

GHOST OF THE GATEWAY: The Metropolitan Building, Minneapolis

LARRY MILLETT



Twelve-story Metropolitan Building at Third Street
and Second Avenue, about 1900

"The pace of change in St. Paul and Minneapolis has been so rapid that it is not uncommon to find downtown lots that are already on their fourth or fifth generation of buildings," writes architecture critic Larry Millett. "Significant pockets of old buildings remain, of course, especially in the warehouse districts of both cities. But even these 'historic' warehouses are often third-generation structures, built on the ruins of the past."

Millett, a reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, devoted years of careful research to his "efforts to reconstruct, in words and illustrations, a lost urban world." The following article is adapted from his new book, Lost Twin Cities, published in 1992 by the Minnesota Historical Society Press.

ON DECEMBER 18, 1961, wrecking trucks rumbled through the streets of downtown Minneapolis toward a rendezvous with the past. Their destination was the corner of Third Street and Second Avenue South, where for seventy-one years the Metropolitan Building (originally known as the Northwestern Guaranty Loan Building) had towered above its neighbors like a “small red mountain.” But with Minneapolis in the midst of the greatest urban renewal project in its history, the Metropolitan was about to come down, a victim of age, politics, and ideology.¹

Once, it had been the pride of the city, the building that more than any other announced to the world that Minneapolis had come of age. “Here there has been erected . . . the most magnificent office building in the whole round world,” gushed the *Minneapolis Journal* when the great sandstone structure opened on May 31, 1890. The inaugural was a glittering extravaganza that drew thousands of visitors. “As early as 7 o’clock [in the

evening] the throngs began to converge toward the building,” reported another newspaper. “Every street in the city seemed to lead to it, as all roads in ancient times are said to have led to Rome. Motors, electric cars, street cars, steam cars and hacks deposited their loads before the marble entrance.” Amid the bright glow of arc lamps and the aroma of fresh cut flowers, visitors strolled along the building’s glass floors (which occasioned some fright), toured its four hundred shops and offices and fought off vertigo to gaze across the central light court—a twelve-story-high fantasy in glass and iron that was among the greatest spaces of its kind ever built in America. Many members of the crowd eventually found their way to the roof-top garden, where they danced the night away beneath the stars, enjoying the “incomparably grand” view.²

By the early 1950s, however, the Metropolitan no longer seemed so grand a place, in part because of the company it kept. The building had the misfortune to stand at the edge of the Gateway District, which by midcentury was the city’s most visible example of urban blight, a broken landscape of pawnshops, cheap hotels, brothels, nightclubs, and bars. Yet for all its squalor, the Gateway District was also a treasure trove

¹*Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 3, 1935, p. 11.

²*Minneapolis Journal*, May 31, 1890, p. 1; *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, June 1, 1890, p. 7; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 3, 1935, p. 11.

Minneapolis’s Gateway District of nineteenth-century commercial buildings, 1904





Aging Gateway's Washington Avenue in 1959, looking east from Nicollet Avenue

of nineteenth-century commercial architecture, with the Metropolitan its crown jewel.³

No one in Minneapolis city government saw this side of the Gateway, however. All they saw was a fetid slum that, unless cleared, could forever poison attempts to reinvigorate an aging, dormant downtown rapidly losing business and population to the suburbs. These concerns were genuine. The Gateway was in desperate need of redevelopment. But the solution chosen by the city was an extreme one—total destruction. This strategy of obliteration received final approval in 1957 when Minneapolis Mayor P. K. Peterson went to Washington, D.C., and convinced federal officials to help fund the ambitious project. Five years and many millions of dollars later, much of the Gateway District, including the Metropolitan Building, was gone. All told, nearly two hundred buildings spread over seventeen square blocks were demolished. This amounted to 40 percent of the city's historic central business district. The Metropolitan was among the last buildings in the Gateway to fall, and it did not go down without a fight.⁴

A loose coalition of architects, historians, and people who simply loved the building did their best to keep it standing. Their efforts proved fruitless. Despite the building's architectural and historical significance, it

had few friends in high places, and the temper of the times was against it. Several years earlier, a prominent academic historian, displaying the bias of the era, had written that "perhaps no single building by a Minneapolis architect is worthy of measurement or preservation." Such thinking was endemic in the 1950s and 1960s, when old buildings generally were viewed as aesthetic embarrassments, worthless relics cluttering the road to progress. An attorney for the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority called the Metropolitan "a monstrosity in the eyes of most observers." The Minnesota Supreme Court, in an opinion permitting destruction of the building, was equally unsympathetic. Allowing the Metropolitan to stand, the court said, "would have an unfavorable effect upon the value of surrounding property." Other arguments against the

³See David L. Rosheim, *The Other Minneapolis or the Rise and Fall of the Gateway, the Old Minneapolis Skid Row* (Maquoketa, Iowa: Andromeda Press, 1978).

