



# Seward Redesign



## Fifty Years of Transformation



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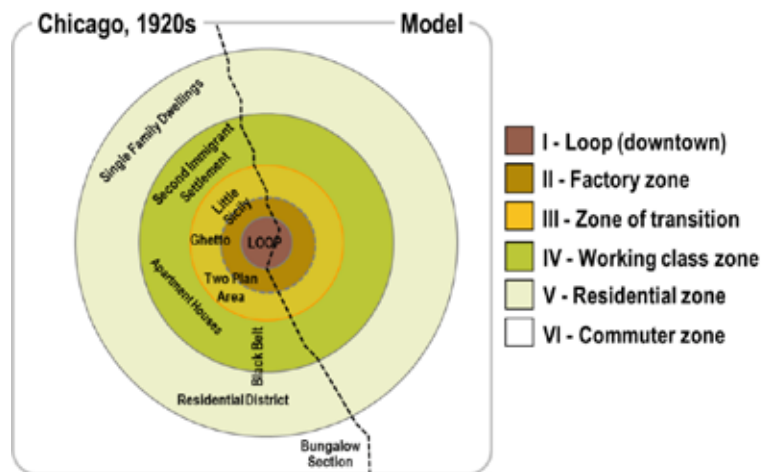
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# Seward Redesign in Context

Fifty years is a long time in an American city. The history of Seward Redesign begins with the institutions and conversations that preceded it, and the ever-changing organization reflects the political and social fabric of Minneapolis over a turbulent and transformational time for American cities. Over the decades in which it has worked in South Minneapolis, Seward Redesign evolved from its roots as part of a community reaction to destructive freeway and urban renewal projects, beginning by developing small-scale housing rehabilitation and construction projects. Over the next few decades, the organization grew and adapted to the changing needs of the community, as well as the economic and philanthropic environments in which it had to survive. These shifts in mission represented an increase in complexity rooted in the cultural and economic fabric of the community, and reflected changes in around how community development corporation models work. The flexibility of Seward Redesign's flexibility reveals how many different pathways exist for economic development nonprofits in American cities. It shows how a commitment to place can serve to create a powerful model for connecting communities to opportunity, and to create a community where people of diverse backgrounds can coexist, come together, and thrive.

## Origins of Seward Redesign

During the early 20th century, academic and everyday understandings of how American cities worked, and what represented progress, tended to marginalize communities like Minneapolis' Seward neighborhood. By the time post-war Federal intervention arrived, primarily through freeway construction and slum clearance programs, older, industrial, mixed-use neighborhoods like Seward, located in the vulnerable "factory zone" ring of "life cycle theory", around the downtown core, were not viewed by policy makers or many others as particularly valuable communities (Pitkin 2001). Neighborhoods like Seward were considered to be marginal, "run down, but not in desperate straits" (Martin and Goddard 1989). Seward and communities like it were often subsumed into the general, stigmatized category of "the inner city" (using the jargon of the era), and "triage planning" was a dominant way in which city leaders, urban planners, and transportation engineers weighed policies for communities like Seward (Pitkin 2001, Herbert and Thomas, 1982). Thus the drastic demolition measures synonymous with urban renewal were justified through the language of deterministic models of social change, and a naturalistic analogy to medical practice. For example, "cutting" away the cancer to save the patient, in this case, meant destroying homes, businesses, or entire blocks of existing buildings all around the urban core.



*Early 20th c. urban land use model by Ernest Burgess.*

It was from this tumultuous and destructive era that Seward Redesign emerged. Luckily for historians, a lot of work has gone into documenting the narratives and perspectives that existed of the Seward neighborhood in this period. Projects like the Seward Neighborhood Group (SNG) oral history project, the *People's History of the Seward Neighborhood*, personal memoirs and timelines such as David Raymond's recollections, and other documentation captured the thoughts, conversations, and hopes of people working to keep the Seward community





*Aerial photos of Seward. (Borchert Map Library, University of Minnesota)*



thriving during the post-war years (Epstein et al. 2019, Raymond 2011). In particular, the revolutionary work in the 1960s to transform Federal and city urban renewal efforts into preservation and rehabilitation for places like Milwaukee Avenue has been well documented (Roscoe 2014, Nathanson 1989). As long-time Seward Redesign board member Gary Hesser explained, the ways that the Federal project requirements played out allowed the “uniqueness of neighborhood” and “unique mix of people in the neighborhood” to come together in ways that created the necessary conversation (Hesser interview).

The partnership that gave birth to Seward Redesign came out of the from destruction connected to the construction of Interstate 94 freeway, which demolished a large number of homes, shops, and institutions from the Cedar-Riverside and Seward neighborhoods, including the almost the entirety of the Seward neighborhood’s built environment north of Franklin Avenue. While the story of the eastern-most Minneapolis portion of the massive Interstate 94 demolition and construction project is not as well detailed as other portions of the freeway construction through the central Twin Cities metro, in general the Interstate 94 construction project was seen as relatively unproblematic by many city leaders at the time (Cavett 2005, Donofrio and Pike 2019).

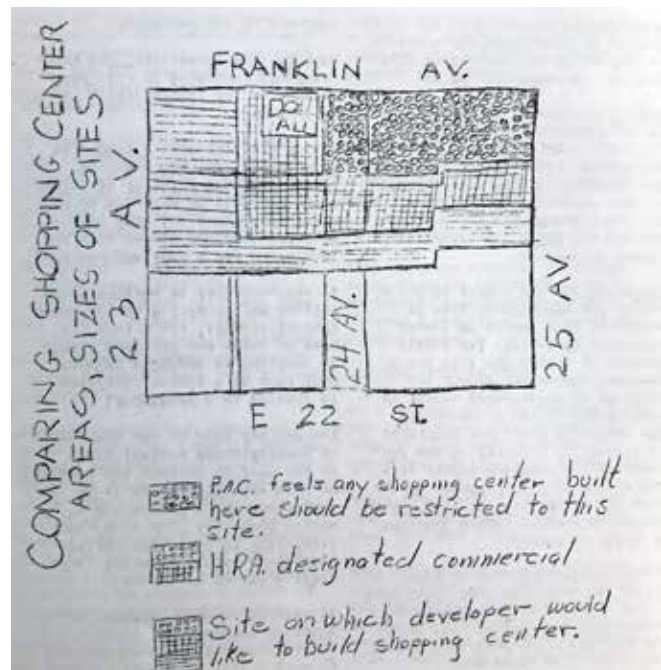


*Trinity Lutheran Church, 1950  
(Minnesota Historical Society)*

Plans for locating the freeway crossing over the Mississippi River in the area just north of Franklin Avenue dated all the way back to 1947, and there was little hope of changing engineers minds about how and where the freeway should be built (Altshuler 1965). Thus demolitions required in Cedar-Riverside and Seward neighborhoods were part of a larger narrative of urban renewal that coincided with the freeway project. Because Federal highway dollars were leveraged in such a one-sided manner, with the Federal government paying for 90% of the cost of freeway construction, local and regional officials viewed these demolition and construction efforts as economically necessary progress for the city and community. It was an offer they could not refuse.

