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Disinvestment Trifecta: Parking, Highways, & Urban Renewal in Minneapolis an Historical Analysis of the Gateway District

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INTRODUCTION

Minneapolis's Gateway District renewal, carried out under the auspices of the Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) during the late 1950s and early 1960s, was at the time billed as the largest urban renewal project ever undertaken.¹ It was a massive investment, involving the destruction of historical gems alongside hundreds of dilapidated structures in what was seen as necessary slum clearance. The sacrifice of old buildings came at the expense of a desire to attract new capital and economic opportunities to the city, and to streamline the automobile circulation in downtown. Unfortunately, only a couple of years after the dust had settled from the Gateway project the interstates burst into downtown Minneapolis.²

These three factors, urban renewal, automobile circulation, and interstate highways, have been covered in existing literature.³ However, there has never been an approach that examines all three of these developments in Minneapolis, where the scars of these interrelated processes are still visible upon the environment.

Literature on urban renewal focuses mostly on the historical economic processes associated with the removal and redevelopment of slum areas for the broader economic and social benefit of the city as a whole. This approach often ignores or shuns downtown automobile circulation as a secondary factor associated with urban renewal processes. In essence, the automobile city, while coming unto itself during the 1960s era of urban revitalization, is never at the forefront of urban renewal literature, which often focuses solely on the built environment and social aspects rather than on the car.

Another less examined link in urban renewal literature is the relationship between interstate construction and downtown revitalization. For example, just as the downtown of Minneapolis was completing a massive renewal effort, the highways came into the core and led

to the furthering of downtown disinvestment, changing the dynamics of automobile circulation in unforeseen ways.

This research will focus on downtown urban renewal through the specific lens of the automobile in Minneapolis. I will show how urban renewal and the development of interstate highways led to a reactionary development of car parking facilities and increased the importance of automobile circulation in downtown. While at first parking and circulation were seen as necessary to retain downtown economic growth, they quickly became powerful tools for urban planners aiming to bolster the economic activity of downtown against the rising tide of suburbanization.

MINNEAPOLIS BEFORE URBAN RENEWAL

Long before the Gateway project began, the center of downtown Minneapolis was located at Bridge Square, at the intersection of Hennepin and Nicollet Avenue. Even thirty years before urban renewal, this area was plagued with flop houses and rampant crime.⁴ As retailers began moving down Nicollet away from the decrepit Gateway area, city leaders took heed and made several attempts to revitalize the area. These efforts included the development of Gateway Pavilion at the site of the old Bridge Square (Figure 1), and the publication of the Plan for Minneapolis in 1917 which named automobile circulation as one of the major problems facing downtown.⁵ This was the first time on record that traffic policy and automobile crowding came to the forefront of policy, a development which was a harbinger of the powerful effects traffic circulation would play in later processes of urban renewal.

The report specified the need to increase circulation in and around the Gateway District in alarming terms, pressing for the quick construction of broad, easily accusable streets before

the built environment became too impregnable. The report saw the Gateway area as key to the growth of Minneapolis, and the automobile was no small part in these early revitalization steps.

Gateway Park [...] is the apex of the existing street system of Minneapolis. [these street improvements] confirm its central location by making it more accessible [for cars] than ever... Of all the recommendations of this report, [this one] is in gravest peril from delay. No time should be lost.⁶

Interestingly, the Plan for Minneapolis envisioned broad boulevards and sightline axes lined with beautiful trees, taking its inspiration from the great Haussmannization of Paris and supported by the current City Beautiful tradition in America. Unfortunately, this beautiful vision, a cry from today's built environment, was succeeded by a far more disastrous environmental reality later in the 1950s and 60s.

MINNEAPOLIS BY THE END OF WORLD WAR TWO – SERIOUS PARKING PROBLEMS

Entering into the 1950s, development in Minneapolis had stagnated, with virtually no new structures being built since the beginning of the great depression in 1929 and onwards into World War II. Coincidentally the building stock in the gateway district of the city had deteriorated far beyond its preceding levels, and was considered by planners to be blighted and in dire need of revitalization.⁷

Even though the built environment had stagnated, this did not mean that the population of Minneapolis had fallen. In fact, between 1920 and 1950, the urban population had ballooned from three hundred and eighty thousand to five hundred and twenty thousand people, leading to growing traffic downtown.⁸ City Planners predicted that this growth would lead to a 37% increase in traffic accumulation by 1955, meaning that there was a dire need to restructure the city to prevent crowding and randomly parked cars which prevented traffic

from proceeding smoothly.⁹ Figure 2 illustrates the extremely compact nature of the Gateway district during this time.¹⁰

