

BUILDING FOR A BIPOLAR CLIMATE



I tend to do most non-lethal things that I'm challenged to do. I refuse to walk my bike up hills despite riding a single speed (when at all physically possible). As an 11-year old, I drank a half bottle of Texas Pete in exchange for \$5 after being dared by my loving mother. A year ago, I was living in Seattle and my current Minnesotan girlfriend said something to the effect of "I bet you're too scared of our winter to move here." As is obvious by this post, the rest is history.

After living here, I've been incredibly impressed by this area's ability to attract and retain millions of people, most of them seemingly normal. They even resemble the Seattlites I left behind, many of whom see Minneapolitans as cold weather masochists. Despite being among the coldest major cities in the world (I could only find one that was both colder and bigger), people seem to have a really hard time leaving here. Part of this is just a result of the Twin Cities' golden ratio of lifestyle amenities that need no introduction. Nonetheless, the suburban model to which the majority of this region adheres actually provides an enormous competitive advantage when it comes to door to door climate control and, as a result, relative normalcy. It is for this reason that I begrudgingly respect heated parking garages, our stupifyingly extensive freeway system and yes, skyways.

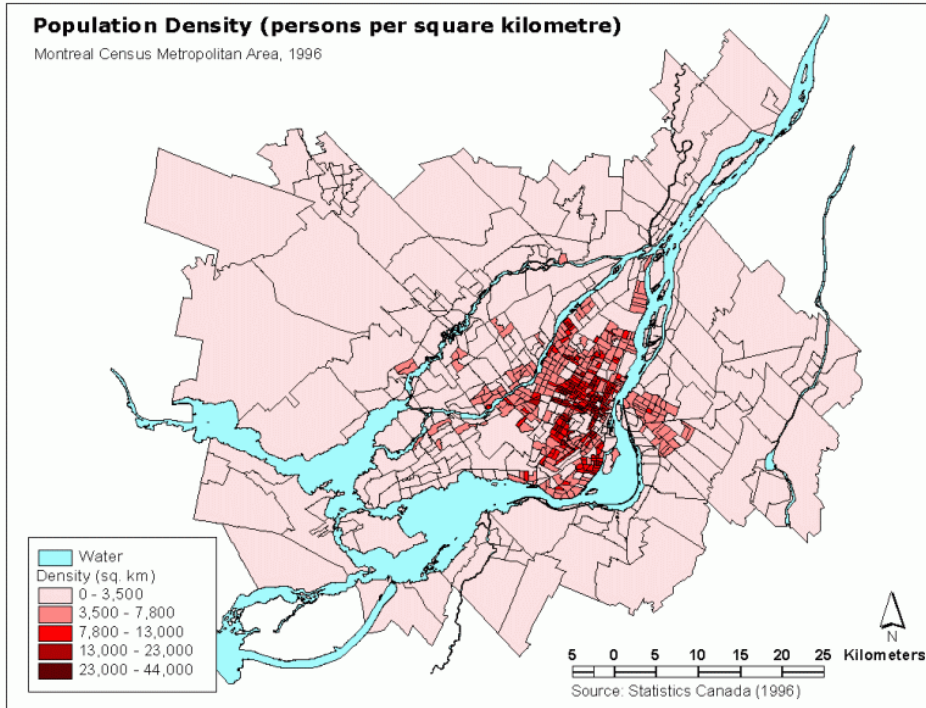
I've never heard a non-urbanist hate on our skyway system. I've agreed with folks becraying piecemeal skyways in other warmer cities. I've heard folks tut-tut the under-abundance of ground floor retail and overabundance of enormous 4-5 lane one way streets in Downtown Minneapolis. I've

heard layperson enthusiasm for nearly everything that urbanists champion... except for dismantling our skyway system. Our current configuration is confusing, inaccessible, and possibly the furthest thing from the traditionally designed narrow storefronts that I love, but there's no denying the conventional logic that a skyway trip beats a sidewalk trip on any -15 degree day. While I'm absolutely of the opinion that traditional city design needs to be the reference point for the future of our cities, it seems reactionist and narrow-minded to believe that every innovation of the auto era has no value to pedestrian-oriented urbanism going forward.

