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A THOUGHTFUL APPROACH TO NEWS

Urban designers critique Minneapolis and offer this idea: Tear down all those horrible skyways



Photo by Steve Date Two prominent urban designers argue that Minneapolis skyways take the life out of the city by moving people off the streets.

By Steve Berg

Thursday, Nov. 15, 2007

When two of the world's top urban designers drop in for a visit and come away with the impression that your city — in this case Minneapolis — is a relic of the 1970s, ill-equipped to thrive and compete in a new century, and that its only hope is to tear down its skyways, well, that gets your attention.

"I feel sorry for Minneapolis," said Jan Gehl, the celebrated Danish architect whose work around the world has linked the rising importance of good public spaces to a city's success.

Thirty years ago, Minneapolis was thought to be a leader among winter cities. But taking people off the streets and putting them upstairs, "under glass," hasn't worked in Minneapolis or anywhere else, Gehl said, to the point that Minneapolis is no longer "up to the beat of the world-class cities of the 21st century."

Gil Penalosa, a noted public parks developer in both Latin America and Canada, said that the skyways lend a defensive, pessimistic air to the downtown core when, in reality, they are needed for only a few weeks of the

year. "They suck the public life out of the city," he said.

Given the fat chance that Minneapolis will remove its eight miles of skyways, both men agreed that finding a solution poses one of the toughest design challenges faced by any city in the world: creating vitality at street level when most foot traffic has been shifted to the second story.

The biggest problem, both said, is that people in Minneapolis don't realize that great cities — even cold cities — are now defined by the vitality of their street life. "People here don't see a crisis," said Gehl. "They don't yet see themselves as behind the times."

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Timely critique

Both men spoke last month at a "Vital Winter Cities" conference sponsored by the Urban Land Institute's [Twin Cities chapter](#). Then, after two days of meetings and tours, they shared their impressions with MinnPost.com over lunch on the Nicollet Mall.

Their critique is timely. The city's political, business and design leaders are studying ways to better integrate working, living and shopping in the downtown district, all with less reliance on cars. All agree that skyways pose an almost unique challenge. "They are both the best and worst things that ever happened to Minneapolis," said Mayor R.T. Rybak. They saved downtown from "folding up" in the 1970s, he said, but they don't offer what people expect in cities today.

The problem, Gehl explained, is that skyways violate the first law of successful city-building: keeping people together in a critical mass. Minneapolis' skyways — as with similar pedestrian bridge or tunnel systems in Calgary, Toronto and elsewhere — disperse people over different levels at different times. On weekdays, skyways bustle and shops flourish for a few hours a day. But at night and on weekends, people are thrown out onto barren and neglected

public sidewalks. A social hierarchy develops: the wealthier classes in private spaces on weekdays; poorer people out in public spaces at all hours. That's not a winning formula, Gehl said. It's bad for retail business, bad for culture, bad for civic life.

The impression given, said Penalosa, is of a fearful city crouching inward against a hostile climate and a hostile world. That's not the kind of optimistic city that most people — especially young people — are looking for, he said. Repeating the phrases of economist Richard Florida, Penalosa said that if a city doesn't present itself as vital at street level, then talented people won't choose to live there, especially when they can live in Chicago or Seattle or anywhere they like. And if talent isn't attracted or drifts away, then the quality of a city suffers.

What has placed skyway-bound Minneapolis out of step, said Gehl, is a broad cultural shift around the world in the way people use urban spaces. No longer do people just pass through city centers while traveling between work and home. City centers have become places to pause and enjoy life away from work and away from home, he said.

The utilitarian nature of cities is being altered by "Mediterranean influences," made possible by rising affluence and the changing nature of work. People are using cities to hang around and enjoy one another. The rising number of nontraditional workers — consultants and independent contractors — has abetted this transformation, he said. Even cold cities (Copenhagen's average temperature is only two degrees warmer than Minneapolis') have developed an impressive sidewalk culture for 10 months of the year — thanks, in part, to gas heaters. The trend is, perhaps, best summarized by the title of one of Gehl's books: "Life Between Buildings."

'We do have parks'

Local reaction to the Gehl-Penalosa critique varied. Judith Martin, professor of geography and urban studies at the University of Minnesota, said that viewing Minneapolis through a European lens misses the point. U.S. city life consists of far more than sitting around drinking cappuccino, she said. Besides, the tax structure here doesn't allow the rebuilding of cities on the European model. As long as there are other needs (education, police, etc.), nice streetscapes won't be a priority. "Maybe we don't have an interesting downtown," she said, "but that's not our defining feature; we do have parks."

