



# Jay Walljasper: Mary Tyler Moore Doesn't Live Here Anymore

*Minneapolis-St. Paul's Serious Identity Crisis*

Commissioned by The McKnight Foundation



# Foreword

Jay Walljasper's *Mary Tyler Moore Doesn't Live Here Anymore* was commissioned by The McKnight Foundation as part of our "Food for Thought" series — a collection of independent essays to help inform our awareness of the fields in which we operate and our related program strategies.

The essay explores the opportunities and challenges in raising the national and international profile of our Minneapolis-St. Paul region. Jay juxtaposes reality with perceptions (our own, as well as others), and explores what we might do to project a better, more accurate portrait of the Twin Cities to the world. Although a main focus is on better honing our messaging, Jay also suggests options for to better assess and build upon our regional strengths while acknowledging, and hopefully overcoming, our weaknesses. And he explores what it might take to make sure MSP's reputation outside our state stays as accurate and vital as we need it to be.

In addition to interviews with thought leaders, community builders, and communications pros, Jay discussed this "identity issue" with some key McKnight staffers whose work affects and is affected by such issues. This piece is particularly relevant to our Region & Communities program support, which is directed to increase efficient and sustainable regional metropolitan development that creates livable communities and expands opportunities for all to thrive. And while support for traditional marketing isn't listed explicitly among our program strategies, effective communications is an important core element of many of our grants in support of sustainable regional development, homes for all, and economically vibrant neighborhoods.

Although Jay's words are his own, we believe many of his points merit useful consideration in our work, which is why we're sharing the piece with our program colleagues. We echo his statement that the MSP region is competing for business, jobs, and well-educated young workers with other cities around the country that are more widely perceived as attractive, interesting places. Our region has more to offer than is commonly known elsewhere, and it's likely that part of this gap in national understanding may well be in how we — all of us — contribute to our region's "marketing" in big and little ways, every day.

I hope you find Jay's essay engaging, with meaningful information and insights to serve as food for thought in your own work.

**Neal Cuthbert, Vice President of Program  
The McKnight Foundation**



*The iconic Mary Tyler Moore statue is located near the corner of 7th Street and Nicollet Mall in downtown Minneapolis — the exact spot that she made her famous tam throw in the opening credits of the Mary Tyler Moore show. (©2011 Mitch Rossow)*



## MARY TYLER MOORE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

*Former St. Paul mayor and U.S. Senator Norm Coleman tells the story that when he moved to the Twin Cities his mother back in Brooklyn was convinced it was Minneapolis and Indianapolis.*

*Steve and Dixie Berg — both communications specialists — once greeted her brother from the East Coast at the airport with a sign reading "Welcome to Milwaukee," which is what he calls Minneapolis. He never noticed.*

*Jay Corbalis, a 27-year-old Cornell grad who is regional coordinator of the DC-based Locus real estate development firm, admits "On my first business trip I didn't realize the Mississippi River ran through the Twin Cities and there were bike trails all along it. I didn't even know there were bike lanes all over town."*

*David Feehan, a business consultant who until recently headed the International Downtown Association, brought a tour of business leaders through Twin Cities in 2011. "Quite frankly, they were astounded. They had a great time," he recalls. "This was a well-traveled group, and none of them had been to Minneapolis-St. Paul before. They had no image of it other than a cold, northern place."*

*Twin Cities, we have a problem!*

We're not on most people's radar of lively, livable, progressive, prosperous, places. The cities we compete with for business, jobs and well-educated young workers enjoy strong identities as attractive, interesting places. Seattle is Microsoft and Nordstrom. The Bay Area is high-tech and avant-garde culture. Denver is America's beer capital and the Rocky Mountains. Portland is the capital of urban livability and young hipsters. Vancouver is green and multiethnic. Austin is music and weirdness (in the best sense of the word). Boston is seafood and highly-educated people. Chicago is the Midwest's true big city and a magnet for ambitious talent throughout the Heartland.

We are best known for ice, snow, wind chill, mosquitoes, the Mall of America and, if we are lucky, Prairie Home Companion — which does not exactly portray us as a dazzling hotspot of culture, innovation and global cosmopolitanism.

"Unless you're from Fargo or Des Moines, you probably don't think much about the Twin Cities, except if you're old enough to remember Mary Tyler Moore tossing her hat in the air on the Nicollet Mall," comments Feehan, who grew up in Minneapolis and now lives in Washington, D.C. "For a while Prince put Minneapolis back on the map, but that was a long time ago."

