

A plan to stitch Minneapolis together again: Cover a stretch of I-35W

By [Marlys Harris](#) | 04/11/14



Courtesy of the University of Minnesota College of Design

Last fall, students at the School of Architecture got together with the Metropolitan Design Center, a research outfit within the College of Design, to develop a plan to bridge I-35 with a park, taking the highway out of view (for a few blocks) and providing space for parks, businesses, stores and public facilities like schools and maybe a library.

If you, like me, consider the tremendous amount of land the Twin Cities devote to freeways, not to mention their attendant ramps, walls and berms, to be somewhat appalling, then you ought to hustle down to the IDS Center's Crystal Court. There you'll find a model of a visionary plan to cover a portion of I-35W in Minneapolis with a park, apartment buildings and commercial space.

I live only a couple of blocks away, so I know the spot well. It stretches along Washington Avenue South, split in half by the I-35 gulch. On one side sit a Bobby & Steve's Auto World and the Minnesota Super-Computing Center; in the other direction lie Seven Corners, with its lively bars and theaters, and much of the University of Minnesota. The walk from one end to the other presents you with a visual desert — the gray, dirty freeway, the sides and backs of buildings, and expanses of (usually) brown grass in the middle of the cloverleaf exits.

OK, so it's not pretty. But, according to **Thomas Fisher**, dean of the U's **College of Design**, this landscape is also incredibly wasteful. The vast space that spans 35W is doing basically nothing, as are the blocks on either side of it. For Minneapolis, which is seeing — at least momentarily — a resurgence of people and businesses that want to live and operate downtown, such a large undeveloped expanse could be a godsend.



“You’d be creating density where it would be accepted,” says Fisher. The plan does not contemplate tearing down or doing away with businesses already in place. Much of the land and the air rights are publicly owned; there wouldn’t be any NIMBY-otic neighbors to complain that the project would block their views or increase traffic.

So last fall, students at the **School of Architecture** got together with the **Metropolitan Design Center**, a research outfit within the College of Design, to develop a plan to bridge I-35 with a park, taking the highway out of view (for a few blocks) and providing space for parks, businesses, stores and public facilities like schools and maybe a library.

Everyone praised it — for different reasons

To view and celebrate the students’ scale model, a batch of local notables and their acolytes gathered in the Crystal Court the other day. Everybody had praise for the idea — but for different reasons.

According to Steve Cramer, CEO of the **Minneapolis Downtown Council**, the "lidding" would aid in achieving the group’s plan for 2025, one of whose aims is to double downtown population to 70,000. **Jacob Frey**, a newly elected City Council member whose **Ward 3** includes Downtown East, waxed enthusiastic about possibility that the land bridge would connect currently separated income and ethnic groups — in this case, I guess, the well-off condo owners of his district and the Somali population of Cedar-Riverside. City plans of yore, he observed, virtually assigned Jews and blacks to their own special districts. “Now we are all trying to come together,” he said.

Several speakers mentioned the importance of establishing (or re-establishing) a physical link between downtown and the U of M.

"If you don't make the most of an educational institution in your area, you'd be crazy," said **Barbara Johnson**, president of the City Council. And there was a lot of talk about how the University was the economic engine of innovation and downtown was the economic engine of the metro, the state, the region and so on, and collaboration between the two would produce everlasting prosperity and other happy outcomes.

I am not sure why a physical connection over I-35 will necessarily bring about more synergy between the campus and the central business district. There's nothing to stop folks in either place from collaborating

now. (Everybody involved already has email and telephones.) But having a thriving neighborhood next to the university rather than the no man's land that now exists certainly couldn't hurt.

Idea includes apartments, schools, shops

That neighborhood, as envisioned by students, would be a place for families, said Mic Johnson, design principal at the Architecture Field Office and interim director of the Metropolitan Design Center.

Apartment buildings would house 5,000 residents, and there would be an elementary, middle and high school. Also included: a day-care center, a food market, an LRT station, a fitness center and a bike repair shop. Fourth Street would be the area's commercial spine, with office towers lining it.

