

Deep abandonment issues

City, building owners looking to replace or 'abandon' aging underground areaways

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They're literally right underfoot, and yet few people think twice about them — or even know they exist, in some cases.

But some of those decades-old "areaways" that hide under streets and sidewalks in downtown Minneapolis and elsewhere are becoming a nuisance and are being repaired or "abandoned," sometimes in connection with projects such as the recent Second Avenue South and Marquette Avenue reconstruction.

For example, Construction Results Corp. recently completed areaway abandonment projects at 1000 Marquette Ave. and 250 Third Ave. N. in downtown Minneapolis. The latter project was part of an effort to improve access to the new Minnesota Twins stadium.

The \$250,000 Third Avenue abandonment project involved removal of the deteriorating underground structure, water main repairs, filling the space, and pouring a new sidewalk, according to Mark Snyder, president of Construction Results.

"The city doesn't want open spaces under the sidewalks, and they were old and rusting and barely supporting the sidewalks," Snyder said.

What are areaways?

Areaways are the usable areas below the sidewalk and between a building's foundation and the street wall. The street wall holds back the earth below the road surface and provides support for the sidewalk between the street and the building walls.



Under the ground at 250 Third Ave. N. in Minneapolis, an areaway was cleared and refilled to improve aboveground access to the Minnesota Twins' new stadium, Target Field. (Submitted photo: Paul Ormseth)

The 250 Third Ave. N. building is considered historic, so "we wanted to remove the areaway and build the new sidewalk, then replace it in a way that didn't distract from the historic character of the building," said Paul Ormseth, a St. Paul architect who also worked on the project.

Ormseth describes areaways as exten-

sions of the building's basement "out into the public right of way, typically under the sidewalk." He says the spaces were used for loading, unloading and storage, and in some cases they're connected with other areaways.

"It kind of goes back to the time when these buildings were serving as ware-

houses, back around the turn of the century, late 1800s or early 20th century," Ormseth said.

They may have served a useful purpose back in the day, but now some of the spaces — typically supported by a roof and

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aging stone walls — are deteriorating and potentially hazardous from a structural point of view, he said.

Kent Warden, executive director of the Greater Minneapolis Building Owners and Managers Association, said some areaways, particularly in the warehouse district, are "pretty ancient."

One nightmare scenario is that if a fire truck responded to a call at the building and had to park over a weakened areaway it could "end up in the void of the areaway," Warden added.

"To the extent that there is a question about the structural integrity, the owner would be required to do repairs, or if they don't need the areaway, then abandon it and fill it up," Warden said.

For building owners, there's obviously a cost associated with such projects, Warden said. But he hastened to add that "it kind of goes with the territory, and it's hard to argue that it would not be the owner's responsibility.

"The areaway was granted as a conditional easement at the time the building was constructed, even if that was 50 or 100 years ago."

Under city ordinance, building owners may leave areaways in place if the structures are in good condition and can support the above-ground loads, according to an areaway "fact sheet" from the city of



Most pedestrians aren't aware that there was ever an areaway underneath 250 Third Ave. N. in Minneapolis. (Submitted photo: Paul Ormseth)

Minneapolis Public Works.

Areaways that are less than 35 years old are typically in good enough shape to meet the city's requirements, the document noted.

But those that are 35 years or older require an evaluation by a licensed civil or structure engineer, the document added, and they may have to be modified or removed — even if they're in good shape —

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to make way for street reconstruction projects.

For example, the city determined that an areaway near the Coliseum Building at 2700 E. Lake St. needed to be abandoned in connection with the Lake Street reconstruction project, according to city documents.

The city says it's "imperative" to identify all areaways and areaway conflicts before construction, or else conflicts found during construction are more expensive to deal with and they limit the owner's "ability to develop plans and have input on what will be done."

Warden says building owners appear to be OK with the current requirements.

"If it looks like the city is abusing the owners, I usually hear about it," he said.