That's not fair, you might say. We're home to more Fortune 500 companies per capita than anywhere in the country. We trail only New York in artistic activity per capita. Our parks are rated among the best in the world, our flourishing restaurants and microbreweries win national

awards, our diverse economy weathers financial ups and downs better than anywhere else. We're tops in recreational biking and civic engagement, according to experts. Our local economic output surpasses that of Sydney, Beijing, Denmark or the Ukraine. We were named the "Gayest" city in America by the Advocate magazine in 2011. We were rated the most fit and third most healthy metro area by the American College of Sports Medicine. Forbes magazine ranked us the best city for working mothers and third best for young professionals. Richard Florida, originator of the much-discussed Creative Class theory of urban success, calls us a "hotbed" of the inventive workers who will fuel tomorrow's economy.

To top it off, Slate's business and economics columnist Matthew Yglesias recently counseled, "You should move to Minneapolis." Here's why: "Of the 15 highest income metropolitan areas, 14 are in high-cost coastal areas. The other one...is the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Statistical Area."

What about the cold? Yglesias points to research in the journal *Psychological Science* showing that warm sunny weather does not make "a huge difference in people's lives." That's why nearly all the 10 happiest states in the U.S. according to the 2012 Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index are among the coldest: Massachusetts, Iowa, New Hampshire, Montana, Nebraska, Vermont, Utah and Minnesota at number 3, beaten only by Colorado, where the year's first blizzards frequently hit in September, and Hawaii.

It's hard to think of another place that offers so many urban and arts amenities interspersed with the natural beauty of lakes, trails, woods and the Mississippi River. Denver leads the nation in attracting the coveted professionals aged 25-34 in one recent survey while Minneapolis-St. Paul ranks 36, notes Todd Klingel, President of the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce. Recreational opportunities in the mountains have to be a big part of the reason, but who realizes that nature is much closer at hand thanks to our beloved park systems, and can be easily enjoyed every day of the week.

"On many economic and quality of life features, the Twin Cities outperforms other much admired metros — Boston, Denver, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco and San Diego. Higher educational attainment, higher labor force participation, better job opportunities for young people, lower unemployment, and higher median income adjusted for cost of living," notes Ann Markusen, director of the Humphrey Institute's Project on Regional and Industrial Economies.

But none of this makes any difference if we keep it to ourselves. That's why over the past few months I have talked to more than 30 urban experts and leaders in a variety of fields about how the Twin Cities could tell its story more forcefully — and have a better story to tell.

What we need is not a slick PR campaigns but a new consciousness throughout the community about the necessity of creating a stronger narrative about Minneapolis-St. Paul. To pay only scant attention to our image in a globalized age is the equivalent of relying on a landline and PO Box with no email, Facebook, twitter, texting or Instagram.

## A TALE OF TWO CITIES (AND SURROUNDING SUBURBS)

“Other cities are much better at bragging about what they are doing, even if they are doing less,” warned urban strategist Charles Landry after a week-long study tour here last year. He works all over the world consulting on “creative cities” and was impressed by what he saw happening here in the arts and urban revitalization.

Ironically the Twin Cities is home to some of the nation’s top branding firms like Fallon, Mono, Olson, Haberman and Zeus Jones, which work for clients all over to make sure their products and services get recognized. Yet as a region we do a remarkably poor job defining who we are and what’s happening here. While Midwestern modesty may be an asset on the interpersonal level, it’s a glaring deficit in the wider world where creative voices get the attention. For young people especially, who’ve internalized “The Brand Called You” ethic of our times, reticence in talking up our strengths is interpreted as being feeble rather than being discreet.

Over the past two years I worked on a project in Detroit with 29 rising professionals in fields like real estate, health care and finance who were helping to reinvigorate the city as part of the Detroit Revitalization Fellows Program. Chosen out of 647 applicants from 42 states, these are ambitious young people who love cities. Their aspirations were that Detroit might someday resemble Chicago, Toronto, Seattle, the Bay Area, Montreal, Washington, D.C., Portland, Boston, Grand Rapids, Brooklyn, Vancouver, Pittsburgh, Berlin and Burlington, Vermont. Unfortunately Minneapolis-St. Paul never crossed their minds, except for one participant who grew up in Richfield.

“We are not getting the internal migration from other parts of the country that we used to,” including the young talent who have boosted our community and economy over recent decades, says Caren Dewar, executive director of the Urban Land Institute (ULI). Indeed, the accomplishments of Minneapolis-St. Paul have always depended on a steady stream of industrious and innovative folks coming here from across the Midwest and points distant. Metropolitan Council statistics show that 141,000 more people moved away from the Twin Cities to other parts of the country than moved here between 2001-2010. We’re projected to lose 180,000 more by 2040.

“That’s a cause for concern,” Dewar says, which is one reason ULI is sponsoring the recent Greater MSP Ahead program to discuss how to ensure a bright future for the region.

