and hard work, he came to Boise in his early forties, fell in love with the place and never left. He died at 83, convinced he had found Shangri-la.

Hummel is a Boise native and for most of his life has been among its most prominent citizens. He received his master’s degree in architecture from Columbia when Dwight Eisenhower was its president. Tourtellotte and Hummel, the architectural firm founded by his grandfather, designed Idaho’s Statehouse, St. John’s Cathedral, the Egyptian Theater, the Hoff Building and other iconic Boise edifices. Hummel architects have designed so many Idaho homes and other buildings that he has no estimate of the number. The company’s public and commercial buildings in Boise include the Hall of Mirrors, the Boise Centre on the Grove (Grove Plaza), the U.S. Courthouse, the Idaho Transportation Department headquarters and many more—including the Idaho Statesman Building where I’ve spent most

*Statesman* columnist Tim Woodward was born and raised in Boise.
of my working life. Hummel is a fellow with the American Institute of Architects, has served on the city and county planning and zoning commissions and is often consulted on matters of growth and development.

My father and Charles Hummel: Two very different men with some things in common. Like Hummel the prominent architect, Bert Woodward the obscure businessman loved Boise and was bewitched by buildings. He couldn’t drive by a new one going up without slowing to a crawl and offering his assessment of its esthetic qualities—or their absence. He never tired of taking me to construction sites to watch the progress of the work, passing on to his young son a lifelong interest in the subject. I briefly studied architecture in college because of him, quickly learning I had the passion but not the aptitude. One of my father’s favorite refrains was that Boise’s attributes needed only to be discovered for its population to swell to the size of Spokane’s, then several times Boise’s, but now slightly smaller.

When I was asked to write this book with Hummel on the places that make Boise unique, my father was the first person to come to mind. His son, the
architectural student, hanging out with Charles Hummel? Right. And we'll have a black president someday, too.

*Quintessential Boise: an Architectural Journey* is Hummel's expert view of the places that make Boise special, downloaded through the filter of a columnist who has been writing about its special places and people for more years than I like to admit. His view began with a list of 25 possible sites, shrank when it threatened to become unmanageable and grew again. The end result is Hummel's top picks, followed by a detailed list of more buildings, streetscapes and landmarks you'll find only in Boise. Hummel devised the criteria, explained presently, to rate them. We toured the most iconic on foot—Hummel at 83, jaunty in a Panama hat atop a head full of erudition and me struggling to keep up with him.

Our first outing was to the neighborhood where Hummel's grandfather and namesake made his home in the River Street area. Not a streetscape on his top list of quintessential Boise places, but an appropriate place to begin. Listening to his stories, I was struck by how little the neighborhood has changed and how much it has changed. Before Lucky Peak Dam was finished in 1955, Hummel remembers the Boise River meandering right up to the corner of 14th and River Streets.

His father learned to swim there. Today, it’s four lanes of traffic. Two blocks away, a new, multi-family housing development overlooks century-old homes across the street.
Fourteenth from Grand to River is one of the last remnants of the old River Street neighborhood, once an ethnic mix of eastern Europeans, blacks and Asians that is now a fading memory. Retro streetlights lend a nostalgic touch and some of the houses look much as they did in the days when William Edgar Borah, Idaho’s Lion of the Senate, strolled the nearby street that bears his name.

“This is old Boise,” Hummel said. “This area was laid out before the automobile. You have big houses next to little houses, porches and small front yards. It’s walkable. People could sit on their porches and talk to people on the sidewalk. This is what planners are after with the new urbanism.

“The older homes are well maintained; someone’s obviously loved them. And the multi-housing development on the corner is the kind of new architecture I like. Even though it is two or three stories, it doesn’t look like it. It doesn’t dwarf the older houses. It’s inviting.”

Put another way, the neighborhood scores highly on most of Hummel’s criteria for being a special Boise place that hasn’t lost its character to growth. It is accessible. It encourages human interaction. Its evolution has largely respected its history and its identity remains intact.

