

Down with the skyways

BY SAM NEWBERG

Isn't it about time to start removing our skyways? A colleague of mine, a very reputable urban critic, mind you, was in town not too long ago and commented that we certainly shouldn't build any more skyways! Well, I for one think it's time to start taking them down. They haven't fundamentally improved or saved Downtown retail, they are expensive to build and they detract heavily from pedestrian life. As well, we need a concerted effort to continually improve the public realm of Downtown. We have made some progress, but there is so much more to do.

I realize winter is perhaps not the time to have this discussion. But if not now, when? There are only a few subzero, truly miserable days, and the rest of the year there are thousands of people needlessly using the skyways in perfectly fine weather. I rarely use the skyways, winter, spring, summer or fall, even when I used to work Downtown. I like to seek out, walk past, or stop to linger and enjoy our good urban places, nearly all of which are public and at ground level. I am certainly not alone in my enjoyment of and hope for an improved pedestrian environment Downtown.

The original intent of the skyways has not panned out. The first skyways were built in the early to mid-1960s largely as a defense against the loss of retailing to the suburbs. Well, that clearly didn't work as a strategy. Retail is a fickle industry, as Downtown boosters well know. I don't like to see stores close any more than the next person, but I think a shift in focus is required. Landing the perfect store for Downtown is not the right strategy, and this city is bankrupting itself trying to lure retailers that have no place Downtown. That said, we should consider ourselves lucky that we have a department store at all (Macy's), much less a Target. A discussion of Downtown retail is for another time, but needless to say, I don't believe the skyways are helping lure big retailers Downtown. An improved public realm could, however.

As for the small skyway retailers, that is simply a function of supply (food, coffee and convenience items) and demand (160,000 office workers). My gut says that most of the retail you now find on our skyways could slowly be relocated to the street level over time, without any fundamental change in demand. Those 160,000 office workers will still need coffee in the morning, then lunch and the occasional aspirin or gift for the boss. There is no good reason that smokers are the only people on Marquette Avenue sidewalks — whatever the weather! Move retailers down to the sidewalk level and people will follow.

Consider this for a moment — each new skyway costs more than a million dollars to construct. Couple that with the fact that the corridors on the second floor of each building bring in no rent for the building owner. You may argue that increased rents of second floor retail space offsets the loss of revenue from the common space, and that ground floor retail space also generates revenue, so renting both levels is a win-win. I argue that there is not enough retail demand for both ground-floor and skyway-level retail, as evidenced in many places by ground-floor space set aside as offices, or worse yet, presenting blank walls. Therefore, skyway-level retail rents lower the potential rent on the sidewalk level. Put all the retail down on the street and the sidewalks will automatically have a huge increase in foot traffic — enough to keep ground-level retail sustained.

This really isn't an argument about economics and retail space, although that is important. This is an argument about what we want our Downtown to be like and how we use it. Urbanists come from far, far away to see our "skywalks." To them, skyways are somewhat of a curiosity, and by extension of that, so is our city. One of those urban planners from far, far away pointed out that today's society doesn't go somewhere to shop; they go somewhere to be. I think that comment is right on, and pertains especially to Downtown. I don't want our Downtown and our city to be simply a curiosity to visitors. I want it to impress them. Moreover, I want it to impress us! I like the idea that people go Downtown just to be. I do. Our best Downtown places are along stretches of street when we bother to pay attention to them. The south end of Nicollet Mall is a good example. That is a good place to simply be. Even the skyway level in the Crystal Court is not the main reason for why that is such a nice space.

Some people will tell you the skyways are not going anywhere. I ask why not? We've had them for just 45 years; surely we can be rid of them in another 45! Just take away one or two skyways per year and nobody will notice. Many other wonderful Northern cities get by just fine without them. Do

we want Minneapolis to be a curiosity, or do we want an attractive, urbane city with a healthy pedestrian environment? If it is the latter, then removing our skyways is part of the equation. Simply repopulating our sidewalks will help Downtown immensely.

But remember, the other part of the equation is leadership! We need to work with organizations like Walking Minneapolis to send a strong message to city leaders to make sure our plans, zoning, and various city codes encourage an attractive streetscape, as well as housing, better transit options, schools, museums, two-way traffic, sidewalk cafés, a wider variety of events, more on-street parking, benches, lighting, trees, flowers, public art, chess boards, fountains, street vendors, ice skating, musicians, bike racks, bike lanes everywhere, places to be ...

Sam Newberg is an urbanist who lives in South Minneapolis. His work can be found at www.joe-urban.com.