## WHAT’S IN A NAME? PLENTY!

One part of the answer is changing our name. Seriously. When I sat down with Minneapolis mayor R.T. Rybak to talk about the Twin Cities’ identity crisis, he politely inquired: “Can I ask you not to call us the Twin Cities? It makes it sound like we are only half as good as the Quad Cities.” From Michael Langely, president of Greater MSP, I learned that there are at least 150 places around the world that call themselves the Twin Cities.

Even worse than “Twin Cities” is the habit of calling ourselves “Minnesota,” according to Steve Berg, a veteran journalist who’s covered urban issues at the *Star Tribune*, MinnPost and other publications. “The sign at the airport says Welcome to Minnesota, as if there isn’t a city here,” he says. Same goes for the Twins, Vikings, Timberwolves, Wild, Lynx, Orchestra, Dance Theater and other nationally known institutions that could raise our profile.

“Minnesota connotes canoes, wild rice paddies and lakes,” which Berg believes are nice images but not what we want people in graduate school to imagine about us as they make plans about where to pursue their careers. The scene we want them to picture is an outdoor café with bikes parked all around on the shore of a lake ringed by trees with a dramatic downtown skyline in the background, he says. And another view of a bustling city street near the river, full of folks of all races and ages walking to galleries, brewpubs, ethnic eateries, theaters, music clubs, ballgames and other activities.

Langley doesn’t think “Minneapolis-St. Paul” hits the mark either. It’s a seven-syllable mouthful that doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue. No other region of a million people anywhere around the world has a longer name except Fukuoka-Kitakyushu, Japan. And if you’ve never heard of Fukuoka-Kitakyushu, its name may be a reason.

Langley prefers MSP, which also happens to be the name of the new organization he heads to attract and retain investment in the 16-county metropolitan region — Greater MSP. It sounds sporty, like LA, DC or NYC. It also happens to be our 3-letter Airport code, which other cities like Portland (PDX) are adopting as monikers.

## A BETTER STORY TO TELL ABOUT MSP

It’s a huge mistake to think all we need is a catchier name and more compelling story to assure continuing prosperity and high quality of life. In an era of accelerating social and economic change, we must also double down our efforts to make sure we have a good story to tell.

“Not only do we not wave our own flag,” Dewar observes. “We don’t think big. We may be cursed by our own strength and stability, which has made us complacent about our future.”

The time for complacency is long past. We can no longer rest on our laurels as one of America’s livable places lauded by magazines back in the 1970s. We are grappling with longstanding problems, such as the coldest winters of any major American city and the widespread perception that we are located in the middle of nowhere, as well as new threats like a widening achievement gap between whites and people of color. Well-established companies can fly off to Atlanta or San Francisco (as happened with Northwest Airlines and Norwest Bank) and young talent may never even glance at us as they speed in the direction of Brooklyn or Portland or Shanghai.

Even our most cherished asset — “a great place to raise a family” — is being undercut by places we once joked about: Omaha, Des Moines, Madison, and other small metros around the country that enjoy booming economies and rising urban sophistication. David Feehan says, “Minneapolis-St. Paul has not been getting better at the same rate as these places.”



## CHALLENGES WE CAN'T BRUSH UNDER THE CARPET

**The Looming Achievement Gap.** First and foremost among our problems is the stark, unyielding fact that the “good life” in MSP is not shared by everyone who lives here. Low-income communities, particularly people of color, are falling dangerously behind when it comes to income, education and home ownership. A sense that “we’re all in this together” has historically been one of our cultural strengths compared to the rest of the country, but now we rank near the bottom on many measures of economic and educational equity.

The reputation of our “brainpower” workforce looks questionable when minorities (who are estimated to be 43 percent of the MSP population in 2040) perform significantly less well in school than white students. This worries Citistates Group president and former Met Council chair Curtis Johnson, who notes, “Our comparative advantage has always been a higher percentage of educated people.” *Star Tribune* political columnist Lori Sturdevant calls the achievement gap, “a demographic recipe for shrinking prosperity.”

Lisa Tabor — founder of CultureBrokers, which works with businesses, nonprofits and government agencies on cultural inclusivity — admits, “It’s scary to think about 40 percent of people here living in poverty. Will we look like Detroit?” DeAnna Cummings, executive director of Juxtaposition Arts, a youth arts center in North Minneapolis, notes “There are stark disparities in this community. There is still a lack of exposure and relationships across boundaries.”

Improving public schools stands out as a paramount priority. Myron Orfield, director of the University of Minnesota Law School’s Institute for Race and Poverty, urges we take strenuous steps to overturn the persistent segregation in our schools and diminish the concentration of poverty in certain neighborhoods and suburbs by scattering affordable housing more widely throughout the region.

Johnson, former president of Inver Hills and Minneapolis community colleges, contextualizes the situation. “One reason we have a gap is that middle-class kids here do well.” The way to fix this problem is not following the path of many cities where middle-class parents abandoned public schools. One of our enduring strengths compared to other big cities, says University of Minnesota College of Design Dean Tom Fisher, is “being a place where most people still send their kids to city schools.”