Ironically, the demolitions for the freeway spurred the birth of the Seward Redesign by demolishing Trinity Lutheran Church, which had stood on 20th Avenue South for decades in the Cedar-Riverside community, but was now directly in the path of the freeway. Early Trinity church and Seward West Redesign board member, David Raymond’s account of the origins of the organization provides a lot of detail about this period:

*Seward West was the only nearby area where Neighborhood Research and Development [NRD, Trinity Lutheran Church’s*



*Map of possible Franklin Avenue plans  
(Seward West PAC archive)*

*nonprofit housing corporation] might have any development opportunity, so the board decided to send two board members, Harlan Christianson and David Raymond, to meet with the new PAC [Seward West Project Area Committee] leaders. Christianson, the president of NRD, was a teacher and rental property owner with political savvy. Raymond was barely out of college and inexperienced, but he shared some of the antiwar movement background of the PAC leaders. After some discussion, the PAC made it clear that NRD was not welcome in Seward West. As a matter of fact the PAC was looking into forming its own non-profit housing corporation.*

*At the next NRD board meeting Raymond and Christianson reported on their meeting with the PAC. Trinity's senior pastor, Sheldon Torgerson, wanted to know what the PAC's goals were. Christianson and Raymond said that it appeared that the PAC wanted to preserve the current fabric of the community, which had a healthy mix of ages, and races and incomes in spite of the poor condition of most of the houses. This was to be accomplished by rehabbing the houses that were basically sound and by building new small-scale infill housing on the lots where houses had to be demolished.*

*After mulling this over, Torgerson said that "if they don't trust us maybe we should trust them." The board sent Christianson and Raymond back to the PAC to explore ways for the two organizations to work together based on their shared goals without concern for NRD or church control.*

*(Raymond 2011)*

The involvement of the church apparatus was a key factor in the birth of Seward Redesign, which gave the early nonprofit assets and institutional framework from which to begin immediately on small-scale housing projects in the community.

In this way, from both sides of the partnership, the flexible and diverse nature of what would become Seward Redesign had fertile soil from the beginning. The church congregation actors and with the anti-demolition activists in Seward West represented a unique combination of actors emerged in the early days of Seward West Redesign,

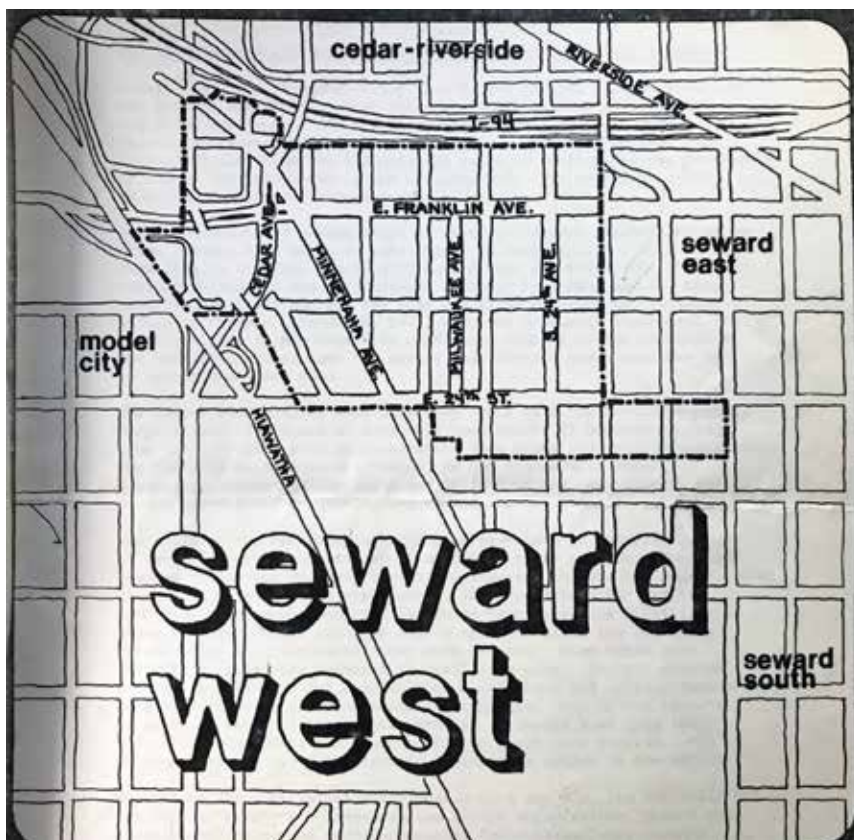


*Milwaukee Avenue before renovation. (Seward Redesign archive.)*



as it was then known. As one historian described it “Seward West Redesign, the neighborhood-organized nonprofit housing organization, began with a well-balanced earnestness and purpose”, but also had a mix of “young turks [and] old farts” that gave the group a variety of strengths (Roscoe 2014, Roscoe interview).

At the same time, the birth of Seward Redesign, while not directly linked to Milwaukee Avenue, coincided with it. The Milwaukee Avenue example set a precedent for thinking independently and promoting a place-specific approach to urban renewal in Seward. The street was the first -- and still the largest -- preservation effort aimed at working-class housing. The rehab efforts, instead of the demolition which was initially proposed, is the reason that Milwaukee Avenue continues to be a unique urban renewal success story today. The precedent of this project, which remains unique nationwide, allowed Seward Redesign to eventually build on new approaches to community building - particularly once the Milwaukee Avenue townhomes were built - and later efforts mirrored the success of that project in shifting the conversation and approach of urban renewal to one of development and renovation.



*An early 1970s map of Seward West (Seward Redesign archive)*

As Iric Nathanson explains in his early history:

*In November 1972, Neighborhood Research and Development was reconstituted as the Seward West Redesign. Trinity had two members on the boards, and the PAC had eight members. One seat was reserved for GMMHC [Greater Minneapolis Metropolitan Housing Corporation], which was also involved in the Milwaukee Avenue restoration. Another seat was reserved for the housing arm of the Catholic archdiocese.*

*While the [Seward West] PAC was working to redirect the renewal plan, Redesign was getting ready to take on its first rehab project.*

*(Nathanson 1989)*

The Trinity Church activist fund had started a 501(c)3, and encountering the energy around Seward West PAC and the Milwaukee Avenue preservation movement, basically granted the nonprofit affordable housing apparatus over to the community. This opportunistic and philanthropic gesture, spurred by the loss of the church building and community connections it entailed, allowed Seward Redesign to enter the affordable housing development field with assets and projects already in the fold. As Gary Hesser explained, this happened “because at pivotal moments, we had Trinity Church around and they were willing to do what they did. [And] there was a gutsy neighborhood group determined to do unusual things” (Hesser interview).

# Developing a Housing Developer

The growth of Seward Redesign as a force for housing and economic development came during a period when the diverse Seward neighborhood was on the brink of major change. Seward in the 1960s retained a diverse mix of housing types and mixed-use fabric, middle-working class homes, and a rare industrial and residential mix that had not yet been completely economically disinvested. That said, there persisted throughout the neighborhood unruly bars, crime and nuisance issues, and stark north / south and east / west divides in the neighborhood. Franklin Avenue forming a “big demographic divide” that remains to this day a striking feature of the neighborhood (Hesser interview).



*Rehab in progress, 1980. (Seward Redesign archive)*

In the early years, like many geographically-based community development corporations (CDCs) in the Twin Cities, Seward Redesign served as a “developer of last resort” for a specific geographic area. The name was changed from Seward West Redesign to Seward Redesign around 1980, as the scope and scale of the activity for Seward Redesign grew to encompass all of the Seward Neighborhood, expanding from just one of the urban renewal zones outlined by the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA).

