

the guide

a world down under

The first hit pieces always start popping up around this time of year, but Margaret Hicks has weathered this storm before. The news media has nothing against her personally; instead, it's the subject of their scorn that hits Margaret especially hard. Don't we all have our loves, and wouldn't we feel bad if they were unjustly attacked? For Margaret, one of her true loves is the Chicago pedway, and she's tired of seeing it maligned.

"I get angry for the pedway, I really do," says Margaret, who spends her days talking up the pedway to tour groups. "It gets beat up on all the time, but I think it's amazing."

Margaret's passion for underground Chicago is understandable, given that she's made the pedway her business. A former legal secretary and Architecture Foundation docent who trained in improvisation at Second City, in 2010 Margaret founded Chicago Elevated, her one-woman company that operates tours of the Chicago pedway, among other out-of-the-way places.

"The pedway is maddening, confusing and hard to use, but once you know that ..." Margaret says, laughing. "I'm very affectionate about this space because it's really the opposite of what everyone says it is."

The Chicago pedway is a system of underground tunnels (and a few ground-level hallways) that runs approximately five miles, or 40 blocks, south of the Chicago River and east of the Kennedy Expressway. Contrary to popular belief, the pedway isn't one continuous system, nor is it managed by the city.

Instead, the pedway consists of a series of basements that connect public and private buildings to create tunnels underneath the city streets. Not all of the tunnels link up, as technically a pedway can connect as few as two structures, and not all pedways are underground, as some continue along ground-floor lobbies.



Margaret Hicks



Chicago Elevated pedway tours begin at the Thompson Center. The building, designed by renowned architect Helmut Jahn, houses Chicago-based offices for the State of Illinois. Long criticized for inefficient and expensive climate control, vast unusable space and an open-plan concept that makes most floors distractingly noisy, the building was put on the market last April.

Chicago has plenty of both types, but regardless of length and continuity, the pedway system as a whole is free, open most of the time, and yes, it can be hard to follow. But Margaret makes a living from showing people that walking below ground is just as rich an experience as traveling above — even though the feeling can leave you a bit unsettled.

The pedway itself dates back to 1951, when the city of Chicago build a one-block tunnel to connect the Red and Blue line subways at Washington Street and Jackson Boulevard in the Loop. Since then, the pedway has grown organically with public and private investment expanding its reach throughout downtown.

Surprisingly, there isn't one overall entity that manages the pedway, nor is there any governing authority. Instead, each building, be it public or private, manages its own section, from cleaning to retail to security. The Chicago Department of Transportation oversees sections connected to government buildings, but otherwise there's no real pedway authority.

Recently, partnerships with the School of the Art Institute and other civic organizations have brought original artwork and Space p11, a temporary art gallery with works that focus on art, architecture and design, to the pedway areas near Michigan Avenue. For a place not

known for art, the pedway is starting to spark oohs and aaahs from passersby.

"The pedway is very much a sensory experience," Margaret says, entering a long hallway outside Macy's department store where 22 stained glass windows glow from where they are mounted inside the wall. The

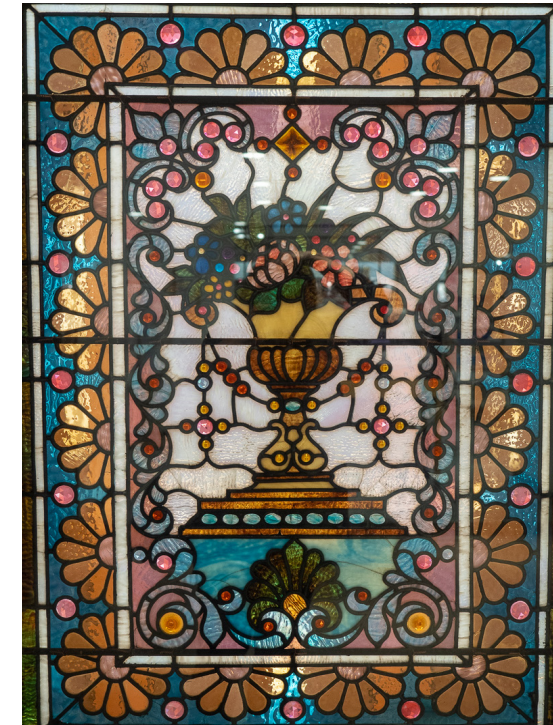
windows, which date back to the late 1800s and include an original Tiffany, were installed in 2013 in partnership with the Smith Museum of Stained Glass (now closed). The gallery is an example of the surprises that the pedway provides people, Margaret says.