Further tactical thinking went into the plan for the neighborhood. All buildings would have "green" roofs. Covered with vegetation, they provide environmental benefits, reducing rainwater runoff for example, and filtering out pollutants. Higher floors would be set back from the lot line to allow for sunshine, air and eyes on the streets below. And in the middle of the whole thing would be a ribbon of parkland covering up I-35.

Even though the plan is years from realization, I was totally ready to move in. But my inner accountant wondered: How much is this whole shebang going to cost? The answer is: not the billions I had imagined. Covering up the freeway and creating parking decks beneath (like Chicago's [Millennium Park](#)) would range from \$40 million to \$60 million. The air rights over the freeway and much of the land surrounding it belong to the [Minnesota Department of Transportation](#) (MnDOT), whose commissioner, Charles Zelle, turned up to endorse the project. Such a walkable area, he suggested, falls in line with MnDOT's latest strategic aim to maximize "the health of people, the environment and the economy." But his eyes also seemed to glow brighter when he mentioned the revenues that selling or leasing the air rights would bring the department. Except for public facilities, all building would be private.

Returns to the city could be immense. A study by the Minneapolis branch of [Jones Lang LaSalle](#), a commercial real-estate company, estimated that the redeveloped land (some of it newly created) would boost tax revenues over a 10-year period by \$288 million. Currently, the 11 blocks involved would pay about \$8.1 million over the same period.

Will developers show up?

Few seemed worried, as I was, that "lidding" the freeway might create a glut of land in an area where its highest and best use has until recently at least been surface parking lots. Just because MnDOT creates more land by "lidding" the freeway doesn't necessarily mean that developers will come flocking. It's possible that we could wind up with a lid but no neighborhood.

Typical was the answer from one notable I asked. Pointing to the power brokers milling around the model, he said, "These people won't let that happen." Hmm, as though bankers and builders had never previously made miscalculations.

In fact, 5,000 more people downtown might be a lot for the market to swallow. Already, apartment towers are shooting up out of the soil like crocuses in spring. Whether they will all fill up immediately,

whether enough people will want to stay in them, whether demand for downtown living will grow — all those questions remain to be answered.

In the meantime, however, Mic Johnson offered a long list of other areas that could profit by highway cover-ups — the huge freeway farm where I-94 and I-35 meet in South Minneapolis; in St. Paul, where the I-94 trench separates downtown from the Capitol, to name just two of 20 examples he had in mind. All of them could become parks and what he described as "a necklace of green connecting the city's major landmarks."

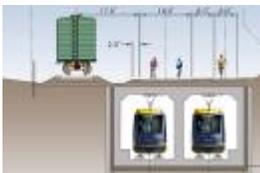
That image of a city putting back together what the federal highway system tore asunder is certainly a dream worth pursuing.

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COMMENTS (18)

Surface parking lots

SUBMITTED BY HARRIS GOLDSTEIN ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 8:25AM.

Surface parking lots are a way to inventory land for future development as well as to utilize land that is undesirable for more productive use. They generate income to pay taxes and operating/maintenance costs until a "better offer" comes along.

"Lidding", regardless of it's other benefits, will increase the supply of land. So as you suggested, without an increase in demand it may in fact increase (or lengthen) the need to stockpile land as surface lots.

On the flip side, to the extent that surface parking lots are a buffer between the freeway and buildings (the lesser of 2 evils), lidding will make that land more desirable.

Let's cover the freeway!

SUBMITTED BY RON GOTZMAN ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 8:32AM.

It would be great to cover the freeway!

Before we go ahead with such a project, let us add about 2 or 3 more lanes to the existing highway and work toward the elimination of the "curve." This would greatly reduce congestion for those who want to escape the repression of city life.

We could also build a huge Wal-Mart on top of this covering in order to promote economic development.

Build a large Costco or Target instead of Walmart.

SUBMITTED BY GERALD ABRAHAMSON ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 10:50AM.

Costco offers better pay to its workers and lower prices.

Target should be "all over" such a desirable site in a fraction of a heartbeat. Within walking distance of massive number of repeat customers (particularly U of M students)--many of whom might not have cars.