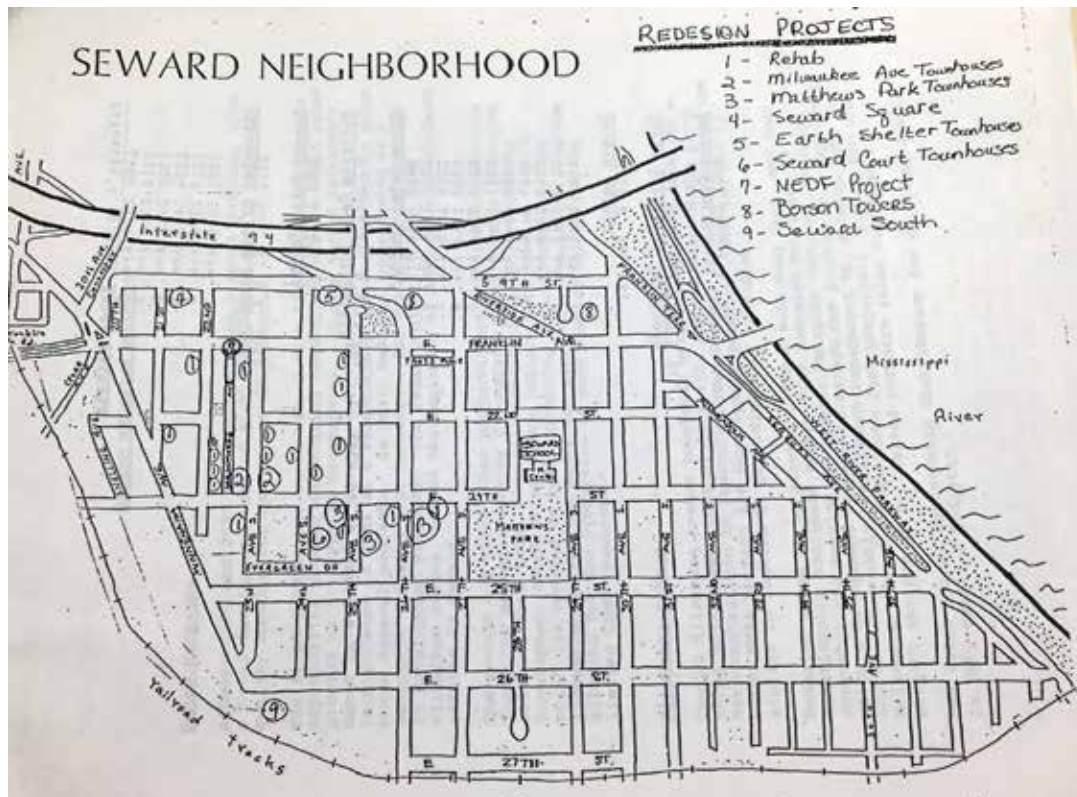
From there, Seward Redesign operated as a small-scale affordable housing development nonprofit, successfully building and rehabbing homes at scattered sites around the Seward neighborhood, particularly around Matthews Park, Milwaukee Avenue, and the western half of Seward.

These early small-scale success, along with Milwaukee Avenue, which remains to the day a rare example of a working-class preservation project, pedestrianized street, and a revision of typically immovable policy positions around slum clearance, gave Seward



*Earth Shelter homes, 1980. (Seward Redesign archive)*





*Map of Seward Redesign projects, 1986. (Seward Redesign archive)*

Redesign a track record of integrating affordable housing within the community in a relatively seamless manner that would make it easier to move forward with larger projects in the future.

As David Fey explained, the existing Seward Redesign affordable housing projects were a great argument for keeping a mix of subsidized and market-rate homes within the neighborhood:

*We didn't need to convince the neighborhood that preserving affordable housing was important partly because the work Seward Redesign had done in the decades prior had been done really well, so the scattered site townhouse developments, that were co-ops originally. Those were done well and managed well. People didn't see affordable housing as a problem in neighborhood they saw it as something they valued.*

*(Fey interview)*

This community buy-in - sometimes over the objections of neighbors concerned about concentration of poverty, leading to a Seward Neighborhood Group (SNG) resolution reaffirming support for subsidized housing - became an important factor for maintaining the focus of the organization on eliminating or reducing displacement as a core value of the CDC work (Gordon 1993). As Gary Hesser explained, Seward's commitment to working class housing was unique, because "[when it comes to] neighborhood gentrification, very few neighborhoods had foresight to not have anyone be displaced [through] purchase agreements, and the like." (Hesser interview).

This was the context in which, in the early years of Seward Redesign, it functioned as a developer of affordable housing, and a "developer of last resort" for neighborhoods like Seward where market-driven investment in housing was not occurring (Dewar interview). CDCs like Seward Redesign, and many others throughout the Twin Cities, served to fill the gap left by the lack of investment:

*At that time the private market place wasn't investing in places like Seward. At the time I was*

*there, there were a number of CDCs being supported by the Foundation community. We were filling a really important market need.*

*(Dewar interview)*

At first, many of the projects that Seward Redesign developed were reactions to requests by the community or property owners to get involved.

That changed when an Executive Director was hired for the first time in 1984, and the organization shifted from having an all-volunteer working board to having full-time staff members. This allowed Seward Redesign to develop the capacity to start to act more independently and decisively within the neighborhood, and led to shifts in roles—that catalyzed the flexible approach that emerged over the next ten years.

*[Caren Dewar] then started to become a bit more proactive as far as doing projects without being asked to do projects. That was Caren's foresight, seeing the two towers were going to potentially become market rate, townhouses to become market rate. vacant lots that needed some attention. Seward Redesign saying here's an opportunity.*

*(Mack interview)*

In this way, the ability to be independent instead of reactive was one of the key hallmarks of Seward Redesign's increased capacity in the coming years.

## Taking on Big Projects

By far the largest of the new proactive projects for Seward Redesign was the Bor-Son Towers (later, Seward Towers) acquisition and preservation effort. Originally part of the Seward East urban renewal efforts, there were subsidized housing primarily for seniors, and the project represented a monumental step for Seward Redesign, the first of the large scale projects that make it unique for a geographically-based CDC. Notably, the Seward Towers project came about through a community engagement process, as many community members objected to the building owners' desire to convert the towers to market-rate housing rather than dedicated affordable units. In response to community requests and city nudging, Seward Redesign began conversations with ownership, a process that, as Star Tribune columnist Leonard Inskip documented in 1991, was a long and ongoing negotiation

### Redesign Memo

To: Iric Nathanson  
From: David Fey  
About: Redesign Early History  
Date: January 29, 1998

Here is a general timeline of early events as reported by early participants and in the minutes and bylaws from this period (1969-1985):

- 1969 Neighborhood Research & Design Incorporated (NRDI) in conjunction with Trinity Lutheran Congregation
- 1970? Jack Cann and others drafted legal appeal to Urban Renewal process (also involved Charlie Warner @ HUD, Steve Swanson, Gary Dodge)
- 1971? "Activist take-over" of the Project Area Committee (PAC)
- 1972 NRDI Articles of Incorporation amended changing name to Seward West Redesign
- 1973 New Articles of Incorporation filed for Seward West Redesign
- 1975 First single-family homes renovated (30 over next 5 years); Milwaukee Avenue Townhomes built with Redesign as managing general partner
- 1976 Matthews Park Townhomes built with Redesign as owners representative
- 1979 Seward Square Apartments and Earth-Sheltered Townhomes built
- 1980? PAC dissolved and Seward East/Seward West merged into SNG
- 1982? Redesign and SNG jointly pursued first MNSHIP grant w/Augsburg help
- 1984 Completed Seward Court Townhouses; Redesign hired Caren Dewar (then Saxton) as first full-time Executive Director
- 1985 Board strategic planning process led to filing of new articles of incorporation for Seward Redesign as a Community Development Corporation (CDC) with a broadened economic development focus and mission

(P.S. I joined the board in 1985 during the strategic planning process.)