"Macy's was the weak link of the pedway, and it's still not great, but when you walk along these windows you come out the other end a different person."

Further east, a 40-foot by 8-foot portrait of Chance the Rapper welcomes pedway pedestrians with open arms, thanks to three students from the School of the Art Institute.

The mural, "Chicago Has My Heart," features Chance and portraits of young Chicago poets, musicians, clothing designers and artists who are making a positive contribution to the community. It's a jolt of color that makes you look up because how could you not? "Everybody knows the city's past, let's talk about the future," the mural proclaims.

"Chicago has more than 200 neighborhoods, and this is one of them."



One of the 22 American Victorian stained glass windows that line the pedway entrance to Macy's department store.

That's how Margaret describes the pedway, and the people she's met there remind her of that fact. There's Ed, who sits outside Marriage and Civil Union Court at the bottom of the escalator below City Hall. Ed greets couples waiting for a Cook County judge to marry them with a suitcase full of silk flowers, 'congratulations' banners and ties for grooms, and a camera ready should the happy couple want a photo.

Or Kyle, who used to work security under the Heritage Millennium building. He and Margaret would chat frequently until one day, he was gone. She looked for him but couldn't find him, until he reappeared as a security guard under Daley Center. "We were so excited to see each other again," she says.

And Bill, who Margaret got to know when he sang under the Chicago Cultural Center. A consistent and recognized pedway performer, Bill disappeared from the pedway but he and Margaret still remain friends on Facebook.

It's not just the people who give the pedway that neighborhood feel. Like any stretch of the city, the pedway has its own rhythms — when it's busiest (morning and evening commute times, for example, and bad weather days); the good places to eat (fast food and restaurants abound); where to get your shoes shined or repaired, a hair cut, a mani pedi.

There's even a bar at the Metra station at Millennium Park. A few blocks north, another section underneath Lake Street connects the Illinois buildings with hotels such as the Fairmont, the Hyatt and the Swissotel (these sections show off with carpeting) and three new residential high-rises. The Hyatt pedway features comfy chairs and beautiful views outside.

In January of 2017, Margaret tested this neighborhood theory out by spending one entire week inside the pedway — eight days of working, eating, shopping and swimming (LA Fitness has a pool you can see from the pedway), no outside activity allowed. Her pedway odyssey was helped by a sponsorship from the Fairmont Hotel but the point was to see if she could live, comfortably, inside.

The result? A resounding yes.

"I tried to think of anything anyone would do above ground, and the only thing I couldn't find in the pedway was some type of spiritual space, a church or a place to meditate, and medical care. Otherwise, I didn't want for anything," she says.

One of the highlights was a late night walk she took through an empty pedway.

"I left the Fairmont at 11:00 pm and made it all the way to the Metra station by myself," she says. "It was empty and safe and beautiful."

Margaret's love of the pedway comes naturally. Raised in Wilmette, Ill., a suburb north of Chicago, her parents divorced when she was young and she spent time each week visiting her father in the Old Town neighborhood where he lived.



Ed, a longtime fixture in the pedway,



The CTA's Blue Line pedway station features tile work in the distinctive colors of the Chicago flag.



“Chicago has more than 200 neighborhoods, and the pedway is one of them.”

—Margaret Hicks

The LA Fitness pool under Randolph Street.