**Minnesota Nice: Not-So-Nice for Minorities.** Our long pride in being a liberal, open-minded place vanishes after hearing people of color speak honestly about their experiences living here. “This is an hospitable place on the surface,” says Dave Ellis who moved to town in 1974 after college and worked for Dow Chemical, the Minnesota Department of Corrections and the United Way. “But it’s hard to be your full self here. Telling my story is very important to me, but to the dominant culture it sounds like anger and rage. I’ve learned to be hyper-vigilant in social settings, and after a while you don’t want to participate any more.” He now runs Three E Consulting and convenes discussions about race and culture across the state.

Many corporate recruiters admit that non-white professionals are reluctant to move to MSP. DeAnna Cummings explains, “They see barriers to moving up in their career. There are few

examples of African Americans or others in positions of power.” Erik Takeshita, deputy director of the Local Initiative Support Corporation-Twin Cities, acknowledges, “There is a growing diversity here, there’s still a lot of pressure to assimilate. Other cities do a better job of letting you be who you are.”

**Vanilla City USA.** In the eyes of many, we are an out-of-the-way city populated exclusively by blond-haired folks who eat spongy white bread and say “you betcha.” That’s not going to stir much excitement for an emerging generation raised on rap, dim sum and a desire for diversity.

Of course, that perception is as outdated as Lou Grant’s wardrobe. After all we elected America’s first Muslim to Congress and the University of Minnesota boasts one of the largest concentrations of Chinese students. You can see West Indians in white flannels playing cricket in Bryn Mawr meadows on Sunday afternoons and gala quinceañera festivities all over town on Friday and Saturday, as Mexican-American communities celebrate girls’ 15th birthdays.

African Americans, Latinos, Asians and Africans have arrived in large numbers since the 1980s, giving us the chance to become a leader in “global fluency” according to Mayor R.T. Rybak, who notes that a delegation from Stockholm arrived to study why Somali immigrants thrive better here than in Sweden. Lisa Tabor, who’s involved with the African American Leadership Forum and helped establish a World Culture Heritage District in St. Paul, advocates that we embrace Interculturalism, which means creating an open community that includes everyone in decisionmaking.

To add brightness to our international image, we should highlight what’s happened around town musically since Prince left the stage. Atmosphere, POS, Brother Ali (who is blonde but also Muslim) and their brethren at the influential Rhymesayers Entertainment label and Doomtree collective are leading lights in the hip hop world. Let’s also draw attention to ethnic attractions like Midtown Global Market, Mercado Central, Karmel Square (Somali), the American Indian Cultural Corridor on East Franklin Avenue and the multi-ethnic showcase of restaurants and shops along Central Avenue in Minneapolis along with St. Paul’s West Side district (Latino), Little Mekong district on University Avenue and Hmongtown Marketplace. Penumbra Theater, one of the most prominent African-American stage companies in the country, was the trailblazer among flourishing ethnic arts organizations including the Asian Mu Performing Arts, the Indian Music Society of Minnesota, and the Native American All My Relations gallery.

Even the suburbs are turning colors. Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center, not Minneapolis and St. Paul, are the two most racially diverse communities in the region. People of color make up at least 10 percent of the population in 72 of the 183 communities in the metro area — about 40 percent of all suburbs. You can find a Halal Meat Market, Somali restaurant and a grocery store advertising “African, American and Mexican Food” next door to one another on Blake Road in Hopkins. Even Eden Prairie is now five percent Somali.

**It’s Chilly Here — And Not Just the Weather.** It’s not just people of color who find it hard to fit in. Tom Borrup, founder of the national arts-based development firm Creative Community Builders, moved here from the East Coast more than 30 years ago. “I found it easy to meet people,” he remembers, “but very few of them grew up here. I heard that you were really

accepted as a Minnesotan when you got invited to someone's cabin. Well, that took about 15 years."

Erik Takeshita, who grew up in St. Paul but lived in Hawaii for several years, describes "Minnesota nice" this way: "People here are more than happy to give you directions, just not to their house."

"In Minnesota, a new resident is someone who's lived there 10 years," reports Katherine Loflin, author of the Knight Foundation's landmark *Soul of a Community* study, which studied 26 regions around the country to find what factors create a sense of belonging for local people. She found that "young talent" was the "least welcome" of all the groups in MSP. DeAnna Cummings, who grew up here, observes, "We're nice, really nice, but we're not really looking for new friends."

Viewed from another perspective, this coolness to newcomers is the downside of one of our chief advantages: The social stability and high levels of civic engagement that come from strong community ties forged over decades. But what's stopping us from asking that new employee at work out for coffee, or inviting the family that moved in down the street over for dinner?