Tom Fisher, dean of the university's School of Design, said he thinks that downtown is important and that skyways pose an "extreme challenge" for Minneapolis, but one that should be turned into an opportunity. He's involved in the [Walking Minneapolis](#) initiative, a public-private effort to revive street-level activity. One suggestion is to spread the city's best asset — parks — onto some downtown sidewalks in order to connect condos to jobs and shopping, and to create a pleasant, more walkable atmosphere at street level.

For Sam Grabarski, president of the Downtown Council, the skyway question is

complex: They are very bad for retail, very good for office towers, he said. He favors a moratorium on new skyways, better signs to de-mystify the system and far more exterior connections between street and skyway levels. The council is studying how to refocus retail in view of changing tastes in shopping and the city's two-level problem.

Midge McCauley, a Philadelphia retail consultant who has studied Minneapolis and wishes its skyways could be demolished, said: "Skyways take vitality *off* the streets, and retail gets its energy *from* the streets. So it makes no sense to take people off the streets for 10 months of the year — including the best shopping months." Minneapolis would have far better retail if it weren't for skyways, she said.

Some suggestions

Gehl said he knows of no city in the world (outside of ultra-crowded Japan) that succeeds on two levels. Nonetheless, Minneapolis has little choice but to try, he said.

"There's a lot of potential at ground level," Gehl said. "The key is to celebrate the wonderful possibility of good-weather days rather than focusing on the bad days and feeling sorry for yourself, which is the impression one gets."

He offered four suggestions: an urban square to provide an outdoor focal point that the city now lacks; more use of water features downtown to reflect a city-of-lakes theme; the blocking of skyways every two or three blocks to lure people — and retail — to the street, and working to attract the region's tens of thousands of college students to the city's core.

There's a paradox to downtown's problem. It has undergone a housing boom and a cultural revival, and the office market is holding its own. But retail and street-level vitality isn't what it should be. Transforming barren streets is a daunting task for a financially strapped city. Penalosa claims, however, that the costs are comparatively small. "It's all a matter of priority," he said. "There's always enough money to accommodate cars, but I don't know of any city, when there's a pothole in the street, [someone suggests that they] need to go to a private foundation to get it fixed."

Minneapolis is still reaping huge benefits from its decision in the 1880s to preserve its lake shores as public parks, Penalosa said. A similar payoff would come if the city revitalized its outdoor spaces downtown. It's happening around the world, he said, in New York, in Portland, Ore., in Vancouver, B.C., and in Aarhus, Denmark, Melbourne, Australia and Lyon, France, to name a few cities. Even with the disadvantage of skyways, he said, it's worth a try here.

Steve Berg, a former Washington Bureau reporter, national correspondent and editorial writer for the Star Tribune, reports on urban design, transportation and national politics. He can be reached at [sberg \[at\] minnpost \[dot\] com](mailto:sberg@minnpost.com).

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10 Comments:

(1) On November 15, 2007, Grace Kelly says:

I think that the opinion of tear down skyways is about as wrong as it is possible to get. We have been subsidizing cheap gas and a spread out housing plan, so there is no concentration of people near downtowns except commuters (who don't stay) and poor people. Coming into downtown is expensive parking, so I won't do it. Skyways are the only thing that makes downtowns attractive compared to suburban locations with massive parking or totally enclosed malls. So tearing down the only good feature, would definitely cause even more avoidance of downtown.

(2) On November 15, 2007, Jason Walker says:

This is a great story - just what I was hoping for from MinnPost. It's relevant to everyone and wonderfully written and sourced. Great job.

(3) On November 15, 2007, Amy Wilde says:

Anyone who thinks pedestrians need an indoors alternative for only two months in Minnesota has never lived here. Better signage? Absolutely. Less labyrinthian routes. Yes. More outdoor amenities? Absolutely. But get rid of the skyways? Please don't. For at least six months, walkers really need them.

(4) On November 15, 2007, Matt Kohner says:

"Even cold cities (Copenhagen's average temperature is only two degrees warmer than Minneapolis') have developed an impressive sidewalk culture for 10 months of the year — thanks, in part, to gas heaters."

You're cherry-picking statistics.

Copenhagen's climate is not like Minneapolis's, especially in winter!

Completely different climates.