“My father would walk us everywhere,” Margaret says. “He didn’t have a car, so our time with him was spent walking Chicago. He would test every door, every walkway, every interesting turn. He was never afraid of exploring and I think he passed that on to me.”

A child of theatre parents, Margaret attended improv classes at Second City when she was a teenager, which allowed her to develop her comedic skills.

“My mom was so brilliant to let me explore that,” she says.

After college, Margaret performed improv, which she credits for helping her develop skills she uses in her business today.

“The skills I learned were listening, confidence, trust in my own voice, and trust in other people’s voices. It’s such a great art to work on.”

Her theatre skills helped when she launched her business. “I was on the news a lot because the pedway was interesting to people,” she says, “I was also on the radio, which is a great place to market yourself. The audience is wide and varied, and they need people to talk about what they’re doing.”

Her business grew via word of mouth and websites like Trip Advisor. “My marketing tends to go where my creatively goes, so it depends on the tour, on the season, and work that keeps me on my toes,” Margaret says.

In addition to Elevated Chicago, Margaret also conducts a tour for Second City that returns her to her father’s Old Town neighborhood. The Second City Neighborhood Tour explores the history and architecture of Old Town along with personal stories about Second City. It’s a popular summer tour.

As a one-woman shop, she does everything herself, from marketing to guiding to coming

up with new ideas for tours. She is currently working on two new ideas, about the lost language of buildings (what the exteriors of buildings can teach us about them) and an over-under tour of Chicago.

“I think it would be fun to explore all the levels of this city,” she says.

Margaret also offers private tours, like bachelorette parties (“always a challenge”) and private tours, like the one she gave a woman who wrote down every turn and landmark so that she could follow the pedway on her own. As she’s primarily self-taught in pedway history, Margaret is fascinated to hear about people’s experience in the pedway.

“The flood brings out a lot of stories,” Margaret says, referencing April, 1992 when 250 million gallons of water from the Chicago River flooded the pedway and building basements in the Loop after a construction accident. Businesses

were closed for several days, and parts of the pedway for several weeks, during the cleanup. (The flood didn’t shut down the entire pedway, however. The only time that occurred was in 2012, when Chicago hosted the NATO summit.)

On her tour she passes a set of display cases underneath City Hall, where someone (Margaret’s not sure who) places posters featuring Chicago crime cases and other historical facts. It harkens back to her theory that the places we take for granted are talking to us, if we’ll only listen.

“We’ve all seen the buildings in our towns a million times, but look a little more closely,” she says. “Are there lions on them? Columns? Leaves? What kind? Each of those answers means something, and it’s fun to figure out what they’re are trying to say.”

Margaret’s tour follows the longest continuous section of the Chicago pedway, starting at



"Chicago Has My Heart," a mural by students at the School of the Art Institute.

the James R. Thompson Center (State of Illinois building) and ending in the lobby of the Prudential Building just east of Michigan Avenue. It's the new home of the *Chicago Tribune*, after the company moved out of Tribune Tower in summer of 2018. The tilework on the walls resembles newsprint; the acoustics focus sound into tall chairs in the lobby. Outside, Millennium Park tempts with fresh air and sunshine.

"The pedway is a sensory experience, with smells and sights and sounds," Margaret says. And it's true: there's art that appears out of the blue along stretches of what used to be blank walls; the sound of cash registers; snippets of conversation coming from the Chicago police break room under City Hall; the scent of coffee and caramel corn; the tinge of electricity from the Metra tracks at Millennium Park.

There's cool air under one building and bus exhaust wafting down the stairs that lead to Washington Street. A broken tile marks where the pedway floor meets the asphalt near the train station. Someone walks a bike, because there are no rules in the pedway so why not take a bike down there. And there, on the wall, is the compass the city of Chicago posted along the pedway which doesn't help at all because the points don't actually correspond to the actual directions because, well, why should they.

It's the pedway after all, and if you embrace the disorienting nature of it then Margaret insists it has a lot to say.

"It's like discovering that a house you've lived in for 30 years has a secret room," she says. "It's just that wonderful."