**Is Our Economy at Risk For Not Taking Risks?** The *Star Tribune* recently shouted bad news on its front page: "Minnesotans ranked last in creating new businesses." According to Patrick Boulay, publisher of *New Business Minnesota*, the newspaper based its story on a mistaken presentation of data by the Kaufman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity. Mark Ritchie, who registers new businesses in his position as Minnesota Secretary of State, reports, "For the record in 2012, Minnesota had one of the highest years on record for new business filings and on a per capita basis we were way ahead of the 'hot' states of Ohio, North Dakota and Wisconsin." Nonetheless our economic dependence on big, established companies is worrisome. "What if you took half of our Fortune 500 companies out of the equation?" asks Curtis Johnson. "I believe these companies are more mobile than we think." Not to mention that 31 Minnesota companies have been knocked off the Fortune 500 since 1955, reports Myles Shaver of the University of Minnesota Carlson School of Management. Remember Control Data, which ranked 159th on the list in 1980?

Since most of our big employers are homegrown it's essential that we continue nurturing small businesses, which provide more jobs than big companies. This inevitably raises questions about the business climate, which has been a political dogfight for decades. Do MSP's high taxes squelch prosperity? Depends on whom you talk to. But it seems clear that even with relatively higher taxes, our economy has remained stronger than many low-tax/low-services regions around the country.

But another deterrent to entrepreneurship merits further scrutiny. "The business climate here is terrible," declares real estate consultant Sam Newberg. "I'm not talking about taxes. I'm talking about all the bureaucratic obstacles, like needing to provide two bathrooms in a tiny store. We need to make it easier to do the right thing."

**Lagging Behind in Livability, Walkability and Transit.** Any discussion about the business climate should be broadened to include what spurs economic development along with what inhibits it. That's the crux of the familiar Creative Class theory, which holds that regions with a high quality of life attract the young creative workers and entrepreneurs who are critical to economic success in the 21st century. In a globalized world, these coveted people have many choices of where to live and won't settle for drab, boring places no matter how low the taxes. Many local observers worry that we are falling short on important measures of urban livability, walkability and public transportation which are dear to the emerging generation of creative workers.

The Millennial Generation — born after 1980 and are now entering the workforce in large numbers to replace tens of millions of baby boomers soon to retire — are the first generation in a century not obsessed with autos. Computers hold far more fascination for them as vehicles of self-expression and personal exploration. They may find driving convenient, but want other transportation options too. According to the Federal Highway Administration, miles traveled by drivers under 30 slid from 21 percent to 14 percent of the total between 1995 and 2009. Even *Motor Trend* magazine admits that young urban professionals are less likely to buy cars than in the past.

While MSP sports some of the best bikeways anywhere in the US, we are outpaced by many other regions when it comes to walking and transit. Even with the soon-to-open Green Line, we're still behind places like, we're still behind places like Dallas, St. Louis, Calgary, San Diego, Baltimore, and Salt Lake City on rail transit, not to mention our A-list competitors.

Tom Borrup, who consults with people around the country wanting to improve their communities, does not mince words: "The one area that's horrendous here is public spaces. Aside from the great parks, it boggles my mind how the streets, neighborhoods and downtowns are so car-oriented. Being a world class city depends on good and aesthetically pleasing places to walk."

In his groundbreaking book *The Option of Urbanism*, Christopher Leinberger, a George Washington University business professor, found only two truly walkable neighborhoods in the greater MSP area — downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul. Washington, D.C., meanwhile boasted 20, scattered throughout the metro area.

Actually the center cities and some close-in suburban neighborhoods show great potential for walking, which accounts for our inclusion in the Top 10 cities from Walk Score, a website that charts walkability. But driving is still the default way to get around town.

Walkability is an issue that goes beyond transportation choices, air quality and exercise. Places where people walk a lot are also places where people interact, the secret sauce of vibrant cities. "We are losing the chance to interact with one another," argues Max Musicant, founder of a local 'placemaking' firm. "We need public spaces to come together."

The streets are often empty and unwelcoming in our most walkable neighborhoods. That's why urban strategist Charles Landry termed downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul "a little soulless"

after his visit last year. Former *New York Times* columnist William Kristol was more blunt. He told local journalist Steve Berg that our downtowns looked as if they'd been hit by a neutron bomb; there was no one on the streets, they were all up in the skyways.

Arguments have long raged about the convenience of skyways for downtown workers versus the deadening effect they have on streetlife for everyone else. MinnPost urban design columnist Marlys Harris recently declared them one of the “9 worst urban planning moves in Twin Cities history,” but then offered a compromise solution: building steps down to street from skyways so that people can move easily from one level of downtown to another. Public artist Andrew Leicester takes this idea one step further by suggesting we add decks with sidewalk cafes to the skyways.