In a report on the state of downtown parking published in 1945, the City Planning Commission formally recognized parking and circulation problems as having the potential to cause a decrease in economic activity in the near future. They knew about the planned interstate development, which in their minds was linked “with increased ease of vehicle operation and accessibility, [meaning] the individual use of the automobile seems destined to increase”. Planners understood that, left in its current state, the downtown parking capacity and traffic circulation system would not be able to accommodate the influx of traffic from the new highways. Already there were complaints about the difficulty of finding space downtown. The Planning Commission realized that if this issue of downtown mobility was left unimproved, there was a high future potential for business stagnation.¹¹

The problem was that downtown, and the Gateway area in particular, had never adopted the grand haussmannization plans put forward in 1917 and remained too tight to accommodate the space needed for the efficient flow and storage of so many automobiles. The 1945 Report attempted to deal with this issue by codifying parking laws and advising when and where automobiles could park, one of the first steps towards the enforcement of a stringent parking policy in Minneapolis.

In the early stages of recognizing parking shortages in downtown Minneapolis, the emphasis had been on providing a parking infrastructure that permitted a streamlined approach to downtown circulation, with a view that parking was a bit of a “nuisance”. Planners saw parking, and the issue of automobile circulation, as (yet) unrelated, or at least only

tangential to the economic growth of downtown. The bulk of the report saw the dense and deteriorating areas of the city only through the eyes of the individual shopper (citing the fact that pedestrians typically will walk only two blocks to their destination from their parked car), and through the lens of “efficiency”, claiming that many parts of downtown did provide “sufficient” arteries to keep traffic moving.¹² This lack of attention paid to the larger ramifications of parking on the macro-economics of Minneapolis could likely be attributed to the belief on the part of the City Planning Commission that downtown would always remain attractive because of the many services offered in close proximity to one another.¹³

However, starting in the early 1950s, there was beginning to be signs of a mass exodus from downtown as governmental structures and societal preferences began to push people to the suburbs. Between 1950 and 1960, not only did Minneapolis’s fast past growth stop, it completely reversed, with the city losing about forty thousand people, its biggest net change since a huge growth period in 1930.¹⁴ This demographic shift cost Minneapolis nearly 7.5% of its population.

The decreasing population, coupled with new interstates and increasing automobile use, put parking at the front and center of Minneapolis’s development plan. After having very little development during the great depression and WWII years, Minneapolis, like many other American cities, was now facing the reality of large population loss. This reality spurred cities to begin viewing parking and traffic circulation as much more than a fly in the honey, as it had previously been seen. Now, parking and traffic circulation became the key to reversing the economic decline of the city, and promoting sorely needed new development.¹⁵ The availability of parking was promising to become a planning tool to promote downtown attractiveness. This

fact was only hinted at in the 1945 report relative to the importance and attention paid to parking and circulation in proceeding reports.

The 1950s closed with cities across the country beginning to wake up to the economic power of parking, and it remained one of the key, albeit overlooked, tools in city planner's arsenals throughout the 1960s. Even the 1945 report, which predates the population loss of Minneapolis by several years, is insightful enough to point to the potential of "increased accessibility" brought by the future interstates, and the current lack of streamlined parking as a recipe for economic disaster, noting that the decentralization of the central business district may be the direct result of an inaccessible downtown.¹⁶

This shift in planning mentality from traffic circulation being a more aesthetic, programming quality (as shown in the 1917 plan) towards much more real and dire harbinger of the death or growth of Minneapolis, reflects a reality faced by cities across the United States in the late 1950s. As urban populations quickly moved towards the periphery, parking and circulation was quickly being seen as a *tool* towards promoting and cementing economic growth, a trend that would continue into the 1960s as the interstate system quickly fulfilled the worst possibilities planners could imagine, by facilitating a shift in capital from the still crowded downtown to new land in the suburbs.¹⁷ The next section of this paper will describe the institutionalized approach to combating the effects of the coming highway, and the prominent role of traffic circulation in that approach.

URBAN RENEWAL, THE INTERSTATES, AND THE PARKING LOTS

As the population outflow from Minneapolis increased into the 1960s, with the city losing another 10% of its population by the end of the decade, city planners became increasingly desperate to replace neighborhoods of Minneapolis that they believed were

damaging the image of the city due with their dense and deteriorating environment.¹⁸ This negative image was, planners believed, partly to blame for the mass exodus of population to the suburbs and preventing economic growth.