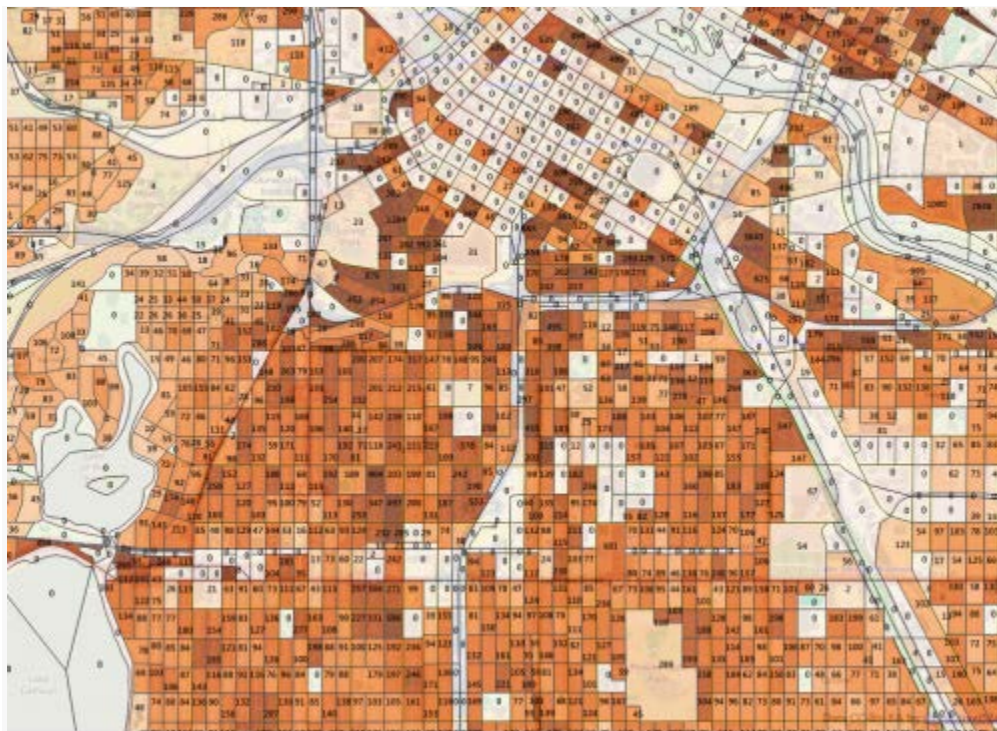
Anyway, onto my personal recipe for a skyway system that any urbanist can froth over. This is less to defend or ignore the equal access problems the skyways currently have, but to demonstrate how they can be a vital part of an inherently public downtown system that is uniquely effective in our climate.

Montreal did it, why can't we?

Possibly the biggest factor keeping me from being a complete anti-skyway zealot is Montreal's underground skyway equivalent, the RESO. In place of second story views, the RESO provides excellent retail and pedestrian connectivity to Montreal's larger than average subway system. I have grand and unrealistic dreams of Minneapolis developing an equivalent system of elevated trains that interface with our skyways, alas I digress. What would be surprising to most skyway opponents is that the RESO doesn't noticeably reduce pedestrian traffic on Montreal's downtown commercial streets. The most likely answer for this is the area's residential density, which is far higher than in Minneapolis' downtown.



You can see Montreal's residential population density peaking at it's downtown, marked by the dark red. (Source: McGill College)



...whereas Minneapolis' downtown has among the city's lowest residential population density. (Source: Streets.mn)

Additionally, there is actually a comparable amount of retail space on Montreal's ground floor compared to the RESO. This is one thing that absolutely needs to change in Minneapolis, which doesn't have anywhere near the critical mass of ground floor retail necessary to maintain a dynamic street scene in any weather. Even if a skyway teardown movement had a broader base, establishing a well-designed ground floor is the absolute first step.

Entrances and Exits

Another thing that the RESO does right is countless well-marked exits and entrances. It also has a distinct brand and has many connections with ground floor retail spaces. Until Minneapolis' skyway has a similar degree of public access and integration with the street, it will remain a sterile, suburban, street-suffocating network. While expensive, I think this could be easily achieved by a staircase or other obviously marked street connection at every single bridge. Combined with obvious signage on both levels denoting the businesses and services above and below, we could have a truly urban, equitable and toasty system on our hands.



The yellow walkway pictured needs to be on every single skyway (Source: <http://archpaper.com/>)

Seasonal Modularity

In our current phase of extensive inner-city growth, the Twin Cities are re-defining the unique urban experience that this area is and will be known for. I believe that this experience should not only compete with suburban climate control but also bolster the unique factors that only come with walkable urbanism. This means urbanism that conforms to traditional standards while also remaining

as seasonally flexible as possible. I feel like I must be one of the only urbanists who absolutely love Calhoun Square, but you can't knock how well it provides a dynamic retail experience for both seasonal extremes. We employ the same kind of flexibility when converting winter's parking lots into summer's patios, just as Bryant Square Park's ice rink turns into its summertime ballfield.

While these are great starts, I challenge Twin Cities urbanists to make this kind of seasonal flexibility the cornerstone of our current urban renaissance. Imagine if our skyway system not only had consistent street connections but also removable windows and roofs for the summer! What if every storefront had as bi-seasonal of a park as Northeast's Crown Center? I'd like to see countless projects like these as well as the overall emergence of built environment that makes as much use of the summer breeze as the winter chill. Let's just see if we can make such a compelling built environment as to make Los Angelenos jealous of our snow!



Dear Minneapolis: I want to see this repeated into infinity please. (Source <http://www.journalmpls.com/>)

I don't think our skyway system should be removed, if only because of the myriad opportunities for improving it. Clearly issues of ambiguous ownership and generally confusing layout would need to be fixed before the system is truly egalitarian. If it is to be removed, let's make sure that we replace it with an innovative solution that makes the winter months a joy.

Source : <http://streets.mn/2014/06/16/building-for-a-bipolar-climate/>