

8 livable places

Introduction

Making *Livable Places* explores the history and politics of the issues and places that shape Boise's metropolitan growth. In the summer of 2009, in the donated space of a vacant downtown storefront, the investigation began as a Boise State University field school on urban affairs. About 40 students attended. City planners and elected officials worked with professors from five academic departments. There were architecture walks and visits to blighted places. There were bus and Segway tours. Students wrote research papers, and 11 were selected for publication by the Boise State University College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs.

The approach has sometimes been called place-based education. Holistic and experiential, it makes the city a living textbook. In June, our summer began with the downtown core of Boise. In July, we broadened the lesson to the Boise Valley and the city's role as regional hub. Students selected from a list of research topics concerning transportation, preservation, conservation, housing, homelessness, crime, regional planning and urban renewal. Professors Todd Shallat and David Eberle invited top students to continue for additional credits. Eight students were recruited from the summer program



©Bob Minton

"Investigate Boise" thrived in the donated space of a storefront classroom. Pictured: Boise's Capital City Public Market at Idaho and Eighth.

and three were master's students who had previously written on Boise topics. Under the guidance of editor Larry Burke, the student authors stepped through the process of publication—of revising, fact-checking, documenting, editing, graphics selection and book production. The result is an anthology of essays on urban issues that vex municipal policymakers. It showcases the pragmatic application of social science research to the study of public affairs.

Students were asked to place local problems in historical context—to understand the origins of disputes, to appreciate how recurrent historical themes shape decision-making today. Chris Mansayon's study of the Boise streetcar, our lead essay, illustrates the importance of historical context.

10 livable places

Mansayon returns to a city of risk-taking entrepreneurs in an era when power grids and rail lines were powerful tools of economic development. Ann Felton's essay on a threatened Eighth Street warehouse also explores the importance of railroads. Felton gets to the nub at what is at stake in the preservationist's fight to keep historic streetscapes whole.

Even in places without iconic historical landmarks, preservation can contribute to economic development. William Blackadar's essay on Collister follows a neighborhood that emerged from an orchard on an electric streetcar line. Collister's revival depends in part on promoting neighborhood identity. Ted Vanegas tells a similar story in a study of the suburbanization that transformed the Ustick townsite. Both essays begin with the streetcar. Both offer hope that walkable streets and traffic-calming improvements can help neighborhoods prosper and grow.

Student historian Jacey Brain studies planning and livable places through the tight lens of a single downtown corner. Ever since the Boise gold rush, Eighth and Idaho has always been a commercial hub. City Hall once anchored the corner, which later became ground zero for the razing of historic buildings during the era of urban renewal. Today a mix of historic uses—of retail, cafes, offices and nearby workforce housing—contributes to the urban feeling that helps downtown commerce survive. Some of the elements that have allowed downtown to prosper are evident through the camera lens of Leo J. "Scoop" Leeburn. A photographer of fires, crime scenes and stories for the *Idaho Statesman*, Leeburn documented the demolition of historic brownstones during urban renewal. Student historian Mary Harbst provides a sampling of Leeburn's photography with an emphasis on the city that Boiseans lost.

Sarah Cunningham's essay on the Central Bench studies the connection between history and revitalization, between the need for historic centers and the future of a place overwhelmed by the automobile. Shaded sidewalks, better lighting, bike paths and landscaping can make the area more inviting. A emerging "international district" of immigrant markets and shops may help the neighborhood prosper by nurturing a new sense of its place.

While Boiseans debate the revitalization of auto-dependent strip malls, planners lay the foundation for a network of high-speed buses. Student

investigator Kelly Foster provides a revealing interview with Kathleen Lacey, a city planner. Buses, Foster explains, are gaining popularity. But an effective alternative to auto commuting may require funding in the form of a local option tax. Bus rapid transit may also require stronger cooperation among the dozens of jurisdictions that compete for highway funds.

Central to the campaign for better transportation is the problem of urban sprawl. Planners agree that smaller houses closer to downtown Boise can alleviate traffic congestion. Houses far from the workplace add commuters to the highways, pave farmland, cripple wildlife and foul the valley's dirty air. Sprawl pits conservationists against developers and property owners. Tedd Thompson marks the lines of dispute in an essay concerning the The Cliffs, once a planned community approved on a foothills plateau called Hammer Flat until the City of Boise purchased the land. Kurtis Hawkins looks at the Avimor development between Boise and Horseshoe Bend. Both authors emphasize urban impact areas and the limits of a city's power to contain developments outside their boundaries.

David Webb concludes with strategies that a city such as Boise might use to preserve livable places. The list of "smart growth" tactics includes zoning reform, landmark preservation, the reinvestment in vacant buildings, workforce housing, buses, light rail and land-use policies that reduce the dependence on cars. Smart growth begins, says Webb, with public education about the ramifications of development policies. Webb's plea for education about the dynamics of cities resonates with the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs. Our mission, simply stated, is to train informed citizens, and to clarify the confusion that clouds voting and policymaking. We proudly submit these essays as proof that place-based urban research can help Boise grow in a responsible way.

Todd Shallat, Ph.D., directs the Center for Idaho History and Politics at Boise State University. His Boise writings include *Ethnic Landmarks: Ten Historic Places that Define the City of Trees* (2007).

David Eberle, Ph.D., serves on Boise City Council and the board of directors for the Capital City Development Corporation (CCDC). He specializes in tax-financing, transportation and urban renewal.