

# GERBIL LAND

LOOKING FOR MEANING IN THE SKYWAYS.

By Chris Clayton



Suppose you wake up one grey Friday morning and decide to walk all eight miles of Minneapolis skyway. And say you start in southwest downtown because your map shows a church there, on Grant Street, that appears connected to the storied steel-and-glass bridges—and what better place to begin a mysterious voyage than a holy site? Well, I hate to break it to you, young skywalker, but your map is lying. Or at least *implying*. Drawn by the city, it definitely implies that skyways join Wesley United Methodist Church with the Minneapolis Convention Center.

I should have done my homework. Instead, I'm standing outside Wesley United at 10:27 a.m. realizing there's no way in hell, or in this case heaven, they'd attach elevated tunnels to a plaque-carrying member of the National Register of Historic Places. I consider rerouting; involving the church will break a self-imposed rule stating that starts and stops on today's flight must occur in skyways or the buildings they link like so many giant Tinkertoys.

Then I recall something about priests blessing Italian fishermen before journeys at sea. I try the church's main entrance. No answer. Around back, a heavyset man with a Grizzly Adams beard cracks open a door. "Is there someone here who could bless me?" I ask. He wants to know why, which seems reasonable, so I explain my goal of visiting every downtown skyway.

"Why would you do that?" Unfamiliarity, curiosity, stupidity, I tell him.

"No preacher today."

"How about you?" I ask. He lifts his chin, looks me in the eye. His beard contains remnants of meals past.

"You are blessed," he says and shuts the door.

Armed with the unofficial support of the Methodists, I take one last breath of fresh air, climb a stairwell to the west end of the Convention Center and begin my search for ... what? Climate-controlled enlightenment? Cheap lunch? It's hard to say what you're looking for when you don't know where you're going.

"EVERYONE I ASK LOVES—LOVES!—THE SKYWAYS BECAUSE THEY ERASE THE NEED TO GO OUTSIDE. REAL MINNESOTANS DON'T SAY THINGS LIKE THIS, WHICH MAKES ME WONDER IF SKYWAY DWELLERS ARE ACTUALLY WIMPY, ABOVE-GROUND MOLE-PEOPLE."



12:03 p.m. Goodbye, Hilton, hello, International Center. My map, which has been spot-on since that initial hiccup, shows a stand of skyscrapers ahead, the beating heart of the skyway. Things *do* feel cardiovascular here. Schools of office workers rush by in pleated

my leg, and I wonder if my soul's being vacuumed away. Time to go.

The next half-hour is a real-life game of Chutes and Ladders: After exploring the Hyatt and backtracking to the Convention Center, I descend to its main floor, suppress the urge to crash a meeting of Hardware Hank employees, climb to the "East Skyway" entry and pass over 12th Street to a lounge in Hotel Ivy. Among modern furniture and maids whining about scheduling snafus ("I wanted Saturday off!"), I consult my good friend iPhone.

**ME:** Who runs the Minneapolis skyway system, iPhone?

**IPHONE:** It's private, meaning if one of these bridges touches your building, you're responsible for cleaning, heating and cooling it, as well as keeping it safe via security camera and/or guard. It also means that the skyways lack standardization. City regulations exist, but they're loose. Each skyway must be between 12 and 30 feet wide, and at least 16 feet above the street. As a result, Minneapolis skyways come in all styles and configurations.

**ME:** That explains the hall of horrors back at Marquette Place.

**IPHONE:** It also explains why the skyway system looks like a shattered windshield when mapped onto the downtown grid.

**ME:** How many blocks is it?

**IPHONE:** More than 70, with at least 80 bridges total. When businessman Leslie Park and architect Ed Baker built the first Twin Cities skyway in 1962 (it joined the Northstar Center and the now-defunct Northwestern National Bank Building), they dreamed of a layout this expansive. Did you know ours is the largest continuous system of its kind in the world? Calgary's "Plus 15" skyways run 11 cumulative miles, but they don't all connect. We're unique that way, like a snowflake.

**ME:** Speaking of which, weren't the skyways originally planned to shelter us from the elements?

**IPHONE:** That's a myth. They were built to return retail and shoppers to the urban core after white people moved to the suburbs.

**ME:** What's the traffic like up here?

**IPHONE:** The Retek on the Mall skyway above Ninth Street is the busiest in Minneapolis, with a daily volume of 16,200 pedestrians. The Nicollet Mall sidewalk, by the way, sees about 25,000 people a day—proof that skyways are hardly the street-life killers that urban planners make them out to be.

**ME:** What am I trying to prove today, iPhone?

**IPHONE:** I'd tell you, but you forgot to charge—



Wesley United Methodist Church; Tom and Rita Bennett; Zen Box's #2; the author, pre-skyway fatigue; a skyway-level view of Target Field; Wells Fargo Center.

khakis and power suits, and it strikes me that you don't see packs like this on the street because most sidewalks aren't wide enough to support them. Up here, they're the norm, and if you're not moving with purpose, they will take you out. Stopping for a photo over 10th Street, I'm nearly leveled by a guy in pinstripes and a buzz cut. "Damn tourists," he says. I'm with him; I feel like a damn tourist.