Marc Goodwin, who lives in a Sears-Roebuck house partially converted to a beauty salon at 509 S. 14th, likes “the fact that the houses are old and built up high in case of a flood. The neighborhood is close to downtown and most of the other places I need to go, so I can walk or ride my bike just about everywhere. There are a lot of rental houses so the neighborhood might not be as friendly as it was in the old days, but people still talk to each other. We talk to our neighbors a lot.”

Then, the clinker—another multi-family housing unit that, in Hummel’s words, “clashes with the neighborhood. It’s formula architecture with a fake mansard roof. It doesn’t fit.”
So there, on an obscure street most modern-day Boiseans are only dimly aware of, is a paradox of its development and that of virtually all cities: Success and failure, the special and the banal, side by side.

“This old neighborhood is probably threatened,” Hummel said. “It could go either way. If it is developed, I hope it goes the way of the neighborhood around it. It has wings.”

The neighborhood around it is a mix of attractive, newer housing, from low-income residences to high-end condominiums.

Our wings also have taken us to some maladroit landings. A short walk from the old River Street neighborhood, on our grandest boulevard: the twin eyesores of the Hampton Inn and Grove hotels.

What places and qualities make one city different from others?
If Boise has an overriding quality that separates it from most other same size and larger cities, it could be argued that it is neighborliness—a sort of abiding friendliness common in small towns but now considered quaint in most urban environs. Many Boiseans not only make eye contact but smile and speak as they pass one another on downtown streets. Virtually every neighborhood has a neighborhood association. And when tragic news befalls local individuals or families, it frequently results in donations totaling in the thousands.

Some of the places that comprise our Boise have changed through the years. Very few Boiseans are left who remember the old Natatorium, White City and other local fixtures of early 20th Century. Many special places of my youth are now fading memories. The sandy beach where high school students built bonfires and drank illicit beer above the Diversion Dam on summer nights is now a busy highway.

The Miramar
and Fiesta ballrooms, Braves Field, Manley's Cafe and other beloved gathering places are gone as well, which is too bad. Friday and Saturday night dances in those old ballrooms were the social highlights of the week, Braves Field was as pretty a minor league ballpark as you could hope to see and Manley's Cafe was arguably the most affectionately regaled greasy spoon in the Northwest. Its epic servings delighted celebrities from the famous New Yorker food critic Calvin Trillin to Jascha Heifetz, the world-renowned violinist.

Other places that help define Boise have remained constant. When I was a child and my parents wanted to show off for out-of-town guests, they took them on a drive past the stately homes on Harrison Boulevard and Warm Springs Avenue, brought them downtown to have their pictures taken on the steps of the Idaho State Capitol building and, for the pièce de resistance, drove up Capitol Boulevard to the Boise Depot, where they treated the visitors to a postcard view of the Boise Front and the city below. They'd point out our small but growing junior college (now Boise State University), being sure to mention its winning football team (even then) and finish the production with a picnic beside the Boise River in Julia Davis Park. Iconic places then and now.

Hummel remembers the day the Capitol Boulevard Bridge opened in 1930. "People would drive across the Ninth Street Bridge admiring the lights on the new bridge."

The boulevard's northern terminus is the Statehouse, designed by Hummel's grandfather and John Tourtellotte. Its southern terminus is the lovely, California Mission style Boise Depot, which Hummel considers "the most impressive Union Pacific Depot between Portland and Omaha." Most of the city turned out for its opening in 1925. Girls decorated themselves in apple blossoms; former Gov. James Hawley was resplendent in a cowboy outfit with six-guns. Harry Truman spoke there on his whistle-stop tour. The Portland
Rose and City of Portland trains brought passengers there from around the nation until 1971 and Amtrak continued the tradition for two more decades, ending in 1997.

