

Opinion Exchange

REACTIONS AND DIALOGUE ON THE ISSUES OF THE DAY

WHAT'S MINNEAPOLIS WITHOUT SKYWAYS?

● Or with cars on Nicollet Mall? We should quickly dismiss the latest suggestions for changing downtown. Let's improve what already works.

By DAVID STOVALL

So the Minneapolis Downtown Council hires a research firm from Washington, D.C., to tell us how to rescue our sagging downtown retail core, and the resulting recommendations are to orient toward the street and put cars on Nicollet Mall? Maybe those consultants should be required to walk our downtown streets during lunch hour to clear their heads of such notions.

How quickly we forget that it was Nicollet Mall and the skyways that stemmed the sagging tide for decades after most cities had long lost their retail cores.

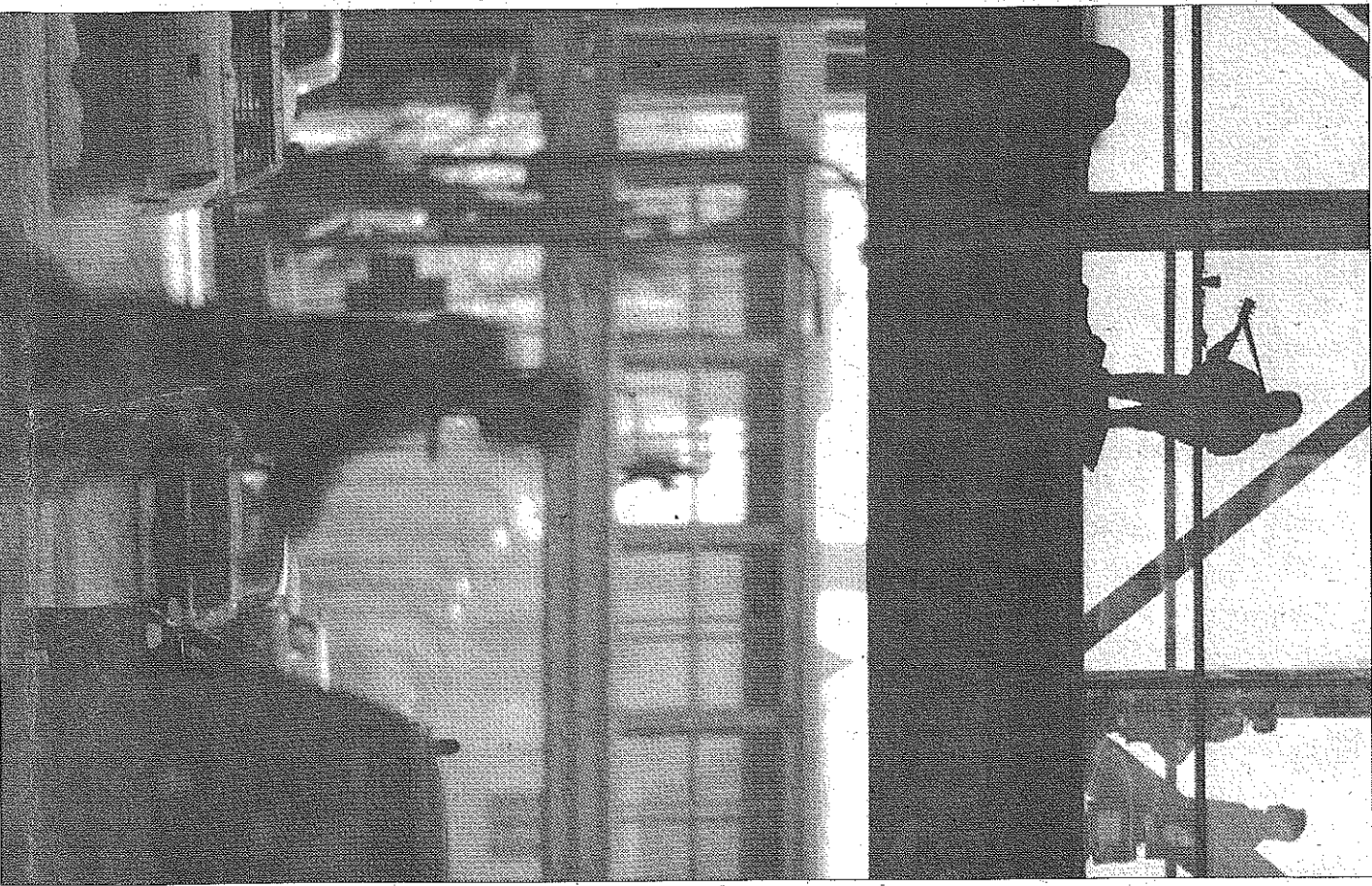
What does one accomplish putting cars on Nicollet Mall? Is it to add spew to complement the diesel buses and drive more dining patrons off the sidewalks? Is it to make the Thursday farmer's market more congested and more dangerous to pedestrians?

What would be accomplished by driving down Nicollet Mall? There are no parking lots to slip into. There are no places to park. You do not arrive downtown via Nicollet Avenue from either end. Why not strip the mall completely of vehicle traffic other than local, quiet, non-polluting people movers? Then maybe more people will find being on the Mall more pleasant, and the retail frontage will become more desired.

Visitors do not like to drive the downtown streets. It's plain intimidating. Parking ramps A, B and C on the edge of downtown, with access directly off the freeway, are the most convenient option for visitors. Those kinds of ramps need the skyways to get visitors into the heart of the downtown. Ramp C needs a skyway over to the new library and a subsequent skyway to close the loop to the rest of the system. Our wise planners seemingly did not plan that. Perimeter ramps with easy access are the key, along with educating visitors, providing free parking during non-office hours and nonmajor events during evenings and weekends.

If it were not for the skyways, Minneapolis most likely would not have 160,000 workers. The skyways are safer, faster, quieter and right now more interesting than the streets. Those are all factors that have kept many corporations downtown. They also double the dimensions of downtown for retail frontage. The idea of "zoning laws" to limit the skyways to workers and downtown residents would only confuse visitors.

What are missing from our skyways are



BRIAN PETERSON • Star Tribune files
A consulting firm has recommended orienting downtown Minneapolis more toward street level, but don't forget: The skyway system helped save this city's core.

visible connections to the street. Other than the Target store atrium, there are no direct visible street accesses. Such connections help people relate to where they are. Block E is a disaster in this respect. With Borders leaving, now is the perfect time to remodel the 6th St. and Hennepin Av. corner of Block E to connect the street to the skyway access. Maey's should be redesigned with an exterior-wall skyway on Nicollet Mall wrapping back to the skyways on 7th and 8th Streets, similar to the Retek building. It would be more convenient for security; store hours would not cut off a vital skyway link; it could attract more window shopping, and it would

open up a view of Nicollet Mall to further orient visitors. A visible street-to-skyway connection could also be built at 7th and Nicollet and do Mary proud. It is so simple. Start thinking of ways to improve the skyway experience, not to "zone" them in to back-alley worker's tunnels.

We are a winter city, and our skyways are vital. If you want to see what our future will be like if we follow the research firm's proposals, check out downtown Dallas, with its extensive-but-hidden tunnel system and its virtually empty streets devoid of retail activity.

David Stovall, of Tonka Bay, is an architect.