

# Making Downtown: Nicollet Mall's Collaborative Design Response for a Vital City Center

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## Timeframe

1955	1956	1962	1966	1967
Downtown Council of Minneapolis formed, a collaboration of businessmen	<b>July 9:</b> Leslie Park (Board of Directors of Downtown Council) proposes plan for an elevated, enclosed, heated "Nicollet Plaza" mall <b>October 8:</b> Dayton-Hudson Co. opens Southdale Center in Edina, MN as the first enclosed shopping mall	<b>February 22:</b> Barton-Aschman and Associates proposes plan for Nicollet Mall <b>November 21:</b> Lawrence Halprin and Associates commissioned for design	<b>April 7:</b> Nicollet Mall proposal wins unanimous approval from Minneapolis City Council <b>August 12:</b> Groundbreaking ceremonies for Nicollet Mall's construction	<b>November 20:</b> Dedication ceremonies for Nicollet Mall

## Introduction

Nicollet Avenue had been the heart of downtown Minneapolis' retail district for almost a century before it was designed to be a pedestrian mall in the 1960s, and thousands of people still circulate through it daily. While the Mall received a lot of publicity and attention in the years surrounding its construction, the story for us today is fragmented. The archival material from this period of Minneapolis' history is found in a variety of places, and the span of eleven years meant a lot of people were involved in the design process. My goal is to reassemble its history during the 1950s and 60s.

A vibrant past of the rejuvenation of Minneapolis' city center was built from the many pieces found in an analysis of a strong base of archival primary sources and secondary literature. If we can construct how this complex web of individuals and groups collaborated to conceive, construct, and care for Nicollet Mall, we would better understand how public and private interests intersect for the lasting success and vitality of one of the nation's shining examples of a pedestrian-friendly downtown core. Because of its intrinsic role in Minneapolis, the history of Nicollet Mall reflects the relationship of urban renewal, suburbanization, and collaborative design. These themes are the framework for discussing how pivotal certain people were to the design process.

Thus, the history of Nicollet Avenue's revitalization through the construction of the Mall manifests the social, political, and economic forces of the 1950s and 60s, in response to suburbanization and urban renewal, to give us an understanding of collaborative design in the urban context.

## Urban Renewal and Suburbanization



Drawing by Barton-Aschman and Associates of plan for Nicollet Mall. Source: Minneapolis Collection, Minneapolis Central Library

The trend to the suburbs in post-World War II America was a wave of middle class Americans relocating in areas beyond the city. Some of the major forces propelling this movement were the freeway development, the perception downtown was dirty, dangerous, and chaotic and people seeking more open space outside downtown.

In the metropolitan Minneapolis, there were several major forces spurring suburbanization including General Mills relocating (1956) and pulling 800 jobs to the suburbs, the nation's first enclosed suburban shopping mall built in Edina (1956), the start of the Gateway project in Minneapolis (1961), and the freeway system being built around the city (also demolishing 22 blocks of Minneapolis).

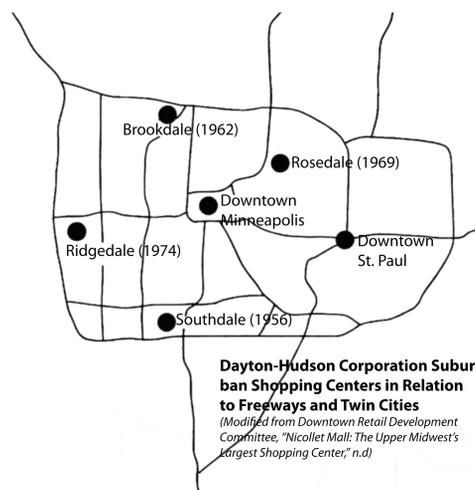
The collaboration of the public and private business sectors in the Downtown Council of Minneapolis was the driving influence to revitalize the central business and retail core on Nicollet Avenue. Due to the effects of suburbanization, the efforts of urban renewal increased awareness of the economic and physical state of downtown. As one businessman stated, "we owe Southdale a debt of gratitude for awakening the downtown business community to do something to improve itself" (Martin and Goddard, 1989, p. 13).

## Downtown Council of Minneapolis: Collaborative Design

The Downtown Council of Minneapolis was formed in response to the City Council and business community's concern about the movement of businesses out to the suburbs as a result of suburbanization and "white flight" in post-World War II America. Its objective was not to "save a declining area" but to "expand, enhance, and conserve a strong asset" (Lawrence Halprin Collection).

The Downtown Council was a collaboration of prominent business and property owners along Nicollet Avenue who helped determine the tax assessment of the tenets to pay for the Mall. Besides the contribution of an Urban Beautification Grant and a Transportation Grant, the local business and property owners would share the remaining \$2.8 million to construct the mall. As noted in Lawrence Halprin's notebooks, his visits often included meeting with the Downtown Council to discuss progress and decisions.