Renovations by the Morrison-Knudsen Corporation and the city have restored the building’s grandeur, now mainly reserved for private functions. That and a demonic quirk of road design that makes it all but inaccessible for southbound travelers lacking a GPS have made the once bustling landmark a quiet place most of the time.

Its parking lot used to be a lover’s lane. It was there, on a summer evening in 1949, that Hummel fidgeted in his father’s Oldsmobile while working up the nerve to propose to his wife. Few if any Boiseans have a stronger connection to the Statehouse, the Boise Depot and Capitol Boulevard than he does.

Capitol Boulevard originally was planned to have formal gardens extending from the Depot all the way to the Statehouse. It became a busy thoroughfare instead, often criticized in recent years for violations of the setbacks meant to provide an unobstructed view of the Statehouse from the top of Depot Hill. Hummel deplored the violations as much as anyone but is happy with the Capitol Boulevard we know today.

"Its integrity is still intact," he said. "It used to be that when you looked down from Platt Gardens you saw a trailer court, a foundry and machine shop, gas stations and lots of billboards. Most of those things are gone now and the trees have grown up. You could argue that they impinge on the view, but they also beautify it. It's our signature view and, despite the setback violations, it's still impressive. It's one of the things that says 'Boise.'"
Others at the top of his list: Eighth Street and the Grove Plaza, the North End and Hyde Park, Bronco Stadium, the Boise Foothills, the Boise River and the Boise River Greenbelt, Julia Davis Park, Garden City, Bogus Basin and Edwards Boise Stadium 22 and IMAX complex in West Boise.

Eighth Street he sees as “the spine of our revitalized downtown.” That would be the downtown that has replaced our postwar downtown, the war being a 20-year effort to knock down cherished historic buildings and replace them with a regional shopping mall that resembled nothing so much as a giant Quonset hut. That ended when a new city administration recognized the futility of trying to woo department stores down-
town, allowed the mall to sprawl amid the open spaces and free parking of
suburbia and built the Boise equivalent of a public square—the Grove Plaza—
where the ill-fated mall would have been. That was the beginning of the
vital downtown we know today and nowhere is it more vital than on teem-
ing, socially vibrant Eighth Street.

People gather for coffee and conversation on its sidewalks and in its
restaurants and coffee houses every morning of the week. On public mar-
et days, it can be a challenge just to wade through its crowds. Its eateries
are jammed for lunch and dinner; evenings bring yet another crowd for
the nightlife. At the Grove Plaza, depending on the time of day and
year, you'll find everyone from children playing in the fountain to business types at the Boise Centre to
sports fans at the Qwest Arena.

"The Grove works," Hummel said. "It's not the Plaza San
Marco, but it does what it was planned to do because it is people-
scaled. ... The planners thought it would have some great archi-
tecture. I won't comment on the convention center because it
is a Hummel building, but I like the Wells Fargo Building a
lot. I like its slick, big-city feel. It is elegant. I like the US
Bank Building, too.

"Architecturally, almost everyone agrees
that the hotel and arena are terrible. But
as it turned out, we can live with
them. They provide life at certain
times when this would be a dead
area. Good streetscapes breed
human interaction. The Grove and
almost all of Eighth
Street do that."

South of The
Grove, Eighth is quieter.
Five lanes of through traffic on Front Street remains an impediment to foot traffic, though weekend signal timing has made the street a bit more pedestrian-friendly. Front is part of the reason that BoDo and Eighth south of there have a different feel from the rest of the street. Hummel is hopeful that one day a pedestrian underpass will change that, but even then, BoDo doesn't rate high on his list of special Boise places. Despite high-end shops, restaurants and a theater, it isn't particularly inviting and it isn't Boise. It is Anyplace, U.S.A.

It is hard to believe that P.F. Chang's, a chain restaurant with a brick and stone facade and two gigantic horse sculptures, occupies the onetime site of the down-home Murray's Drive-In, a Boise eatery that still evokes sighs from all who remember it.