Beginning in the 1960s, Minneapolis's Housing and Redevelopment Agency (HRA) embarked on what become the largest urban renewal scheme in the country at the time, involving the demolition of hundreds of buildings in the Gateway district to make room for economic renewal.¹⁹ By removing what they saw as blight, planners began the demolition of flop houses, cage hotels, and other dilapidated buildings seen as detrimental to the image of the city. By 1965 the last of the buildings were torn down, many of which were historical gems, such as the old Metropolitan Building, signifying a great loss to the city's architectural landscape.

There was an initial influx in investment as reconstruction of the Gateway District began, with approximately 60 million dollars being injected into the area (including 19 million dollars in public projects and an additional 33 million dollars in private investment). As the 1960s came to a close, however, the HRA began having trouble selling off many of the vacant lots due to an economic slowdown. This mean that during the late 1960s and into the "1970s much of the cleared land was still vacant, used only as parking lots [...], because "the clearance effort [...] had been zealous and too rapid for the market to absorb".²⁰

The creation of these parking lots followed what was generally perceived as a solid development practice in cities around the country. Since surface parking lots were cheap and quick to build, and required little maintenance, they were a desirable short-term asset for developers.²¹ However, even though they were profitable to construct and operate, surface

parking lots were always seen as a “place holder” until future investment could be brought in. This was especially the case in the Gateway district, which was envisioned as being re-incorporated into modern Minneapolis with the construction of shiny new office buildings (Figure 3).²² However, what had not been anticipated by the planners was the massive impact that the highways would have on Minneapolis’s economy.

The opening of I-94 in 1968 and I-35W five years after Gateway renewal ended lead to a quick decline in the remaining desire to invest in downtown.²³ Because the interstates opened the possibility of cheap, expansive land to be developed on the periphery of the city, the desirability of development in the inner-city quickly plummeted because of limited space, decreasing market base, higher taxes, and congested roads.²⁴ This meant that the parking lots, which were built as temporary investment until more permanent construction came along, became much more permanent than intended. Furthermore, because the arrival of the highways increased the accessibility of downtown, traffic flow increased. This meant that the temporary parking lots were not only more permanent because of the lack of investment interest, but because they provided necessary parking for the increased flow of cars through downtown Minneapolis.²⁵

It is important to realize that there was still strong business interest in the core of downtown, as well as large civic and cultural institutions that remained in the downtown, along with nightlife, fine dining, and many tertiary businesses such as finance and law.²⁶ This meant that while *new* investment was not too keen to come into the Gateway district, many areas of downtown remained viable, partly in thanks to the creation of Nicollet Mall in 1968.²⁷ This remaining interest, combined with the increased access provided by the highways meant that

even though downtown population continued to decline, there was still a strong incentive for people to journey into the city to fulfill certain needs or enjoy a true “urban” experience. This meant that the traffic circulation system of Minneapolis was put under increasing strain.

Minneapolis’s experience echoed that of many other cities around the country that were going through the same processes. City planners worried that as drivers found it increasingly difficult to find space, they would turn to the suburbs to fulfill their commercial needs and leave the city empty.²⁸ To address this problem, the obvious solution was to build more parking spaces, but providing additional spaces increased the accessibility of downtown for the automobile, which perpetuated the cycle of overcrowding and new parking construction.²⁹ In Minneapolis’s case, the parking lots of the Gateway district provided this necessary need for parking to guarantee the vitality of the core, but soon it became apparent to city planners that a piecemeal approach to parking and traffic systems was not effective in increasing accessibility to combating the decline of downtown.

A report commissioned in 1969 entitled “Parking and Circulation in Downtown Minneapolis: an Evaluation Study” highlighted the necessity for local government to take control of parking policy in order to guide land development in a beneficial manner. The report characterized the detrimental effect of a piecemeal approach to parking (where private developers supplied the need for parking, such as in the Gateway district, with chaotic on-street parking making up the difference) as an intrusion into the urban fabric of Minneapolis.³⁰ The next section will show how planners acted on this recommendation to create a city wide parking strategy to help boost economic vitality.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF PARKING LOTS

In order to prevent downtown flight caused by traffic stagnation and the draw of suburbia, planners across America realized that they would need to formally control parking and traffic circulation to increase mobility downtown, hopefully improving economic activity. Minneapolis's case was no different. Beginning in the 1970s, city planners slowly began to view the clutter of downtown traffic as part of the reason that Minneapolis's population continued to decline with increasing rapidity. Indeed, from 1970 and 1980 Minneapolis lost another 15% of its population, putting its cumulative population loss at nearly thirty percent since its high in 1950.³¹