Because of the council members' influence in the design process and retail economy, these retailers maintained a "firm grip on shopping habits and pocketbooks." Perhaps accredited to collaborative design, Nicollet Mall actually saw an increase of 14% in retail sales in the years following its completion (Minneapolis Collection).



Dayton-Hudson Corporation Suburban Shopping Centers in Relation to Freeways and Twin Cities (Modified from Downtown Retail Development Committee, "Nicollet Mall: The Upper Midwest's Largest Shopping Center," n.d.)

## Retail Revitalization: Donald Dayton's Role in Urban and Suburban Malls

The Dayton family has had a long history on Nicollet Mall, and a strong tradition of philanthropy and civic duty in Minneapolis. Donald Dayton, the president of Dayton's during the Nicollet Mall project, was a major proponent for the Mall's revitalization. Ironically, in 1956, he had just opened the nation's first enclosed shopping center in Edina, an outlying suburb of Minneapolis.

The suburban shopping center was viewed as a threat to the downtown retail district, but Dayton's prerogative was ensuring that both shopping havens could exist cooperatively. His role was pivotal to the Mall's final design. In his case study of Nicollet Mall, urban planner Frederick Aschman succinctly describes Dayton's role as a "behind-the-scenes mover":

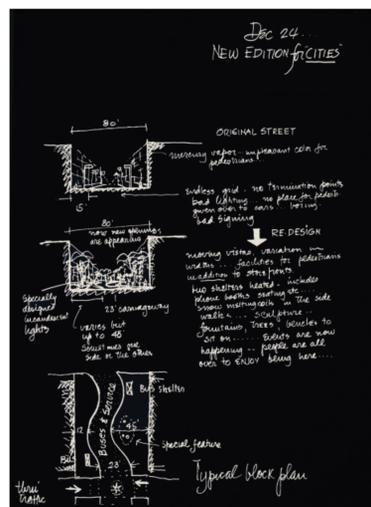
*First, the mall would be of top quality construction or not come into existence at all; and second, it would have to be designed to the highest possible aesthetic degree, be urbane and not patterned after suburban shopping centers, be simple and uncluttered, and be provided with the fullest safeguards against garishness and commercialism. (Lawrence Halprin Collection)*

## Medieval Street: Lawrence Halprin's Design Intention

When Lawrence Halprin and Associates was commissioned in 1962, the idea for the pedestrian transit way was already conceived through collaboration between the Downtown Council and Barton-Aschman and Associates, the urban planners. Perhaps the greatest challenge for Lawrence Halprin was to combat what he described as such "urban undesirables as traffic, noise, overcrowding, ugliness and racial tension" (Lawrence Halprin Collection).

The means for this end are his micro-architecture—the plantings, concrete work, street design, light and traffic fixtures, and street furniture. Halprin intended Nicollet Mall to be reminiscent of a medieval street, where the public space is owned by the people, and the original character is preserved. By integrating Barton-Aschman's proposed serpentine curve into the street design, Halprin created varied vistas, and emphasized different moments within the landscaping. These prescribed intentions offered more than the case study by Barton-Aschman and Associates, and focused on the circulation of people through the mall.

As he stated in his dedication speech, "Nicollet alone cannot make your downtown...Its life and character, its quality and vitality come from its people..." (Lawrence Halprin Collection).



Lawrence Halprin's notebook sketches. Source: Process Architecture [Tokyo: Process Architecture Publication Co, 1978]

## Conclusions

Beyond the five themes discussed in the research so far—urban renewal, suburbanization, collaborative design, retail revitalization, and design intention—perhaps the most striking chord is the pivotal role passionate people had throughout the design process. They had great foresight in predicting trends in suburbia and downtown, and had a proactive response to preserve Nicollet Avenue as a shopping destination by creating the Mall as the largest, and very successful, shopping street in the Upper Midwest. This unabashed optimism in the Nicollet Mall project gained Minneapolis a reputation as being a city willing to take big risks (Martin and Goddard 1989).

As a result, Nicollet Mall has been preserved as street for the pedestrian, for which thousands circulate through daily. The Mall has garnered nationwide attention and reverberates the success of the project:

*For those who love cities, and believe that they must endure if civilization as we know it is to be perpetuated, Minneapolis offers more than a model. It offers hope. (Minneapolis Collection)*

## References

- (1978). Process Architecture, No.4. Tokyo: Process Architecture Publication Co.
- Lawrence Halprin Collection, University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives.
- Martin, J. A. and A. Goddard (1989). Past Choices/Present Landscapes: The Impact of Urban Renewal on the Twin Cities. Minneapolis, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.
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