

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

FOOD FOR THOUGHT



Jay Walljasper: A Tale of Three Cities

*Valuable lessons from Seattle, Denver, and Toronto —
regions that serve as both competitors and inspiration
for Minneapolis-St. Paul*

Commissioned by The McKnight Foundation

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Foreword

Jay Walljasper's *A Tale of Three Cities* was commissioned by The McKnight Foundation as part of our "Food for Thought" series — a collection of independent essays to help inform our understanding of the fields in which we operate and our related program strategies.

McKnight's Region & Communities program supports a variety of efforts to increase efficient and sustainable regional development for livable communities and opportunities for all to thrive. Specific strategies revolve around sustainable regional development, affordable homes for all, and economically vibrant neighborhoods. Within this work, there is no question that our grantees' and partners' homegrown ideas provide plans and action for a better future every day. MSP often lands near the top of national lists of "innovative cities," with no shortage of creative ideas to pursue regional development that is economically efficient, environmentally sound, and socially equitable.

And yet... we would be foolish to assume that we alone hold all the answers.

So as a matter of course, McKnight and our partners regularly — and necessarily — look elsewhere for fresh ideas and inspiration. Some of the most fertile ground for great ideas is found in cities with whom we're already in stiff competition for industry, workforce, tourism and business travel (Super Bowl hosting!), and more. After all, as former MIT dean Lester Thurow once said, "A competitive world offers two possibilities. You can lose. Or, if you want to win, you can change."

When looking for models to learn from, comparing apples to apples counts. So in researching *A Tale of Three Cities*, Walljasper sought urban centers that share certain commonalities with MSP. Seattle is about our size and shares a similar vibe for civic-mindedness, Denver is landlocked and an outdoor tourism destination, and Toronto offers a useful emphasis on the arts and cold weather. None are an exact match for the challenges and opportunities unique to our region, but each offers meaningful approaches and perspective that might just help MSP to change for the better and win.

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

A Tale of Three Cities

Valuable lessons from Seattle, Denver, & Toronto — regions that serve as both competitors and inspiration for Minneapolis-St. Paul

The history of the Minneapolis-St. Paul region has not been one of steady growth and prosperity. We peaked in the [census rankings](#) of largest U.S. urban centers in 1890 at number nine, ahead of Washington, Detroit and Los Angeles. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 diminished our influence as a gateway to the Pacific Coast. Amid the social unrest of the 1930s, *Fortune* magazine warned “The revolution may come from the Minneapolis gateway district” and went on to pronounce St. Paul “cramped, hilly, and stagnant... Its slums are among the worst in the land...[if] the entire city slid into the Mississippi and disappeared, it would hardly make a ripple in the economic life of the United States.”

Over the past 70 years, however, we have enjoyed unprecedented stability and a national reputation as a progressive, prosperous, pleasant place to live. But we won't maintain this enviable position by continuing to do things as we always have. The economic and cultural forces shaping our time are in flux as never before. Ideas, money, and people are moving around the world faster and faster. To stay in place today means falling behind.

It's not time to panic. But it's more important than ever to pay attention to what's going well here and what needs action. In an earlier “Food for Thought” article, I outlined what I saw as the Minneapolis-St. Paul (MSP) region's chief [assets and liabilities](#). I followed up with a second report on [bright ideas](#) from around the world that we might adopt here and a third report about the potential of the [Mississippi River](#) to boost our prospects for the future.

I am now focusing on three “peer cities” from which we can learn: Seattle, Denver, and Toronto. These places are positioning themselves for the future by capitalizing on opportunities today. We are competing with each of them for business, jobs, well-educated young workers, and international attention.

Seattle is very close to our same size and shares a similar reputation for livability, civic engagement, and a certain orderliness. Denver is a landlocked city in a remote location that thrives thanks to its surprising urban sophistication and nearby outdoor opportunities. Toronto is a cold-weather city with a reserved character and notable arts scene that was once overwhelmingly Northern European, but has become much more diverse.

While there are no easy, off-the-shelf solutions to our problems, Seattle, Denver, and Toronto each offer inspiration and practical examples to help us make sure MSP will be a good place for everyone to live, work and raise a family.

9 LESSONS FROM SEATTLE

In 1962, the world took notice of Seattle as a city on its way up when it staged a world's fair, symbolized by the futuristic Space Needle tower. By all accounts the fair, officially known as the Century 21 Exposition was a success, even turning a profit at the turnstiles with 10 million visitors.

