

StarTribune Editorial

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Our perspective

On the avenue

Toward a walkable city

Today marks an important turning point for downtown Minneapolis. At the corner of 5th and Hennepin, shovel will hit pavement and six months of construction will begin to transform one of America's ugliest streets into a linear park, complete with trees, flowers, new paving and lighting.

For 30 years, the city has been trying to give Hennepin Avenue a facelift. Now, finally, it has reached a critical juncture in creating a true Theater District for the avenue, state and region. Not only are theaters, clubs and cafes in place, there now will be a promenade, a walking experience to take people, not just from cars to theaters, but along the avenue, illustrating the actual *reason* for urban life. To mingle. To experience. To understand that life consists not only of *home* and *destination* but also of the journey in between.

We don't mean to sound highfalutin on this. We want merely to recognize the incalculable value of just hanging out in a pleasant, vibrant atmosphere, of strolling down a pretty street after a play or movie, stopping for a drink or cup of coffee, discussing the performances just seen, dipping into a books-and-music store. A recent letter writer to this page celebrated his ability to leave a concert at Xcel Center and be back home in the suburbs in 20 minutes. What a pity.

Overcoming this mentality has been crushingly difficult in Minnesota. Climate plays a role. But a new, actually pretty Hennepin Avenue, decked out with the greenery and fixtures that already adorn Block E, should begin to broaden outlooks and possibilities.

Indeed, the new street lays down an important challenge to the rest of downtown. Slowly, the city's backward attitudes on urban streets are turning. Streets are no longer seen just as funnels for driving, but also as places for walking. Downtown's rapidly growing assemblage of residents, now



The long-awaited facelift for Minneapolis' Hennepin Avenue, as envisioned by the architectural firm HGA.

nearly 30,000, has begun to expect pleasant, walkable streets. The arrival of rail transit next year will only heighten demand. Business, finally, has begun to see aesthetics as an essential investment, to understand that Minneapolis cannot be a competitive, 24-hour city until it allows the beauty of its lakes and parks to spread also to its streets.

The city is fortunate to have Klara Fabry as its new public works director. With European roots and extensive experience in the Seattle area, she brings just the right perspective to Minneapolis' underachieving public places. Fabry wants to move public works beyond its curb-and-gutter mentality. "Good engineering is not just solid construction," she says, "it's creating an impression, a co-existence between humans and their surroundings. I strongly believe it."

The Hennepin Avenue improvements could not have happened without Tom Hoch, head of the Hennepin Theatre Trust and the avenue's businesses, which will pay the entire \$3 million cost of the five-block project and its maintenance. Especially at a time of fiscal struggle at City Hall, this project is a valuable reminder that a successful city must hold fast to a solid long-term vision.