⁴Judith A. Martin and Antony Goddard, *Past Choices/ Present Landscapes: The Impact of Urban Renewal on the Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, 1989), 60–64. See also Linda Mack, "Gateways of Change," *Architecture Minnesota* 17 (May–June 1991): 36.

building—that it was too old, too dangerous (because of the threat of fire spreading up through the light court), and too poorly designed for modern use—could all have been answered a decade later when historic renovation became commonplace.⁵

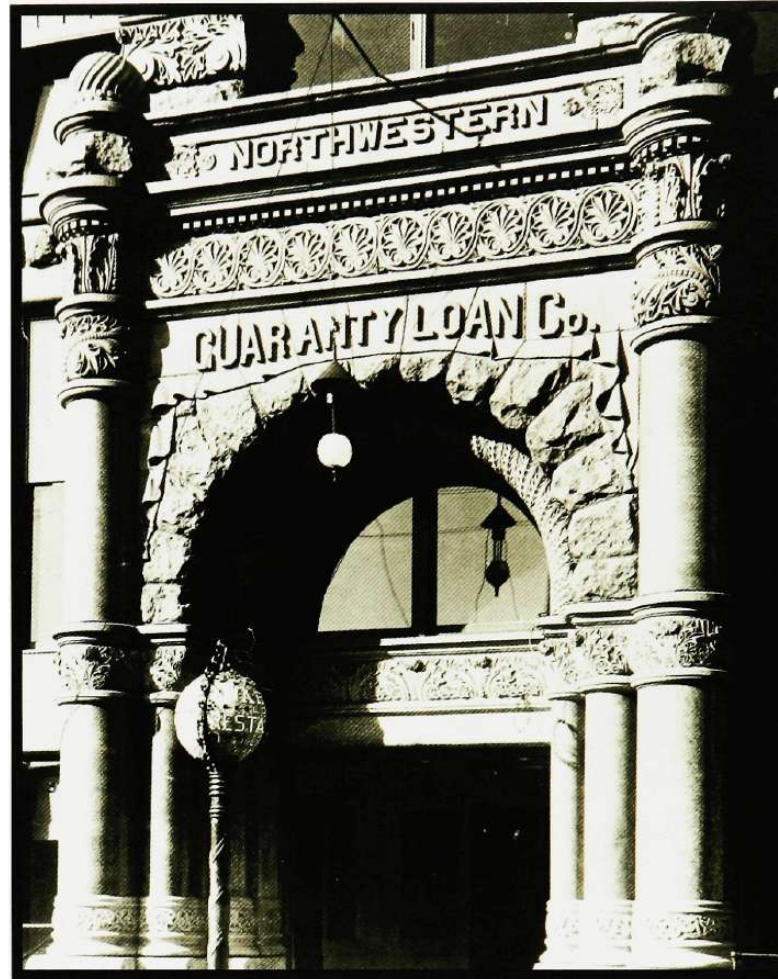
Whatever else they may be, cities are structures in time, where past and present mingle and the future gapes out from empty holes awaiting yet another round of development. But time moves with a special and destructive speed in American cities, often erasing our monuments before we have a chance to appreciate them.

The day before the wrecking crews arrived, a newspaper reporter interviewed fifty-eight-year-old Wally Marotzke, who for twenty years had been the building's engineer. "I'm not gonna watch 'em rip it down," Marotzke told the reporter. "I don't think I could. But I'll tell you one thing: The future generations are gonna read about this building and they'll see some of the buildings they're putting up here and they'll damn us, they will, for tearing down the Met."⁶

⁵Donald Torbert, "Minneapolis Architecture and Architects, 1848–1908: A Study of Style Trends in Architecture in a Midwestern City Together with a Catalogue of Representative Buildings" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1951), 7; *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 9, 1961, p. 6A. One of the surrounding properties was the Sheraton Ritz Hotel, a lackluster building completed in 1963 and demolished, to no one's evident regret, just twenty-seven years later.

⁶*Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 17, 1961, Upper Midwest sec., p. 1, 6.

The photograph on p. 114 is from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* archives; the others are from the MHS collections.



Carved entrance to red sandstone Metropolitan Building, razed with nearly two hundred others for urban renewal in 1961



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