*Timeline of Seward history, 1998. (Seward Redesign archive)*



that became a huge part of Seward Redesign's organizational work. By all accounts, a great many hurdles were overcome during those years:

*The path to success was torturous. The outcome was hardly more than a dream in 1987 when city officials approached Seward Redesign - a neighborhood development corporation - [Dewar] recalls that the owner wouldn't talk with her. Later [Dewar] found a partner in the Westminster Corp, the housing arm of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. [Dewar] assembled and chaired a development team of housing, finance, legal and government people. It began meeting regularly to draft purchase scenarios.*

(Inskip 1991)



*Seward Towers West. (Hennepin County Library archive)*

At the same time, the acquisition of the two Seward Towers projects illustrated two unique aspects of Seward Redesign's organizational strengths: access to in-depth community knowledge, and the capacity to preform long-term project negotiation.

Having in-depth knowledge of the communities where they work is important for CDCs, but it is particularly critical for those that work only within specific geographies. Throughout its history, Seward Redesign has been able to develop and cultivate meaningful connections with community groups, business people, and other sources of information that have allowed it to anticipate changes and use economic development and property acquisition strategies in advance of market and policy developments. Particularly given the long-timeline of property development in real-estate, Bor-Son Towers is the largest example of this, where Seward Redesign leadership was able to anticipate the change in subsidized affordable status of the residential buildings and, well in advance, begin the difficult and time-consuming negotiation. As contemporary news accounts pointed out, at the time the 640 units in the two buildings represented 10% of the total amount of subsidized affordable housing in the city of Minneapolis.

By the time the sale was com-



*2627 Franklin Avenue over the years. (Hennepin County Library archive, Seward Redesign archive)*

pleted in October 1990, the work to acquire and preserve the affordability of the towers had been what Dewar called a “tough, long, hard negotiation with Bernardi, the owner”(Dewar interview). That Seward Redesign had developed the stamina and expertise to coordinate such a difficult negotiation reflects its a complex combination of CDC strengths, and its pivot toward taking on large-scale projects alongside smaller-scale work.

Another important facet of the Seward Towers acquisition is the relatively unique way that community commitments to housing affordability remained a key priority for people within the Seward community, both inside and outside of the Seward Redesign organization. As previously mentioned, this kind of commitment to repenting displacement and maintaining working-class housing stock was not always norm for communities in the Twin Cities, which often prioritized the protection of property values in local policy interventions.

As one board member described it:

*Bor-Son Towers had a tax benefit where developer after 20 or 25 years can turn development market rate; most neighborhoods would have had political pressure to turn the buildings market rate, but not in Seward.*

*(Hesser interview)*

In addition to reflecting a commitment to diverse housing types, the large scale and long-term scope of the Seward Towers projects changed the approach of Seward Redesign. The project created a organizational culture that became more ambitious about the kinds of proposals it would generate. One benefit of this, according to Brian Miller, who ran Seward Redesign from 2002 to 2019, was that it attracted more ambitious staff members.



*Going back to 1990 but, the whole Seward Commons projects and Riverside Market project with the [Seward] Coop, those kinds of larger scale projects were good for the org, from standpoint of not just sustaining revenue but being involved in interesting enough projects to keep talent around on the staff.*

*(Miller interview)*

The revenue aspect remained important, as well, diversifying the income stream for Seward Redesign to ensure it could maintain its existence through different generations of CDC evolution. These big projects allowed Seward Redesign to ensure it had:

*just enough economic vitality to maintain some slow development, and creativity by staff to get development fees etc., they were able to bring enough development fees to maintain the staff and organization we had.*

*(Hesser interview)*

Of course, not every large-scale project went forward, but even the ones that did not get off the drawing board kept that dynamism alive within the organization as well as within the larger community. For example, the proposed YWCA project that eventually ended up located next to the Lake and Hiawatha light rail station began as a market study done by Seward Redesign, in the hopes of attracting the gym and community center to a local site (Dewar interview). Similarly, one of the largest projects ever proposed by Seward Redesign were plans for a 10-story mixed-use development that might have occupied the air rights just northeast of the Franklin Avenue light rail station. Though the project never came to fruition, it was far enough along that architecture plans for the Metro Transit Operations and Management facility included space for the foundations and pillars that would have been required for the large-scale project (Fey interview).



*LRT area planning map, 2000. (Seward Redesign archive)*

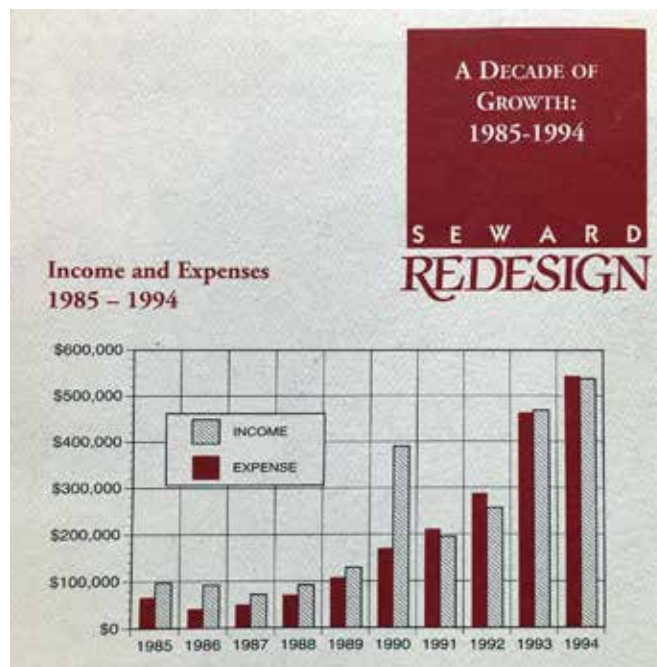


*Community planning at a fair. (Seward Redesign archive)*





Franklin Avenue map, 1998 (Seward Redesign archive)



Budget chart, 1994. (Seward Redesign archive)





# SEWARD WEST REDESIGN

## REDESIGN



Seward Redesign logos through the years.

# Adaptability

During and after the period when closing the deal on Seward Towers, Seward Redesign began to pivot towards community development work, and maintaining a balance of small-scale housing development, large-scale long-term projects like Seward Towers, and economic development and planning work, particularly along Franklin Avenue.