Money not well spent

SUBMITTED BY MARK WALLEK ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 8:49AM.

There are so many other issues of livability in this city that this looks to be a total waste of money benefiting a small area of the city. When there is tremendous excess of public capital then maybe we can think about this. In the meanwhile, let's get roads drivable and carpetbagger landlords out of business, just two of a number things that would vastly improve the quality of life in this city.

I, too, would like to cover them up

SUBMITTED BY LORA JONES ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 9:16AM.

I'll never forget how, when both my sister and I lived in the Kingsfield neighborhood 20 some years ago, my mom relayed how much the freeway had changed the area since, as a student, she'd worked for a professor who lived there . I

guess my priorities might be a bit different than the U of M students, however. I'd like to see the Capitol and the Cathedral reconnected with St. Paul first. With the West Bank/Downtown-Westbank/Augsberg/Seward areas to follow.

Washington Ave.?

SUBMITTED BY MOIRA HEFFRON ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 9:21AM.

Really like thinking about this possibility. However, knowing the importance of the Washington Ave. exit to access both downtown and University (and the accompanying congestion at the on-ramp at some times of day), I am curious about how the planners would address this.

Grand plans

SUBMITTED BY ADAM MILLER ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 9:25AM.

Does it matter whether the the developers come? I think it would be a positive simply to cover the freeway and reconnect the physical space on either side. If all we get is parkland out of it, that would be great.

Cold water here

SUBMITTED BY RAY SCHOCH ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 9:59AM.

Hard to disagree with the overall goal – it's "...a dream worth pursuing." One of the great domestic planning errors of the 20th century was to route interstate highways through downtown areas instead of around them.

That said, however, I can't help but think of at least a few nagging details, such as the public and business response to I-35 being closed for 'x' period of time while the "lid" is installed, or even more time-consuming, if it's built on-site. The same thing occurs to me in regard to just about any proposal to cover an interstate highway canyon.

I'm also inclined, dream notwithstanding, to think that there are several items that ought to be higher on any list of public works priorities. Before we build this, let's get the city's roads, mostly in terrible shape, into something approaching acceptable condition. With more and more people finding themselves housing-distressed, before we build more "luxury" condos in a new neighborhood, how about building some "stylish" but moderately-priced condos and apartments in areas of the city – the north side, especially – that need both new development and affordable housing.

And the list could go on. I like the idea, but other items seem more important and more immediate to me.

Tremendous amount of land?

SUBMITTED BY KEVIN WATTERSON ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 10:49AM.

Tremendous amount of land? Have you ever flown into or out of the Twin Cities or looked at it on Google Earth?

Ms. Harris

SUBMITTED BY TODD ADLER ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 10:52AM.

I like Marlys' pragmatic outlook on these proposals. It looks like the "lid" will be a welcome addition to the area, but whether or not anyone builds there remains to be seen. I believe the one thing that will spur new construction beyond "those guys standing over there" is the fact that this will be a new park. And people love to be near green space rather than a freeway.

Hopefully it'll get built, be successful, and we'll see a lot more of these projects. It sure beats the hell out of watching cars go by.

Adjacency

SUBMITTED BY NAT CASE ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 11:54AM.

The big adjacency you've left out is the Stadium and Wilf-led redevelopment around it. The surface lots there will be gone in a decade unless Wilf has made a major miscalculation. This in itself gives the potential project more legitimacy. And notice how in the last decade and a half pretty much all of the surface lots on the riverfront have vanished. Opening up this bridge space makes a lot of sense, and provides a sense of continuity to downtown that will be running out of "expansion space" in the foreseeable few decades. That, and notice all the university residential housing going up around the U... there's a market there that this will help fill. High-density city, here we come!

rondo

SUBMITTED BY BRIAN SIMON ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 1:43PM.

Restitching Rondo together in a similar fashion is also a worthwhile idea.

Downtown sprawl?

SUBMITTED BY STEVE SANDE ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 2:21PM.

