

Changing the Conversation: **from Building Heights to Place Making:**

- *Walter Chambers*

Discussions about building height limits often turn into a discussion about “human scale”. As the discussion goes, tall buildings are impersonal. Short buildings are more “human”.

To be clear, this discussion is about the buildings that line our streets, and the experience one has when walking down the street. Although people may not know it, the discussion about building heights is really about the way one **FEELS** when experiencing the street. Everyone wants to feel good on the street -- safe, protected, happy, and engaged. When streets feel good, people like to be on them, and having people on the street makes places feel lively, interesting and safe – and that attracts even more people.

Unfortunately, short buildings are no guarantee that a street will feel good. Neither are tall buildings.

So how do you make a street **FEEL** good? By creating a good **Sense of Place**. Streets feel good when there is a strong Sense of Place.

Streets are like rooms. They have a floor, walls, and ceiling. And like a room, they can feel good or bad, depending on their proportions and detail. Have you ever walked into a banquet hall or room with low, tile ceiling? Feels awful doesn't it?

Or how about being the first one to a wedding reception held in a large hotel ball room. The room looks lovely, but you still feel exposed and awkward until the other guests arrive and start filling the space.

A Street requires the same good proportions as any room to make it feel good. It is the “walls” of the street that are key to creating good proportions and a sense of place. The buildings on either side of the street form the walls of the street “room”, and as such are called the “Street Wall”.

So what makes a good street wall? Several factors go into making a good street wall*, but for this conversation about building heights, the focus will be on **Height to Width Proportion**, or HWP.

HWP is the ratio of the Height of the street wall, to Width of the street. For example, if the buildings that form the street wall are 30 feet tall, and the street is 60 feet wide, then the HWP is 1:2. $30:60 = 1:2$. If the buildings (street wall) are 180 feet tall and your street is 60 feet wide, then the HWP is 3:1. $180:60 = 3:1$.

Why does HWP matter? Different HWP ratios invoke different feelings and a different sense of Place. A 3:1 ratio (think major urban downtown) feels different than a 1:4 ratio (think suburban retail strip).

Typically, if an HWP is too low, the street will not have a good sense of place. People will not want to be on that street.. And in urban settings it is people we want to attract. People are the ones who create lively, exciting streets, who fill the sidewalk cafes and stores, and that help trigger economic growth. To quote famous urbanist William H. Whyte, “What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people.”

That’s why low building heights might work on some streets, but not on all streets. If a community is demanding limits on all building heights in its district, then some streets are being set up for failure. And if limits are excessively low (or too high) then the entire district may be set up for failure.

When the conversation changes from building heights to place making, the chance of creating good urban spaces is greatly enhanced. Good place making also triggers economic growth. Talking solely about building heights is to ignore the environment that surrounds the buildings. It is irresponsible. The following real life case demonstrates how focusing on place making is different (and more important) than focusing on building height limits.

Case Study: 301 University – University Avenue @ 3rd Avenue.
The street at University Avenue and 3rd is approximately 40-45 feet wide (two lanes wide, with parallel parking on either side). A proposed new 12 story condominium tower met fierce

community opposition, and perhaps with good reason. At a HWP ratio of 3:1, this building begins to create a sense of place that feels very much like a downtown high-rise urban area. That is not in keeping of the character of the neighborhood. Perhaps a better HWP for this area would be 3:2 (mid-rise urban) or 1:1. A 4-5 story building would create an inviting sense of place, and would be a better height in this location.

However, a just few blocks further east, University Avenue widens significantly. At Richmond Street, University Avenue is approximately 90-100 feet wide (four lanes, center median, and parking either side). Would a 4-5 story building create a good sense of place here? Probably not. At this location, the wide street can easily handle an 8-9 story building without the street looking or feeling overwhelmingly urban. In this location, a 3:2 or 1:1 HWP would also create a good sense of place, and would feel most comfortable to the people on the street.

For University Avenue, a single building height limit is not appropriate. What works at 3rd Avenue, does not work a few blocks away at Richmond Street. That is the reason building height must be based on Place Making, and not on some arbitrarily assigned number applied over an entire district.

In order to achieve good place making, one must start with good walls that are the right height for the “Room”. Below is a sampling of Height to Width Ratios and the sense of place they tend to

create. Many thanks and great appreciation to the St Louis Great Streets Initiative from which the below descriptions have come. I urge you to visit their website and read more: <http://www.greatstreets-stl.org/content/view/417/400/>

HWP Raito and Place making

3:1 or higher: Height to Width Ratio
Sense of spatial definition: strong; may feel like a “concrete canyon” in some settings.
Often seen in larger downtown, urban cores.

3:2 Height to Width Ratio
Sense of spatial definition: strong; clear sense of enclosure.
A good HWP for Medium sized urban downtown, or urban core residential

1:1 Height to Width Ratio
Sense of spatial definition: Excellent. Strong place making potential. May be strongest ratio for good place making. Encouraged minimum for all urban areas, including residential.

1:2 height to Width Ratio
Sense of spatial definition: Good; Sufficient for place making. Considered a minimum for good urban street place making.

1:3 or lower
Sense of spatial definition: Weak; Place making potential is low.
This ratio is often seen in suburban areas where wide streets are lined with 1-2 story retail stores or strip malls. No sense of place to the street.

**Of course, as mentioned earlier in this article, other factors are essential in creating a good Street wall, and those must be taken into consideration. Elements of a good street wall include:*

- *HWP*
- *Architectural Diversity (old & new, short & tall, frequency of façade changes)*
- *Building should be built to the sidewalk for consistent wall face.*
- *Buildings and the architecture must be engaging and interesting to people at street level and second floor (Including human scale building elements, active engagement such as storefronts or sidewalk cafes, and experience of other people).*
- *Landscaping*