Bernyce McCormick, a former carhop at Murray's and the adopted daughter of its owners, remembers selling "a thousand hamburgers there at 10 cents apiece on the night of D-Day. Everyone in town loved Murray's. It was such a special place."

Now of Lewiston, Idaho, McCormick has never seen P.F. Chang's.

"I don't want to see it," she said. "I'd rather remember it the way it was."

Murray's and the slickly packaged P.F. Chang's may seem exact opposites, but they have one thing in common in addition to sharing the same soil. Murray's was frequently jammed with customers waiting for carhops to deliver orders (including beer) to their window trays and there are nights when 'Chang's is packed to its gilded rafters. Both are, or were, places where people congregate—a criterion that inspired Hummel to include among his Boise icons some places that wouldn't have made the cut on the basis of architecture alone.

Garden City, for example. Naming your favorite piece of Garden City architecture is like being asked to hum your favorite Miles Davis tune. But if you know anything about jazz, you admire Davis's genius. And if you live in the Boise Valley, you go to Garden City.
Once named “Chinese Gardens” and from 1949 to 1953 the valley’s gambling Mecca, Garden City today draws people for a wide variety of reasons. Its nightlife has attracted crowds for generations. Restaurants and watering holes like the Ranch Club and the Stagecoach (both still around) and Edward’s and the Hi-Ho and others now gone have lured customers with everything from hearty food and live music to wet T-shirt contests.

Garden City also is, to a significant degree, the valley’s service center. If you have a typewriter, lawn mower or air compressor that needs to be fixed or are looking for car or truck parts, a timer for a sprinkler system, vacuum tubes, custom window frames, pumps, generators, an RV or mobile home, a body shop, welding shop, machine shop or carpentry shop, chances are you head to Garden City. You also can find an inexpensive place to live there, or, increasingly as Garden City reinvents itself once again, a high-end waterfront home.

The Edwards Boise Stadium 22 and IMAX complex makes Hummel’s list for the same reason. It is, in his words, “throw-away architecture.” Imported glitz thriving amid the onetime pastures of West Boise. But, anyone who has tried to see a movie there without buying tickets early has learned the hard way not to do it again. Local bands draw crowds for concerts and the complex of restaurants and other businesses that have sprung up around the theater has, in short order, helped it become a wildly popular destination, even if it does look like New Fresno.

The ultimate example of people-packing power in Boise and arguably all of Idaho is Bronco Stadium.

“If you want to talk about affecting thousands of people, no place else comes close,” Hummel said. “The tailgate culture, 30,000 fans or more for nearly every game; there is really nothing else like it.”
The addition of the Stueckle Sky Center increased the stadium's capacity to 33,500. More additions are planned and as long as the Broncos keep winning, filling the stands isn't likely to be a problem.

Hummel likes the "brutal concrete architecture" of Bronco Stadium, designed by the late Nat Adams. But he has some misgivings about the Sky Center.
"You have this massive structure that almost overwhelms the other side of the stadium and it is sitting on skinny little legs that don’t look strong enough to support it."

Skinny legs aside, many of the same things can be said of Bogus Basin. It attracts crowds of skiers and snowboarders in winter and serves as the setting for activities from trail rides to star gazing parties in summer.

Bogus Basin is at the apex of the Boise Front, the hills and mountains that rise to some 7,000 feet north of the city and provide its mountain backdrop. Green in the spring, tawny in summer and fall, spectacular after a heavy snowfall, the mountains are an ever-changing tapestry. In the right light, they almost seem to glow—pink during a winter sunset, gold on an Indian Summer afternoon, lavender on a summer evening.

Crisscrossed by miles of hiking and biking trails, the Front is a recreation playground for young and old, a wildlife haven and, increasingly, during the last half century, a place to live. When I was a boy, we rode our bicycles there to fish and catch tadpoles in ponds long since filled and paved over. Thousands of people now live and work in the once virgin hills that comprised our Huck Finn playground.