“There’s still an attitude here the status quo needs to be suburban office parks, subdivisions and freeways,” says Jay Corbalis, a real estate developer who works around the country.

“Minneapolis-St. Paul is behind the curve, which is why so many Big 10 graduates are flooding into Chicago where they can walk, ride trains and live a big-city life.”

**Not Quite a Big City?** Is MSP a big city along the lines of Seattle, Toronto, Boston and Chicago, or an overgrown version of Duluth or Sioux Falls? That’s the question at the heart of one of our most contentious issues today: urban density. “Getting the kind of energy, vibe and experience that people want in a city doesn’t happen without density,” explains Patrick Seeb, executive director of the St. Paul Riverfront Corporation. “People equate density with tall buildings but new developments like you see at 50th & France show you can do density in other ways.”

People here have long equated an urban atmosphere with blight, while spread-out houses with easy freeway access symbolized the “good life” as seen on TV shows like the *Brady Bunch*. But many young people today aspire to the urbane world of *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother* and *Happy Endings*. The 20th century American dream of a big house and a green lawn is not disappearing any time soon, but an increasing number of people want the choice of living in more compact, lively neighborhoods within walking distance of amenities, including convenient transit. The regions that thrive in the future will offer people both options. MSP still has a long ways to go in providing high-density, transit-friendly communities, although we’re making progress. “There’s less of a sense that we have to apologize about being a big city anymore,” remarks Sam Newberg.

**Us vs. Them.** We’ll never succeed at presenting a positive image of MSP as a whole if we continue feuding among ourselves about whether St. Paul is better than Minneapolis, the suburbs are choking the central cities or rural Minnesota always gets the short shrift from the metro area. Even the University of Minnesota seems strangely disconnected from the two cities it calls home.

We rise or fall together in the face of competition from the rest of the world. Patrick Seeb of the St. Paul Riverfront Corporation credits Mayors R.T. Rybak and Chris Coleman for mending fences between Minneapolis and St. Paul. Light rail, improved bus facilities and New Urbanist



developments in St. Louis Park, Bloomington, Richfield, Burnsville, Stillwater and other communities are beginning to blur some of the sharp distinctions between cities and suburbs.

With 60 percent of the population, MSP is obviously the epicenter of the state. But as Ann Markusen, who several years ago moved from Minneapolis to Cromwell in northern Minnesota, points out, “One of the best advantages of the Twin Cities is close proximity to some of the best outdoor recreation in the U.S.” Significant selling points for MSP stretch from the Apostle Islands to the Boundary Waters to the Lake Superior Hiking Trail to the Lutsen ski resort to the Cayuna mountain biking trails to Lake Itasca to numerous lake resorts and fishing holes and hunting grounds to the St. Croix Valley to the Root River Trail to the Mississippi Valley Driftless Area to the Blue Mounds.

**Our Distinctiveness Deficit.** “What’s iconic around here?” asks Carol Becker, who teaches public policy at Hamline University and is an elected member of the Minneapolis Board of Estimate and Taxation. “Besides the Juicy Lucy, which is just a cheeseburger turned inside out, what’s our special food?”

The IDS Center looks a lot like skyscrapers everywhere and the Walker Art Center’s Spoonbridge and Cherry is hardly an Eiffel Tower. What are we best known for? Probably the Mall of America, an impression Sam Newberg finds “embarrassing.” The overwhelming majority of its stores are chains and even local boy Snoopy has been ejected from the amusement park in favor of a cable TV channel. Is it any wonder people think of us as bland?

Part of the problem, Becker says, is our lack of reverence for the past. “We don’t look back, especially in Minneapolis. St. Paul does a better job of appreciating its history. Minneapolis has always been, ‘Tear it down and build something new.’” This detracts from the local distinctiveness that makes a place interesting.

We definitely need to develop more of an independent streak when it comes to local businesses, patronizing local landmarks instead of familiar franchises. Just because we gave birth to the world’s first modern enclosed shopping mall doesn’t excuse our relative shortage of funky, idiosyncratic, locally-owned places to shop, eat and have fun.

Let’s celebrate the Stone Arch Bridge, Nice Ride bikes, the Roller Garden rink in St. Louis Park, pond hockey, the St. Paul Farmers’ Market, the Excelsior Steamboat, bald eagles flying around town (Austin has made bats a tourist attraction), Nye’s Polonaise Room (which *Esquire* tapped as America’s best), Heimie’s Haberdashery, Hymie’s Vintage Records, Stillwater’s and Hopkins’ Main Streets, Minnehaha Falls, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s boyhood haunts, Al’s Breakfast, Lord Fletcher’s, the American Swedish Institute, Rice Park, the Loring Pasta Bar, and more.