It is in this period that Seward Redesign “matured” its focus and mission, developing the kind of flexible comprehensiveness that is often very difficult for CDCs to achieve without overly diluting its capacities (Glickman and Servon 1998). As one Executive Director described:



*Seward Redesign community meeting. (Seward Redesign archive)*

*Even though Seward Towers was a big deal and other—not affordable housing work going on, that decade Seward Redesign expanded its focus to include commercial and job development. We matured during that period from—not an affordable housing organization to a really multi-dimensional CDC organization, looking at job development, not commercial redevelopment, and urban planning at a district scale, not [just] a project here and there.*

*(Fey interview)*

Pivotal in this process was a turn toward “asset-based” development and a commitment to community engagement that, as David Fey explained, allowed Seward Redesign to work with community visions instead of setting them. Beginning with an analysis of the existing businesses and community assets of Franklin Avenue done during Dewar’s years as Executive Director, Seward Redesign began to complement its affordable housing work with a variety economic development projects focused on “the street-facing Franklin Avenue storefronts” (Letofsky interview).

This ongoing work on the historic and diverse Franklin Avenue corridor has touched most of the buildings along the street, from the Mississippi River to the intersection with the Hiawatha Avenue Light Rail line.

*Bringing in Ruth, from [the] Community Design Center, to do an analysis of what the—not assets and liabilities were in Seward, it was rare for a CDC to really do a deep dive and understand what the capital is in your neighborhood. That’s where this notion of Franklin Avenue came [from]. They helped us think more holistically, rather than just saving Seward Towers, or Matthews Park, or the Milwaukee Ave townhomes.*

*(Dewar interview)*

In this way, drawing on the community feedback and close connections with business community, Seward Redesign completed multiple planning studies beginning in 1985 and continuing through 1990s and into the present,



that worked, block-by-block, to improve and economically revitalize Franklin Avenue and its many small businesses. The fine-grained urban fabric of Franklin Avenue, where Seward Redesign still sits today, reflects the work that the CDC has done and at the same time, is the rich historic landscape that made that work possible.

## Place-based Committment



*Seward co-op in its original location, 1980.  
(Seward Redesign archive.)*

The success of Franklin Avenue businesses and its rich legacy as a space for people to thrive offers a microcosm of Seward Redesign's most fundamental divergence from other CDCs that work in cities like Minneapolis. Many CDCs that began as local affordable housing organizations later expanded to become municipal or regional affordable housing developers. Seward Redesign, on the other hand, has remained a geographically based institution from its inception. Originally limited in scope to the small Seward neighborhood, Seward Redesign added the Longfellow to the south to the scope of its work around 2001, but has not changed its mission as an organization based on geographic limits. As development theorists have pointed out, this approach comes with costs and benefits, increasing complexity while allowing for more in depth (Vidal and Keating 2004). Another limitation of place-based approaches is that foundation funding has moved to focus far more on regional efforts, rather than community-specific economic development. The changing funding landscape around diverse work, rather than more streamlined and dispersed approaches, has posed a challenge for place-based CDCs. As such, geographic CDCs have not always remained vital through the constantly evolving urban landscape for urban housing and economic development work.

As Brian Miller explains, this approach has been one Seward Redesign's hallmarks, in spite of the additional challenges that come from working more holistically within a specific neighborhood:

*That's the advantage and disadvantage of being geography-based. it commits you to working on the issues in your community, no matter how long they take, but you work on deals that take a long time, [while] not working on simpler deals someplace else. It's been a major battle is to keep it—geographically-based, there was the expansion to Longfellow that created a service area ran the length of the [Blue Line] light rail. But if the organization tried to serve a much larger area, the key relationships wouldn't be able to maintain close enough relationships to get information soon enough to get involved in this kind of problem solving.*

*(Miller interview)*

By relying on the in-depth relationships that come from working continually in the same communities, the approach of Seward Redesign has allowed it to connect existing businesses, communities, and buildings with each other in a way that would not be as possible for a city-wide or regional institution (Kokodoko 2009). Many of the small- and large-scale projects that Seward Redesign created and fostered relied on these kind of deep community links, for example, attracting tenants to the Smiley's Clinic building at 27th and Franklin in order to put

together financing for the project.

# Seward Culture and Institutions

Another key dynamic that allowed Seward Redesign to thrive and adapt over the years was the politics and community landscape that already existed within the Seward neighborhood - particularly by forming tight connections with the local Seward Neighborhood Group (SNG) - and by tapping into the strength of the diversity of arts organizations and coops that continue to thrive on Franklin Avenue (Epstein et. al. 2018).



*Guided planning walk, 2008. (Seward Redesign archive)*

From the very beginning, Seward Redesign worked closely with the Seward West Project Area committee, and later the SNG, to develop agendas, organize and connect with community members, and even shared resources through the years. As Gary Hesser described, Seward Redesign wrote grants that benefitted both SNG and Seward Redesign, allowing them to cooperate and work together on projects through the early years (Hesser interview).

This relationship evolved as Minneapolis launched its innovative Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) efforts in the 1990s, shifting how Seward Redesign and SNG worked together on community development efforts.

*We worked really hard at to make a working relationship b/w the [Seward Redesign] CDC and the neighborhood group, SNG. There was a natural tension there, and particularly when [the Minneapolis] NRP (Neighborhood Revitalization Program) came along and dumped mega-bucks into the picture, all these people came out of the woodwork to think about what we spend that money on.*

*(Fey Interview)*

According to Fey, some neighborhood and SNG priorities shifted towards housing improvement projects for existing homeowners, a trend later confined by a comprehensive study of how NRP funding was used in Minneapolis (CURA 2019). At the time, in the early 90s, “almost none of the NRP money, except what Seward Redesign was able to leverage, went into the activities that benefitted a broader spectrum of the Seward population; there was built in tension there, but we managed it really well” (Fey interview).

At the same, the community and SNG generally supported many of the broad goals set out by Seward Redesign, such as maintaining affordable housing in the community, reducing the impact of nuisance properties like some of Seward’s historic bars, job training initiatives such as the Phantom community bike shop, and small-scale economic development projects. On those issues, “the fight was not with neighborhood; they [the neighborhood]



were with us” (Fey Interview).

The shift to focus on more on community planning and economic development and becoming a “really multi-dimensional CDC organization” in the 1990s came at the same time that the neighborhood was quickly changing demographically, in particular, to reflect the diversity of new immigrants coming to Minneapolis from East Africa and parts of Asia (Fey interview). In order to change and adapt to better reflect the community, Seward Redesign commissioned a 2001 external review funded Twin Cities LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation), that pointed out key needs for the organization.

*Seward Redesign’s primary strengths lie in its ability to produce quality products and services, identify and develop resources and market itself to the major financing sources. Its major appeal to the financing sources is its ability to implement the projects/programs it designs. Another part of its apple is the thoughtfulness that goes into their planning.*

*Although founded as an affordable housing development company over 30 years ago, Seward Redesign’s primary focus now appears to be on commercial and business development. Its role in housing has changed from that of developer to asset management. This change was a result of the organization’s decision to “broaden” its scope.*