“It’s surprising that it took so long for foothills homes to be established,” Hummel said. “They crept up modestly from Sixth and Seventh streets after World War II, but it wasn't until the Smith brothers came along in the 1950s and developed the Highlands that it really took off. It was inevitable that it would happen because of the proximity to town and the great views of the city. Today, the foothills are immensely popular with the Ridge to Rivers Trail System. And you can see them from almost everywhere in the valley. They’re a constant reminder of where we are.”

Much of what applies to the foothills applies to the Boise River as well. Nothing is lovely in the same way as a city with a river running through it and few cities are fortunate
enough to have a river as clean and useable as Boise’s. Anglers catch trophy-sized trout in the heart of the city. People float on the river, swim in it, relax, recreate and reside along its banks. When foot traffic damaged some banks during the float parade of the mercifully deceased Boise River Festival, the parade was moved to Capitol Boulevard. The river even
gave us our name. When desert-weary French explorers spotted its willows and cottonwoods—our only large, native trees—and cried “les bois (the woods),” they had no idea what they were starting.

The Boise River Greenbelt that skirts the river began with small land acquisitions and a few short strips of pavement in the late 1960s and early 1970s and has grown to a 26-mile path stretching from Lucky Peak Reservoir through the city and beyond. Except for the dead of night, there is rarely a time including the dead of winter that it isn’t heavily used by pedestrians and cyclists, many commuting to and from work. Serious crimes have occurred there, but in recent years, bicycle police officers and volunteers patrolling in golf carts—the only motorized vehicles allowed—have increased safety.

Due in large part to the Greenbelt, Boise is one of only two Northwest cities—the other is Portland—where stranded cyclists can use their American Automobile Association memberships to get a lift. Boiseans aren’t entirely joking when they say it is only a question of time before the Greenbelt will need traffic signals.

“Most of the great cities in the world have a river of some interest,” Hummel said. “The Arno in Florence, the Seine, the Thames ... Boise’s has become a hallmark of summer. Its water quality is excellent. And I don’t know of many cities in the U.S. that have anything like our greenbelt. With a
whole mile of university frontage and the string of parks named after women, with more being added, it is just a beautiful amenity. It’s part of what makes Boise Boise.”

The first of the major parks, and for decades the largest, is Julia Davis Park. It was a gift to the city from pioneer produce supplier Tom Davis, was named for his wife and makes Hummel’s top list for “diversity that the other parks don’t have. They all have big swathes of grass and places for softball and picnics and other things, but Julia Davis has open spaces plus a zoo, the historical museum and art museum, the band shell, rose-garden, ponds, paddleboats and the footbridge to the university. It links the town to the gown.”

One of the town’s most enduring and prestigious residential neighborhoods, the North End, was Boise’s first large, residential addition, expanding it north and west of “old Boise.” Even when my parents built their North End home at 25th and Lemp Streets in 1951, it was still vigorously being developed. It had a generous supply of vacant lots that inspired the rightly departed diversion of dirt-clod fights. Looking back, it seems almost miraculous that none of the North End kids of those days lost an eye in those spirited battles. Today’s kids have no such worries. Not only would the quaint practice of hurling dirt clods at one another instead of sending text messages never occur to them, but there also are virtually no vacant lots left. The North End has become one of the most sought-after chunks of residential real estate in Idaho.

“It’s immensely popular, as shown by real estate values

North Enders unload groceries in Hyde Park, 1918. Opposite: Boise’s annual Twilight Criterium crosses Main Street at Tenth.
that have continued to increase even in hard times,” Hummel said. “It epitomizes the residential aspect of the city at its best, with a huge variety of houses with varying levels of affordability and especially style. It is almost a demonstration area for the popular styles of various eras—Victorian, bungalows, the classic American foursquare with two stories and a porch and others. When you progress from State Street up the numbered streets, you start way back in time and the further north you go, the more the newer styles emerge. It’s like an architectural layer of styles. And the trees are well established and kept up, which is another wonderful aspect of the city. We even have a city forester.”