In 1978, realizing that something had to be done to prevent this substantial population loss, the Citizens League drafted a new report for the entire Twin Cities, entitled "Needed: A Policy for Parking". The report outlined the need for a formalized system of fringe parking, forcefully recommended that the development of future lots should be discouraged downtown and instead be created on the fringe of the city, in order to remove traffic congestion to the edges of the core city. Combined with the downtown development plan that was already in place, the report suggested that such a solution would free up the core from traffic and increase its attractiveness for investors because business accessibility would be greatly enhanced.³² Since the Gateway district, which had been identified as a "fringe" area of the downtown core in the 1969 report, was still underdeveloped and characterized by expansive parking lots, it fit naturally into the recommended fringe parking policy.³³ However, the report highlighted two necessary requirements that complicated the resulting fringe parking policy: First, it suggested that fringe parking lots should be "located very near existing or committed extensions to the highly developed core" and that they "will work best if they are tied directly

into the skyway system”, and secondly, it recommended that the lots should be part of a public parking plan, but privately owned to reduce public debt.³⁴

The idea that, in order to solve its parking problem, Minneapolis would have to have privately owned parking lots that followed a city wide parking policy that integrated parking facilities into the existing urban fabric presented a mutually exclusive relationship between public and private interests, a commonality shared by many other cities during this time.³⁵

Minneapolis proved to be no different, and the integrated fringe parking policy recommended in the 1978 report never materialized. Because there was a lack of support for using public funds to develop an extensive and integrated parking system, planners had to rely largely on the existing patchwork of private surface lots located in the Gateway District and other fringe areas to fulfill the parking needs of Minneapolis.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the 1990s, Minneapolis was still experiencing population decline, losing about one percent of its population during that decade. Not until the year 2000 did the populations of the city finally begin to rebound.³⁶ After forty years of population loss, it is important to ask if the goals and aims of city planners were effective. In looking back, it seems that the question is unequivocally no. While urban renewal in the Gateway District may have been effective in stabilizing the economy of the city, we will never know for certainty because urban renewal occurred on the cusp of a major population exodus to the suburbs. However, what can be assuredly stated is that after the renewal of the Gateway District the grand redevelopment that was envisioned never transpired. Instead, “lots of parking” was created. These parking lots were both a product of urban renewal and interstates construction, but

developed into a tool which urban planners used to help retain economic activity in the downtown. In cities across the United States urban planners latched onto the idea that, while the car was tearing cities apart, it could also help revitalize them. So planners created new developments that aided the circulation of the car, Minneapolis being no exception to this rule.

The parking lots in Minneapolis today, which create harsh scars in the urban fabric, remind us of the “arrogance of planners” during the preceding decades.³⁷ In urban planners’ drive to renew and revitalize the city through the car, they failed to see that Minneapolis was losing out to the suburbs because of deep structural inefficiencies and government subsidies that made suburban living vastly more attractive than living in the city center. A policy of saving the city through increased parking capacity and circulation was always doomed to fail because it was at its heart an aesthetic solution to a very real structural dichotomy between the city and suburb.

As Minneapolis entered the 21st century, there are signs that the relationship between city and suburb is changing. Suburban growth is slowing, and Minneapolis has had a modest population growth of 3.9% since 1990, its first increase since the 1940s.³⁸ As the desirability of urban life is slowly reviving, there is an increasing pressure to develop new residential units downtown. In fact, the population of census tract 1612, which encompasses the Gateway district, increased 183% between 2000 and 2010. As existing surface lots are replaced by new apartments and commercial establishments to cater to this growing population, the issue of parking may once again rear its ugly head. This time, city planners need to be better prepared with a better strategy to deal with the issue of parking and traffic circulation. Whether this strategy entails the “attrition of the city by the car” through the development of increased

automobile capacity, or through the “attrition of the car by the city” through denser development and new forms of mass transportation, remains to be seen³⁹.



Figure 1 : The Gateway Park & Pavilion, built in the mid 1920s, was the first major step in attempting to revitalize the Gateway District and help prevent investment from migrating south down Nicollet Ave.



Figure 2 : Taken in 1938, this image shows that extremely dense environment that characterized the Gateway District of Minneapolis before urban renewal in the 1960s. Gateway Park can be seen at the upper-middle section of the photo, at the convergence of Hennepin and Nicollet Ave.



Figure 3 : This image, taken in the 1960s, shows the slow development of the Gateway District after clearance was complete. Many of the parking lots seen in this image remain today.