The idea of stitching up the wounds those ugly freeways inflicted upon the urban fabric is appealing on many levels. Connecting people and places, adding housing close to the U of M and downtown, restoring part of the grid -- what's not to love?

Nonetheless, I think this deserves a sober assessment. In particular, consider what it would mean to extend the boundaries of downtown so far beyond the traditional office and retail core. The housing aspect sounds promising, but do we really want office towers in the middle of 35W? That might be fine, as long as we are reasonably certain that downtown Minneapolis will grow so incredibly much in the years to come that it can support multiple thriving centers of activity. Otherwise we may see pockets of shiny new development here and there, separated by tracts of surface parking lots and decaying buildings. The core of downtown may suffer. In that scenario, can downtown still support the kind of districts, retail and otherwise, that appeal to residents and downtown workers? (Related thoughts here: <http://www.minnpost.com/twin-cities-business/2014/04/inside-story-wells-...>)

Without high-intensity development, though, the numbers no longer work, probably. The air rights may be worth less, and tax revenue projections would decline. Yet new public infrastructure is created that must be supported for the long term. I would agree with Ray Schoch that we should carefully consider where this ranks on our current list of public priorities.

Theft tell ya...

SUBMITTED BY PAUL UDSTRAND ON APRIL 11, 2014 - 3:54PM.

I don't know how they did it but somehow they stole my idea. I've been saying for years they should just cover that roadway and reconnect downtown with south MPLS. We've already got a big damn library downtown that cost a lot of money to build so I'm not sure we need another one, but that "land" bridge would go a long ways towards erasing a huge chunk of 60s era civic vandalism.

I don't know why people seem to be so hostile to this idea? It makes a lot of sense, it would be like Boston's "Big Dig" but much much cheaper. I'd cover it from somewhere around Lyndale down to just shy of Park Ave.

Ramming these freeways through downtown core's was a huge mistake back in the day, this is one way of correcting that. They could do the same thing over in St. Paul. They actually built a scheme like this into the section of 35W that ends up in Duluth and it works pretty well. Without the city would have been completely cut off from the lake.

This has already been done years ago.

SUBMITTED BY KEITH MORRIS ON APRIL 12, 2014 - 1:35PM.

My hometown of Columbus built "The Cap" over a highway bridge which was retrofitted to hold more weight to handle one story commercial buildings made of light-weight material back in the early 2000s and it's a good deal shorter than one over Washington between Seven Corners and Downtown.

I'm surprised that several years later not a single one has been built, especially over the bridge on Nicollet between Loring Park and Stevens Square/Loring Heights.

Here's what the \$8 million highway bridge with a retail cap looks like facing north from Downtown Columbus to the Short North.

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.973823,-83.002864,3a,90y,352.37h,91.83t/data=!3m4!1e1!3m2!1sjAVD6HM1cjSdBvE>

Here's what a southbound view from the southern end of Loring Park to the other neighborhoods across the highway w/o a cap looks like.

https://www.google.com/maps/@44.966722,-93.27782,3a,75y,172.44h,79.03t/data=!3m4!1e1!3m2!1sk_yR2eaXuwtqRDux5

Why don't we already have multiple version of the former?

35E by State Capitol

SUBMITTED BY RICHARD CALLAHAN ON APRIL 12, 2014 - 4:29PM.

It makes more sense to me to lid over 35E between the State Capitol and St. Paul.

Projects

SUBMITTED BY TODD ADLER ON APRIL 13, 2014 - 8:31PM.

I'm having a hard time figuring out why we can do a project like this or repair our roads. Why is it an either/or proposition? I realize funds are always tight these days, but my philosophy on life isn't to treat a road block as a reason to stop, but rather to find a way through, under, over, or around it.

Where there's a will, there's a way.

affordable housing

SUBMITTED BY ANDREW VIRDEN ON APRIL 14, 2014 - 1:38PM.

Wouldn't it be nice if the 5,000 units of housing were "affordable" housing not like the hundred of new high-end units being build downtown, Loring Park, Uptown and Lake Calhoun? Affordable housing would also be perfect for the undergrad and grad students, staff at the U as well as other under-served parts of the city.