Skyway survival lesson #2 occurs in AT&T Tower: If you're on the second story of nearly any building in downtown Minneapolis, and said building starts on fire, simply cross to a different one. OK, so the recorded voice telling me to evacuate the premises is likely a false alarm, but I'm not waiting around to find out.

Next up: TCF Tower (lonely brick atrium), Campbell Mithun Tower (windowless, too-hot skyway), Energy Center (pleasant, Gazebo-like skyway); Accenture Tower (former sight of the Admiral Hotel; "John Dillinger stayed there," a worker bee tells me); and lunchtime (I could eat a mixed-use development).



Back at TCF, I head north through the Baker Center, past tasty-looking options like D. Brian's, German Hot Dog Co. and Tensuke Sushi. Two inadvertent side-trips later (to the IDS and Rand Tower), I stumble upon Zen Box, a pint-sized bento joint a friend of mine raves about. New-age flute music floats from ceiling speakers as I inhale the venerable ginger chicken, a weary traveler meditating in a Zen Box.

So far I'm torn. On the one hand, the skyway level is a fascinating exercise in futurism—a thriving, self-sustaining hive with myriad retail and restaurants, a grocery store (if you count Target), medical and dental clinics, even a church (where were you this morning, St. Olaf Lutheran?). Downtown's second story also acts as architectural magician, flipping the skyline inside out and offering indoor walking tours of our most iconic edifices (see the Rand Tower's terrazzo flooring and IDS Center's Crystal Court, essentially a glassed-in

forest with a waterfall). Most compelling, though, are its views of the rest of the city. Stand on almost any sky bridge, gaze out on streets and high-rises that seem close enough to touch, and for a moment you feel like it's all for you.

But this place is also kind of freaking me out. It's just as easy to see the skyways as the endless food court of some *WALL-E*-esque alternate universe where Taco Bell sits empty and Taco John's is packed. (Seriously, I witnessed this an hour ago. When was the last time you even saw a Taco John's?) Adding to the "slightly askew" factor: Folks up here wear weather avoidance like a badge of honor. Everyone I ask loves—LOVES!—the skyways because they erase the need to go outside. Real Minnesotans don't say things like this, which makes me wonder if skyway dwellers are actually wimpy, aboveground mole-people.



After lunch, a three-anecdote pileup:

1.) At Premium Quality Coin in the Northstar Center, Bill Himmelwright points to an American flag adorning the back of his rare-currency emporium. It's made of thousands of pennies. "Largest coin mural in the world as of 2006," says Himmelwright. "Guinness-certified." Then he pulls out a stack of \$100 trillion bills issued by Zimbabwe at the height of its hyperinflation in 2009—one of which can be yours for 10 bucks.

2.) At US Bank Plaza, a Hennepin County Sheriff tells me she's never heard of or witnessed serious crime in the skyway. "Couple purse-snatchers. Couple medicals. Overall, pretty safe."

3.) At Gaviidae Commons, I meet a woman who sold her car, moved downtown and, you guessed it, "never leaves the skyway!" She refers to Minneapolis's city within a city as "Gerbil Land."

Spend enough hours pinballing through the skyways and everything starts piling up: Subways, Caribous, drycleaners, fancy hotels, bizarrely named restaurants (e.g., Beyond Juice; Salad Creations), empty retail space, gaudy atria, dead ends, defective drinking fountains (like the one

in the Plymouth Building that gives a loud honk instead of water), buildings named after Target, attractions you'll never visit (the museum of Wells Fargo history), power-walkers, power-shoppers, shoe-shiners, bums, buskers and every stripe of office worker imaginable, including Headset King and Severe Pantsuit Woman.

By late afternoon, I'm experiencing skyway fatigue, the symptoms of which are heel blisters, dry-mouth and a diminished sense of self. I need a plan. My map claims that Capella Tower leads to the area by City Hall and the Federal Courthouse—the only span of skyway I've yet to conquer. Unfortunately, I can't figure out how to get there. I try the bottom of Northwest Center, but all I find is a gallery named "Louvre It or Leave It." Back on the second floor, I walk in circles for 20 minutes, apparently stuck in the Bermuda Triangle of the skyways.

This seems like a good time to curl up in a ball and cry, but I soldier on, taking a back way that shoots me into the Government Center, where it occurs to me that I just completed a reverse pilgrimage of sorts: The last six hours have taken me from church to state. With things tied up in this semi-compelling thematic bow, I abort mission and exit onto Fifth Street.

Failure has never felt so good. In my head, I kiss the sidewalk and shake hands with my fellow groundlings, who assure me that the bridges I missed probably look a lot like the 60-plus I've already visited today. Half-baked conclusions come to mind: The skyways are a metaphor for modernity and its push for comfort, convenience and commodity at all costs. The skyways are pointless—look at chilly Stockholm's lively street life. The skyways are ... worth getting uptight over only when trying to see them all in one day.

Just then, a cool breeze blows in from the northwest, bending the young ash trees that line Government Plaza. Feeling suddenly chilled, I zip up my windbreaker, stick my hands in my pockets and walk away from the floating city. +



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