Copenhagen

http://weather.yahoo.com/climo/DAXX0009_f.html

Minneapolis

http://weather.yahoo.com/climo/USMN0503_f.html

We're more like Moscow:

http://weather.yahoo.com/climo/RSXX0063_f.html

(5) On November 15, 2007, Charlie Quimby says:

<http://www.greatdiv.com>

As Amy's comment indicates, three decades of skyways have already conditioned local rats to the maze. But don't forget the city's visitors who would find Minneapolis sorely lacking in the streetscape amenities and life that make a great place to visit.

(6) On November 15, 2007, Elizabeth Gales says:

Well-researched and written story. Thank you for covering an issues about our built environment. I disagree with the visiting designers. I think they missed a lot about how are city really operates and its basic urban design. The local experts know what they're talking about.

The suggestions at the end from Gehl seem to be stock ideas and not truly tailored to Minneapolis. We have a huge focal point in downtown, Nicollet Mall. It acts as a sort of linear town square that gets people onto the street. Indoor and outdoor plazas open off of the mall (Crystal Court, Peavey Plaza, Loring Greenway) and help people transition into buildings and skyways. As to water features, true there aren't monumental ones, but there are plenty spread throughout downtown. Don't forget the fountain in the Crystal Court and the amazing one in the Maya Lin-designed winter garden in the Ameriprise building. There are also the fabulous fountains at Peavey Plaza (outside Orchestra Hall), and the lowest level of the plaza was originally meant to be flooded to serve as a reflective pool and ice skating rink. Lastly, if that isn't enough water, just walk a few blocks to the river, the reason for this city.

We have so many great resources downtown, including the skyways. We should make these work for us and not try to compare ourselves, too much, to other cities.

Mr. Berg, it would be great if you could write an article about downtown Saint Paul. Minneapolis may have issues, but downtown Saint Paul has more serious problems with its street life.

(7) On November 15, 2007, Ann Spencer says:

OK, I'm going out on a limb, but here goes!

I think the reason skyway critic Gil Penalosa sees our overhead tunnels as conjuring "a fearful city crouching inward against a hostile climate and a hostile world" is that that's exactly the way many daytime denizens of Minneapolis really feel.

I often joke (well, I'm sort of joking!) that the Twin Cities are the last bastion of Jeffersonian agrarianism---that strain in American intellectual life that sees the city as a sinkhole of evil and European decadence and the countryside as the source of goodness and purity. Workday Minneapolis is full of people who grew up in small towns and on farms and are in the city only perforce---because that's where the jobs are. They want as little contact with "urban life" as possible and at the end of the day are relieved to jump into their cars and commute back home, sometimes extraordinary distances. As a recent Strib article pointed out, the Twin Cities rank high in the number of people willing to endure lengthy commutes so that they can live as far from town as possible.

These people don't care about sidewalk cafes, town squares, or various other "people magnets." They want to work, collect their paychecks and get out. The skyway system is a perfect architectural metaphor for their feelings about their workplace. This attitude may be changing with the boom in downtown housing and simply the passing of generations. Young Twin Citians have never lived on a farm or in a small town. They may have grown up in a suburb or exurb, but they look to the core cities for entertainment and night life. For now, however, I think entrenched suspicion of cities has as much to do with the popularity of skyways as the climate does.

(8) On November 15, 2007, Mary McCarthy says:

It is ironic that these sources see the skyways as the bane of retail, when they were created to save downtown shopping.

I love using the skyways, which offer the protection (and security!) I need to park and explore downtown Minneapolis.

(9) On November 15, 2007, John Neumann says:

The trouble with Nicollet was the devil's bargain the city ("planners" City planners (well, "planners" may not be too accurate) ruined downtown for retail at the same time they attracted it in the 80s. They built four suburban shopping malls that look in rather

than out: City Center, the Conservatory and the two Gaviidaes. If they were designed to be open like the Crystal Court and weren't each two stories too tall, they may have worked. Instead, they're fortresses with fourth floor food courts. Except for the lamented Conservatory, that is. With more structures like Barnes & Noble and Crate & Barrel, both accessible by street and by skyway, and imaginative, decidedly non-suburban spaces downtown could be magical. Better than competitive, it would be special. Ironic, isn't it, how suburbs such as Maple Grove are now building open air shopping streets to put their Pottery Barns. Minneapolis has the best one of all, if only we can figure that out.

(10) On November 15, 2007, David Cater says:

<http://justacoolcat.blogspot.com>

"They suck the public life out of the city"

I couldn't agree more. The skyways are useful in the winter and in the summer when it's 100 degrees; not to mention during rush hour traffic. It seems to me that all too often people that won't have to live with the drastic changes they suggest are more than willing to force them on others.