The North End’s oldest and most storied people place is Hyde Park, built in the late 1800s as Boise’s first “suburban” shopping center. It had convenient, streetcar access, stores, offices; a fountain. When Hummel’s father’s family moved to Boise in 1895, they rode the trolley to Hyde Park for ice-cream sodas.

“My father said it was the high point of his introduction to Boise.”
Like the rest of the North End, Hyde Park has changed and adapted. New people and businesses have come and gone; homes and other buildings have been restored, expanded, converted to other uses. In-fill has given some blocks a contemporary look. In recent years, a number of older homes have been razed and replaced by expensive residences that may or may not complement their neighborhoods. Gentrification was inevitable.

The overall character, however, remains essentially unchanged. For every modest older home that has been leveled and replaced with a monument to opulence, dozens have been lovingly restored or remodeled. If my father could visit his North End neighborhood today, he’d find it largely unchanged. Many of its homes, including his, look almost exactly the way they looked 30 years ago. Others look better. Some of the neighborhood eyesores have been tastefully rebuilt and updated without changing the feel of the place a whit. He’d still feel right at home there.

Other parts of Boise have changed so much he wouldn’t know them. I often wonder, as I go about the Boise of today, what my father would think of it. He died just before the boom that brought us Boise Towne Square, the Grove and a revitalized downtown, most of our taller buildings, scores of commercial and housing developments and more than 100,000 new neighbors. My guess is that he’d have approved of most of it. Most, but not all. He was a Boise booster to the core, but it’s doubtful that even he could have loved the Grove Hotel.

Happily, Hummel is still here to tell us exactly what he thinks—which brings us neatly back to his five-star system for rating “Quintessential Boise” places. Five stars are best, one worst, based on the following criteria:

**Identity:** Are the places uniquely Boise? Do they reflect and complement our history? Example of a five-star rating: Capitol Boulevard.

**Scale:** Are they well proportioned? Do they blend with their surroundings and promote neighborly interaction? Example: The North End.
**Utility:** Are they accessible and well used? Do they serve the public? Are they walkable and bikeable? Are they easy to access by bus or car? Example: Eighth Street.

**Consistency:** Are they individually and collectively complementary? Example: The Boise River, the Boise River Greenbelt and string of parks.

**Impact:** Are they visually memorable? Do they affect us emotionally? Examples: the Statehouse and the Boise Depot.

Boise, of course, is more than what fits in the top of Hummel’s list. The pages that follow detail more places that rate high in some, but perhaps not all, of his criteria.

Think of this little book as a guide to what makes Boise like no place else. In an age when you can drive across the country and eat in the same restaurant, sleep in the same motel and see virtually the same skylines, suburbs and strip malls every day, what makes us different is priceless.
Five Fundamentals

Boise’s most authentic places are memorable and functional. They provide accessible forums for neighborly interaction. Historic or modern, they epitomize the Boise in Boise, respecting the aesthetic of neighborhoods and the way the great streets have been developed and used.

1. **Identity**: Quintessential architecture should respect the history and traditions of Boise.

2. **Scale**: Buildings should be well proportioned; large buildings should have appropriate setbacks so they do not overwhelm.

3. **Utility**: A place should be usable, functional and easy to reach on foot or by bike, bus, or car.

Capitol Corinthian column (Otto Kitsinger), Johnson Block (Tim Buckley), O’Farrell log cabin (Buckley), Boise Art Museum (Steve Bly), Key Bank parking structure (Buckley), Adelmann turret (Buckley).
4. **Consistency**: Buildings and parks should match their neighborhood streetscape; the parts of a building complex should complement the whole.

5. **Impact**: A place should be memorable, inspiring and carry emotional weight.