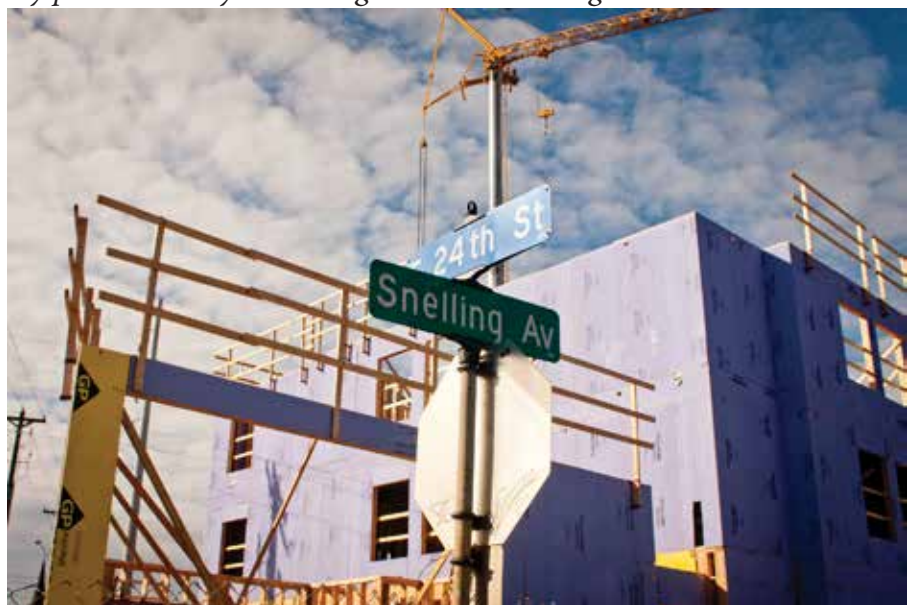
*(etc Network 2001)*

The study also detected a primary concern, which was the perception that Seward Redesign was not adequately serving, or perceived not to be adequately connecting with, its communities of color, which had been growing in the Seward community for years. Particularly from this point, Seward Redesign began to focus more intently on connecting with new immigrants and people of color within the community, drawing on some key connections it had made over the years to intensify the economic development work in Seward. The cultural diversity and vitality of Seward has long been a key part of the community there, along with the nearby Cedar-Riverside neighborhood.

*[This was] the period when these waves of immigration were transforming the whole west bank and Seward. We went from basically predominantly white neighborhood to a neighborhood suddenly that had lots of people from Africa living nearby or in from Russia. We added Russian cable TV at the Seward towers, [because] there were enough Russian immigrants at that they wanted that.*

*(Fey interview)*

Thanks to earlier working on projects like assisting the Blue Nile restaurant or negotiating with Shabelle Market, Seward Redesign fostered further connections with the neighborhood’s East African community and helped connect businesses with sites along Franklin Avenue. In the subsequent



*Construction of Seward Commons, 2012.  
(Seward Redesign archive)*

years, Seward Redesign has helped dozens of small businesses get started and continue to thrive along the commercial corridors of the Seward neighborhood in a rich variety of ways.

## Conclusion: Urban Evolution

There is little doubt that Seward Redesign as an organization has evolved repeatedly to adapt to the shifting economic, social, and fiscal realities in the Seward neighborhood where it has thrived for the last half century. By reacting to and anticipating changes in the funding environment for economic development, Seward Redesign transformed from a “developer of last resort” working on small-scale affordable housing and rehab projects, sometimes down to the scale of single homes, into a key partner to some of the city’s largest subsidized affordable housing. It has remained a flexible and diverse organization that commits to its community and operates in a rich variety of ways that remain adaptable to the changing urban world in which it thrives.

The range of activity at which Seward Redesign has adopted are perhaps best reflected in the Seward Commons project, which began in 2014 and has proceeded in phases to create dedicated affordable and supportive housing, incubator spaces for small businesses, and (in the future) the first market-rate apartments planned for the Seward neighborhood in generations. The project reflects the unique expertise of Seward Redesign in working with different communities in different ways, as well as the wide range of development skills needed to put together a complex development. That project, as well as the hundreds of others over the years, reveal Seward



*Co-op Creamery Building, before rehabilitation, 2012.  
(Seward Redesign archive)*



Redesigns role as a flexible economic development grantor for fine-grained mixed-use corridors, doing small area plans, transportation access planning, rehab and preservation projects, integrating contemporary sustainable architecture into project development, assembling light-industrial job sites, offering job skills training to underserved youth, and convening in-depth community engagement sessions. This kind of diverse, mixed-methods development approach is part and parcel of Seward Redesign's commitment to neighborhood, rather than focusing on one particular specialized approach. Especially as the field of subsidized housing development has become more complex and regional in nature, the adaptive nature of Seward Redesign should allow the organization to thrive into the future, as it proves able to shift its strategies to meet the changing needs of the growing Seward and Longfellow neighborhoods of Minneapolis.

As recent events in the year 2020 have proved, the economic and social conditions of South Minneapolis can change on a dime, especially as American society deals with the kinds of overlapping crises like climate change, public health, and systemic racism. For all of these challenges, diverse urban neighborhoods that provide opportunity to all its neighbors, and that foster rich social connections across race, class, and ethnic divides, will be the critical piece in whether American cities can prove to be resilient to these upcoming challenges. The kind of work that Seward Redesign has done over the past half-century to knit together, empower, revitalize, and provide opportunity for Minneapolis residents should be a standard that is replicated far and wide across the United States. Given how much has changed over the last fifty years in neighborhoods like Seward, it is a safe bet that there will be plenty of opportunity for future development focused on living-wage jobs, affordable housing, and a vital economy.

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#### **Interviews conducted with:**

David Fey  
 Gary Hesser  
 Caren Dewar  
 Cara Letofsky  
 Bob Mack  
 Brian Miller  
 Bob Roscoe

#### **Photo and document archives:**

Borchert Map Library, University of Minnesota  
 David Fey, personal collection  
 Hennepin County Library: Special Collections  
 Hennepin History Magazine  
 Minnesota Historical Society  
 Seward Redesign Archives  
 Star Tribune



# Appendix: Project List

List of confirmed properties, businesses, or planning efforts that had a connection to Seward Redesign

## **Estelle Apartments / 21st Avenue Lofts**

Address: 2012 21st Avenue S

Dates: 1999-2002

Seward Redesign acquired and demolished apartment building in collaboration with Seward Neighborhood Group to build new housing development; Seward Redesign demolished the apartment here and built rowhomes

Sources: Star Tribune (image); 1999 30 year celebration list



## **Riverside Assembly of God**

Address: 2011 21st Avenue S

Info: Seward Redesign facilitated shared parking agreement with church and Blue Nile Restaurant

Sources: 1999 30 year celebration list

## **Milwaukee Avenue Townhomes**

Address 2400 23rd Avenue S; 2306-2310 E 24th Street; 2317-2327 Milwaukee Avenue

Dates: 1975

Info: Seward Redesign developed these homes, and remains the general partner and manager for them; Seward Redesign developed 12 townhomes, first new construction in urban renewal area; Seward Redesign successfully converted them to Project Based Section 8 in 2017.