The arts, particularly, cry out for more attention. The Fringe Festival is America’s largest non-juried arts festival in America. Jonathan Tourtellot, Geotourism editor at the *National Geographic Traveler*, notes that it was the Toronto Film Festival that first drew the world’s interest to another city once dismissed as bland. Our choice of independent and foreign films is among the best in the country. The Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts stand as two of the top art museums in the country. And looking deeper there’s a staggering breadth of

grassroots arts organizations from the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theater to The Loft Literary Center to Springboard for the Arts to Skylark Opera (specializing in operetta) to the Walker West Music Academy to the Ethnic Dance Theatre to the Minneapolis Jewish Film Festival. Standouts on the local music scene are breathtakingly expansive from the Cactus Blossoms (country) to Atmosphere (hip-hop) to Café Accordion Orchestra (Paris Musette and Colombian Cumbia) to the Rose Ensemble (choral early music).

Given that our most universally known attribute is wild swings in the weather, why not grab some attention with big-bang seasonal festivals that show off our extremes? “The Winter Carnival and Aquatennial are both good, but need some shaking up,” offers Mayor R.T. Rybak. The State Fair, The May Day Parade and Festival in Powderhorn Park and the Loppet Ski Festival all merit international attention. What about a major Midsummer Festival to capitalize on our Nordic heritage? And an International Hall of Fame, with exhibits on everything from extreme blizzards to polar explorations to the history of ice hockey as well a gloves-on “freeze chamber” that simulates 30 below and encourages snowball fights in July. Each December it could host a European-style Christmas market and an induction ceremony honoring the likes of Will Steger and Lindsey Vonn as well as non-Minnesotans like Edmund Hilary and Irving Berlin (composer of “White Christmas”).

Looking forward, planning is underway for a bid to hold a World’s Fair here in 2022, which offers a sterling opportunity to put MSP on the global map. Secretary of State Mark Ritchie is chairing the effort, with former Vice-President Walter Mondale and Governor Arne Carlson as honorary co-chairs.

**Our Near-Total Obscurity as a Travel Destination.** It’s difficult to shift perceptions of a place very few folks have ever set foot. “The biggest issue we face is that people don’t know we exist,” says Paul Sherburne, marketing manager for international travelers at the Explore Minnesota state tourist office.

This poses a missed opportunity far bigger than lost hotel and restaurant revenues. “Tourism and cultural exchange leads to trade, which leads to investment, which leads to jobs, which leads to wealth creation,” points out Michael Langely of Greater MSP. Happy tourists become prospective residents, or even if they have no plans to move here nonetheless spread the word back home. And while here, they help enliven public spaces, cultural institutions and entertainment offerings.

Our Midwestern humility may blind us to MSP’s appeal as an urbane destination. For the last two years we’ve led the rising star category of Travel + Leisure magazine’s “America’s Favorite Cities” poll, where 40,000 readers ranked 35 cities for their best qualities. Last year, they ranked us #1 for Intelligent, Cleanliness and Parks/Outdoors; #2 for Theater, #3 for Gay-Friendly. We topped vacation hotspots such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Las Vegas, Boston, Honolulu, and Washington DC.

**It’s Cold Here — Really C-c-c-c-c-c-c-o-o-l-d!** As Mark Twain famously observed, everyone talks about the weather but no one does anything about it. Talk, however, is exactly what we need to change the universally negative perceptions about our winters. The one thing people

everywhere knows about MSP is our temperatures. But cold does not automatically mean terrible. Kerri Westenberg, travel editor of the *Star Tribune* who moved here from Los Angeles, says, “We should be celebrated for winter rather than pretend it doesn’t exist.” That means encouraging skiing, skating, ice castles, snow sculpture, hot chocolate stands, holiday markets, broomball, holiday lights and anything else to break us free of self-imposed hibernation all winter. It’s hard to convince anybody this is a great place, if people hide indoors five-and-a-half months a year.

We need to talk about ourselves as the “Northern Sunbelt with blue skies for most of the winter when other places endure a dismal blanket of clouds, says local education expert Ted Kolderie. Ann Markusen has pored over data from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which show we are among the country’s sunniest places outside the Sun Belt. Indeed, our climate may actually be a sweet spot between the gray skies that generally prevail to our east and the barren brown landscapes to our west.

R.T. Rybak extols the idea of our theater of seasons, quipping “if you want kabuki weather, where nothing happens, go to California.”

Disturbingly, climate change might make Minnesota look more attractive by raising temperatures and shortening winter at the same time as erasing favorable impressions of hot weather. But polar explorer and environmentalist Will Steger cautions that global warming will also bring more deforestation, a decline in water quality, major storms, invasive species, vermin, drought and heat waves. But that’s mild compared to the sea level rise, hurricanes, water shortages, severe droughts, and interminable heat waves threatening other parts of the country.

And let’s not forget one of the least appreciated virtues of cold weather. Many of our region’s strengths have been born out of the necessity of doing things better than other places to compensate for the perceived liabilities of Minnesota winters, reminds Jon Pratt, director of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits.

## **ADVANTAGES TO BUILD UPON**

Despite all these challenges, a thorough assessment of our strengths and weaknesses against other U.S. regions shows that MSP’s glass stands closer to full than to empty. Here are some of our current assets:

### **Business & Economy**

- A well-educated workforce
- A strong creative industry sector
- A strong work ethic throughout all levels of the labor force
- A low-cost of living compared to other high-income metropolitan areas
- A diverse economy, which offers resilience in periods of economic upheaval
- Relatively low unemployment
- A hub airport with nonstop flights to 135 destinations, including Europe and Asia
- The most successful network of homegrown natural food cooperatives in the country.

### **Public Participation, Civil Society & Government**

- A vital civic sector, encompassing citizens groups and nonprofit organizations across many sectors
- A strong philanthropic sector, committed to the region
- Civic-minded citizens who show high levels of volunteerism and community engagement
- High social capital due to widespread participation in civic and religious organizations
- Progressive, efficient, transparent government
- Tax-base sharing on the regional scale, which helps poorer municipalities avoid steep decline
- Regional coordination on transportation, planning, sewers, parks and housing through the Met Council

### **Education, Arts & Recreation**

- A major research university and many well-regarded four-year and community colleges
- A vibrant, internationally recognized arts community, ranging across all genres and mediums
- A wealth of arts institutions to sustain and inspire local creativity
- Generous funding of the arts at a rate 13.5 times the national average
- A lively, nationally recognized music scene, ranging from orchestras to bar bands
- Excellent parks and trails offering access to nature in people's neighborhoods that is surpassed nowhere else in America
- Topnotch outdoor recreation at lakes, forests, prairies and other public lands
- The best network of urban bicycle trails in the country, and high levels of bike commuting
- Five major-league sports teams, plus Big 10 athletics

### **Community & Social**

- Growing ethnic and international diversity
- High rank in ratings of gay-friendly communities
- A burgeoning food scene encompassing gourmet restaurants, ethnic eateries, farmers markets, local food purveyors and food trucks
- Good housing stock with relatively few abandoned or blighted properties
- Widespread recognition as a good place to raise a family
- Plentiful sports, arts, academic and other programs for children
- High attachment to community, making it one of the hardest markets in the country to recruit people away from
- People who grew up here returning at high levels after studying or starting careers elsewhere
- Strong tradition of neighborhood involvement and identity

“So far Minneapolis-St. Paul get good marks,” says Doug Baker, CEO of Eco Lab. But he cautions that we must understand it’s not something in the water. “We need to make it happen.”

## BACK TO OUR STORY

Overall we have a good, but by no means, perfect story to tell. So how do we tell it better?

Jeff Berg, creative director at Olson, which is famed for branding campaigns commissioned by everyone from the Detroit Pistons to PepsiCo, says it's elementary marketing: "We have to figure out what makes us unique from other places. How are we different from, say, San Francisco?"

Off the top of his head, he rolls out some ideas. "Consider the dress code for most men here: flannel, jeans, boots. Does that not say hardy pioneer stock? How do we get people to consider us as a place to live? Maybe they have to ask themselves: Am I hardy (and hearty) enough? Do I want to be a pioneer of industry, live in the land where creativity is demanded? Am I looking for the easy way or the road less traveled? There's a great play on words here — Minnesota: Can you weather it?"

There are advantages to our long winters too, says Berg who grew up in Eugene, Oregon and moved here from New York City. "We huddle together in ways you don't see in other communities. We work together in civic ways to make things happen."

In a similar vein Sam Newberg, who grew up here and writes the Joe-Urban blog, says, "If I was to sum us up in one word it's ACTIVE. We're involved politically and in our communities. We ice fish and ride our bikes all winter. We open up our own brewpubs and spend the long winters discussing ideas with our friends. We're just active."



## ABOUT FOOD FOR THOUGHT

This publication was commissioned by The McKnight Foundation as part of the “Food for Thought” series — a collection of third-party reports that inform our program strategies and are shared with the fields we support. This publication is available for download at [www.mcknight.org](http://www.mcknight.org).

## ABOUT THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Minnesota-based Foundation had assets of approximately \$2 billion and granted about \$85 million in 2012.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Walljasper writes, speaks and consults about urban and community issues. He is author of the *Great Neighborhood Book* and *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons*. For many years he was editor of *Utne Reader* and now edits OnTheCommons.org. His website is [JayWalljasper.com](http://JayWalljasper.com).

## PHOTO CREDITS

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