Sources: 1999 30 year list



## **First Rehab Package**

Address: 2406 23rd Avenue S; 2215 23rd Avenue S;

2301 23rd Avenue S; 2309 24th Avenue S; 2304 24th Avenue S; 2212 25th Avenue S;  
Dates 1974

Info: Seward Redesign served as a developer, rehabbing these homes and selling them at low prices

Sources: Seward Redesign archive (image)

### **Third Rehab Package**

Address: 2303 22nd Avenue S; 2307 22nd Avenue S;  
2311 22nd Avenue S; 2315 22nd Avenue S; 2112 22nd  
Avenue S; 2116 23rd Avenue S; 2420 25th Avenue S;  
2010 25th Avenue S; 2024 25th Avenue S;

Dates: 1975-1979

Info: Seward Redesign served as developer, rehabbing  
these homes and selling them at low prices

Sources: 1999 30 year list; 1980 annual report (image)



### **Habitat for Humanity House**

Address: 2404 24th Avenue S

Info: Seward Redesign negotiated purchase of vacant lot to develop by TC Habitat for Humanity

Sources: 1999 30 year list

### **Seward Court**

Address: 2407 24th Avenue S

Dates: First developed in 1984

Info: Seward Redesign built these courtyard-style town-  
homes

Sources: 1999 30 year list; Star Tribune (image)



### **Slide Services**

Address 2535 25th Avenue S

Dates: 1994



Info: Seward Redesign facilitated expansion and relocation

Sources: Seward Profile 7/94

### **Mack Engineering**

Address: 2601 32nd Avenue S

Dates: 1992

Info: United Van Bus Site, became Mack Engineering Corp.; Seward Redesign trying to work to purchase or facilitate re-use; facilitated approval for purchase of site; Seward Redesign worked with city to clean up and demo former buildings, helped Mack purchase and develop property

Sources: Seward Profile 11/92, 12/93; 1999 30 year list

### **Gateway / Seward Commons**

Address: 1915 E 22nd Street / 2200 Minnehaha

Dates: 2014

Info: Seward Redesign developed and owns this mixed-use supportive housing property. Verna business incubator includes Solcana Wellness -- which received support from a Redesign revolving loan fund -- Los Falls Distillery, Cycles for Change, Beez Kneez, Barton Player Piano, and others; Seward Redesign developed this mixed-use project in phases, some of which is housing for people with mental illness (Rising Cedar Apartments) or for seniors at 50% Area Median Income (The Cooperage)



Sources: Annual Reports

### **Matthews Park Townhomes**

Address: 2406-2410, 2419-2429 25th Avenue S; 2413-2431 26th Avenue S; 2415-2433 E 24th Street

Dates: 1976

Info: Seward Redesign developed this and still owns it; claims to be the first MFHA section 8 project in the city when it was developed; Seward Redesign negotiated a new 20-year Section 8 contract in 2016

Sources: 1999 30 year list; SR website

**WW Johnson**

Address: 2013 E 24th Street

Info: Seward Redesign assisted with expansion and relocation plans

Sources: 1999 30 year celebration document

**Second Rehab Package**

Address: 2613 E 24th Street;

Info Seward Redesign served as developer, rehabbing this home and selling them at a low price

Sources: Seward Redesign archive

**Blue Moon Garage**

Address: 3101 E 25th Street

Info: Seward Redesign acquired and facilitated demo to help home get constructed by Greater Minneapolis Metropolitan Housing Corporation

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**Birchwood Cafe**

Address: 3311 E 25th Street

Info: Seward Redesign assisted with business plan loan application

Sources: 1999 30 year list; Seward Redesign archive (photo)

**Eagle Welding**

Address: 2425 E 26th Street

Dates: 1992

Info: Seward Redesign facilitated deal to help business move to Seward; helped finance new facility

Sources: Seward Profile 3/92; 1999 30 year list



**Koechel Peterson**

Address: 2600 E 26th Street

Info: Seward Redesign led planning to redevelop following shooting

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**Norma Jean's / Duffy's**

Address: 2601 E 26th Street

Dates: 1991-1992

Info: Seward Redesign helped with guiding purchase and demolition of site, 1993 helped work on revitalization and project that took its place

Sources: Seward Profile 12/91, 3/93, 6/93

**Envirobate**

Address: 3301 E 26th Street

Info: Seward Redesign assisted company to acquire property and negotiate agreement for use of it and surrounding lot

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**New French Bakery**

Address: 2609 26th Avenue S

Info: Seward Redesign assisted purchase and renovation; former Mirage building

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**Western Roofing Supply**

Address: 2727 26th Avenue S

Info: Seward Redesign assisted with industrial activity

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**Perkins**

Address: 910 E 27th Street



Info: Seward Redesign helped integrate landscape and fencing

Sources: 1999 30 year list

### **Diner Steak House**

Address: 2545 27th Avenue S

Info: Seward Redesign provided business planning assistance and helped with grant

Sources: 1999 30 year list

### **Migizi**

Address: 3017 27th Avenue S

Info: Seward Redesign facilitated facade improvements grant; former Firestone Tire site

Sources: Seward Redesign Annual Report 2016

### **Former Seward Co-op**

Address: 2111 Franklin Avenue

Dates: 1987, 2010s

Info: Seward Redesign assisted coop with planning and financing new store; worked to attract clients afterward

Sources: Seward Profile; 1999 30 year list; Seward Redesign (image)



### **York Millwork**

Address: 2648 34th Avenue S

Info: Seward Redesign coordinated redevelopment plans with new development on former United Van Bus property;

Sources: 1999 30 year list

### **Minnesota Grinding**



Address: 815 Cedar Avenue

Info: Seward Redesign assisted with expansion and relocation plans

Sources: 1999 30 year celebration document

### **Holiday Station**

Address: 2124 Franklin

Info: Seward Redesign worked to do facade and fencing improvements; Worked with gas station to apply neighborhood design siting and landscaping; Black Steer/Henry Hamburger (formerly)

Sources: 1999 30 year list; Hennepin County Library: SNG archive (image)



### **Seward Café**

Address: 2129 Franklin

Dates: 1987

Info: Seward Redesign got them a rehab grant; helped cafe get low interest construction loan for expansion,

Sources: Seward Profile; 1999 30 year list

### **Franklin Village / Lebovsky Property / Seward Makes**

Address: 2211 Franklin

Dates: 2002

Info: Seward Redesign worked to purchase and redevelop these buildings; Seward Redesign assisted plans to construct new building, helped the Movement Arts Center (formerly) get located there and purchase the building; Seward Redesign did grants for revitalization work, facade improvements; housed a laundromat, Domino's, Shabelle Grocery (former);

Sources: 1999 30 year list Annual Report



### **Hoffman Guitars**

Address: 2219 Franklin

Info: Helped rehab and storefront; Seward Redesign did revitalization work, facade improvements

Sources: Annual Report; 1999 30 year list

### **Playwrights Center**

Address: 2310 Franklin

Info: Seward Redesign assisted with capital improvement plans;

Sources: 1999 30 year list



### **Shabelle Grocery / DoAll Building**

Address: 2325 - 2327 Franklin Avenue

Dates: 2002

Info: Seward Redesign developed property; also Shabelle Grocery; Shega bakery; Nile Chiropractic; Sierra Club; Minnesota 8 Ball League; Buck Brothers Construction; SNG offices; SR annual report 2003 redeveloped with goal of creating opportunity for E. African businesses, \$1.6M project, moved tenants in by 11/02

Sources: Seward Redesign Annual Report 2003; Seward Redesign archive (image)

### **CJ Café**

Address: 2401 Franklin

Info: formerly Himalaya; Mon Petit Cheri; Seward Redesign provided exterior rehab grants

Sources: Seward Redesign archive (image)



### **Northern Clay Center**

Address: 2424 Franklin

Dates: 2002

Info: Former Wendell's Rubber Stamp building; SNG offices (former); Seward Redesign assisted in redevelopment of building; Seward Redesign facilitated joint development





Sources: Seward Redesign annual report 2003; 1999 30 year list; Seward Redesign archive (image)

### **Seward Market / Halal Meat**

Address: 2431 Franklin Avenue

Info: Seward Redesign provided business planning assistance and helped with grant, housed Tran's Tailors (former)

Sources: 1999 30 year list

### **Office Building**

Address: 2525 Franklin Avenue

Info: Seward Redesign assisted with grant; housed the Nomadic Oasis barber, LBM corp., Alta Planning, The Alliance

Sources: 1999 30 year list

### **Creamery Co-op**

Address: 2601 Franklin Avenue

Dates: 2016

Info: Seward Redesign worked through negotiations between the co-op and the building owner, working out a lease that allowed the building to be rehabbed. Worked through initial phases with project management and architect

Sources: Brian Miller



### **Zipps**

Address: 2618 Franklin Avenue

Dates: 1995

Info: Big Mike's Super Sub (formerly); Seward Redesign worked with them to cut down on nuisance issues; Co-ordinated demolition of former Shapiro's and landscaped parking lot

Sources: Seward Profile 5/95; 1999 30 year list; Seward Redesign archive (image)

### **Seward Co-op**

Address: 2823 Franklin Avenue

Dates: 1990s, 2006

Info: Seward Redesign assisted Riverside Market with grant; Seward Redesign acquired property after it closed in 2004, helped get financing for new market building;

Sources: 1999 30 year list; (Epstein et. al. 2018); Seward Redesign archive (image)



### **Woodland Stoves/ Cushman**

Address: 2901 Franklin

Info: Seward Redesign helped with a facade improvement grant.

Sources: Brian Miller



### **Seward Towers East (Bor-Son Towers)**

Address: 2910 Franklin

Dates: 1988

Info: Seward Redesign began trying to buy this in 1987 after working with the City; crafted purchase agreement and closing purchase in October 1990; Seward Redesign created a nonprofit with board members a nonprofit corporation to manage this large affordable housing project, bringing together board members and residents to manage and own the property; the project was completed by December 1990; Seward Redesign facilitated \$95M in funding for rehabilitation work in 2015-7

Sources: Seward Profile 3/89; 5/90 10/90, 5/92; Star Tribune 1/91

### **Welna II Hardware**

Address: 2201 Franklin

Info: Former Seward Co-op; Seward Redesign helped with facade improvements; recruited tenants; Assisted hardware store with a grant.

Sources: 1999 30 year list; Seward Redesign Annual Report 1980 (image)



### **Franklin East Building**

Address: 2613-2625 Franklin

Dates: 1992

Info: Jim's Barbershop; Landrieu Insurance Group; Lightbulb Community Learning Center; completed rehab and renovation in 1992; attracting tenants into incubator spaces in 2016

Sources: Seward Redesign annual report 2016

### **Ross Drug**

Address: 2627 Franklin

Dates: 1991-

Info: Former Ross Drug Store; Franklin Clinic; Oriental Garden; Smiley's Clinic Building; 2/91 Seward Redesign renovation; 10/91 helped Chinese restaurant renovate; 12/91 got contract for clinic to move in which helped Seward Redesign finalize project; 12/92 clinic opens; 1993 glass and architecture assistance; Star Tribune 3/93 story on clinic and rehab;



Sources: Seward Profile 2/91, 10/91, 12/91, 12/92, Star Tribune 3/93

### **2nd Moon Coffee**

Address: 2223 Franklin

Info: Precision Grind (defunct); Seward Redesign helped attract tenants

Sources: Seward archive

### **Blue Nile**

Address 2027 Franklin

Dates: 1994

Info: formerly Montaninta's; Tempo; Seward Redesign worked with them to re-use and improve the parking lot; torn down; helped with planning financing and land exchange;

Sources: Seward Profile 4/95; 1999 30 year list; Seward





Redesign archive (image)

**Tip Top Foods**

Address: 2701 Franklin

Info: Assisted relocation of businesses and parking lot landscaping; Godzilla Video, Crown Video (formerly)

Sources: 1999 30 year list



**Precision Grinding**

Address: 2225 Franklin

Info: Seward Redesign funded rehab in 1987; Seward Redesign did revitalization work, facade improvements

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**LRT Blue Line Station**

Address: Franklin / Hiawatha

Dates: 2002

Info: Seward Redesign helped with station area planning during LRT planning process; facilitated community meetings with many groups and communities around station area planning for the LRT station, produced a report in 2000

Sources: Seward Redesign annual report 2003; 2000 LRT station report

**Growing Lots Urban Farm**

Address: 2314 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign developed this community garden on a former parking lot, and still owns it, helping the operator get grants for the project; Seward Redesign has guided it through two ownership transitions

Sources: Brian Miller, Renee Spillum

**DeVries Bar Grinding**

Address: 2433 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign helped with approvals for loading dock addition

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**Modified Tool & Photos**

Address: 2591, 2601 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign helped partner with job training and business association

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**Baker Bearing**

Address: 2620 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign assisted with land negotiations with Minneapolis development agency

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**Siewert Cabinet**

Address: 2640 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign assisted with land negotiations with Minneapolis development agency

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**Digigraphics**

Address: 2639 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign facilitated contact with the city leading to development

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**R+S Litho**

Address: 2600 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign facilitated contact with the city leading to development

Sources: 1999 30 year list

**D.C. Sales**

Address: 2700 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign facilitated contact with the city leading to development

Sources: 1999 30 year list

### **Movement Arts Center**

Address: 3748 Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign helped them get their new building built

Sources: Seward Redesign archive

### **Intersection redesign project**

Address: Franklin/Minnehaha

Info: Seward Redesign helped city with plan for realignment of intersection

Sources: Star Tribune

### **Seward Square Apartments**

Address: 2121 S 9th Street

Info: Seward Redesign was nonprofit sponsor for development of 91 apartments here

Sources: 1999 30 year list

### **Seward Towers West**

Address: 2515 S 9th Street

Dates: 1988

Info: Seward Redesign worked to acquire and set up a nonprofit corporation to manage this large affordable housing project, bringing together board members and residents to manage and own the property; Seward Redesign helped ensure the survival of Triangle Park; 9/91 Seward Redesign deal to get \$800K to renovate (upgrade elevators, HVAC, ADA etc.); 5/92 Seward Redesign did more rehabilitation work; in 2003, completed a \$20M renovation



Sources: Seward Profile 9/91, 5/92; Seward Redesign annual report 2003; Hennepin County Library: SNG collection (photo)



### **Earth Shelter Townhomes**

Address: 2403-2425 S 9th Street

Info: Seward Redesign developed this project, it used innovative architecture and environmental design

Sources: Seward Redesign archive (photo)



### **Moto Primo building**

Address: 3140 Snelling Avenue

Dates: 2016

Info: Seward Redesign refinanced to renovate parking lot

Sources: Seward Redesign 2016 annual report

### **Dutton Brown Headquarters**

Address: 2323 Snelling Avenue

Info: Seward Redesign helped lease the building to Dutton Brown, who then purchased it

Sources: Renee Spillum

### **YWCA**

Address: 2121 East Lake Street

Dates: 1993

Info: Facilitated grant for study and negotiated with site relocation; facilitated market research

Sources: Caren Dewar interview; SP 12/93

### **Milkweed Coffee (Blue Moon)**

Address: 3822 East Lake Street

Info: Exterior improvement grant working with Lake Street Council (Blue Moon); helped get city grants for business development (Milkweed).

Sources: Brian Miller, Renee Spillum