But Seattle's future looked far from rosy 10 years later when a downturn in the aviation industry, which indirectly counted for as many as one in six jobs, plunged the region into an economic slump so severe that unemployment reached 17 percent.

Those hard times jolted the local community to get serious about diversifying and strengthening their economy, notes Bill Stafford, a former deputy mayor and founder of the [Trade Development Alliance of Greater Seattle](#). The region rebounded, he says, by taking advantage of its collaborative culture, willingness to take risks and global outlook.

Today some of the most world's most recognizable companies call Seattle home: Microsoft, Starbucks, Amazon, Nordstrom, Costco, and REI. The region is projected to generate 1.2 million new jobs by 2040.

But Seattle is known for more than its economic prowess. Pike Place market, grunge rock music, a reputation for environmental awareness, and the iconic Space Needle all put it on the map as an innovative, distinctive, and attractive place to live.

“The quality of life, arts, and outdoor lifestyle are important to our success,” Stafford underscores. “We are a high-cost area, but people keep coming here. Google is moving all kinds of staff here. Why did Howard Schultz [of Starbucks] and Jeff Bezos [of Amazon] come here to start their businesses?” And why did Bill Gates come back home from Albuquerque in 1979, bringing four-year-old Microsoft with him?

Minneapolis-St. Paul (MSP) is also a high-cost place to do business, but we're not [widely recognized](#) outside the Midwest for our strong economy and quality of life, raising questions about how we will fare over the long haul in an increasingly competitive globalized economy.

The Seattle region could be seen as the Twin Cities' slightly bigger sister. The census ranks it 15th in metropolitan population (3.9 million) while we stand one notch below at 16th (3.5 million). Both places are home to large respected state universities, substantial Scandinavian populations, sometimes disagreeable weather, and a reputation for decision-making through consensus-building. Stafford's assertion that “Seattle is the process capital of the world — issues are discussed here ad nauseam” might be disputed by folks in MSP.

Seattle is also similar to Minneapolis-St. Paul in its populist liberal political tradition. Strong opposition to economic inequality has been voiced throughout town from the 1919 Seattle

general strike (when labor unions shut down the city) to the 1999 Battle of Seattle protests against corporate globalization (when activists shut down a World Trade Organization meeting) to last November when socialist Kshama Sawant was elected to the city council on a platform of raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. (In Minneapolis, socialist Ty Moore narrowly lost a city council race the same day.) Nonetheless, economic inequality endures in both regions. Segregation of African Americans and the achievement gap in city schools were cited as major problems facing Seattle by a number of those I interviewed on a recent visit.

Here are some ideas MSP can borrow from Seattle in a range of fields:

1 Look Outward

“We’re a port city,” Stafford reminds, “and that has shaped us. Forty percent of jobs here are linked to the international economy. Kids in Seattle schools speak 76 different languages at home” (which is actually about the same as MSP schools).

Wandering around Seattle the city’s tangible connection to the big world on the other side of Puget Sound was apparent. You find newspaper boxes for several Chinese-focused publications on street corners. Seattle Center, site of the World’s Fair, advertises upcoming events celebrating the cultures of Turkey, Italy, Tibet, West Africa, Croatia, and France as well as a Japanese cherry blossom festival and the Vietnamese Tet holiday. Among fast food offerings around town, you find Doner, a Berlin-style Turkish kebab shop, and Piroshki, specializing in Russian meat pies.

Seattle’s global view takes in more than economics, says Kelly Mann, director of the Urban Land Institute Northwest. “We’re outward looking, always asking how we can better. Why can’t we be more like Vancouver? Why can’t we be more like San Francisco?”

As an inland region, Minneapolis-St. Paul has historically focused less on what happens elsewhere. Even today pointing to Portland or New York as a model for MSP (not to mention Copenhagen or Shanghai) can sometimes elicit an “I-don’t-care” stare. That doesn’t serve us well in an interconnected world.

2 Expand Light Rail In All Directions

Seattle and MSP share the dubious distinction of being latecomers to rail transit. Places like Salt Lake City, Sacramento, Edmonton, Buffalo, Dallas, St. Louis, Calgary, San Jose, Baltimore, San Diego, Guadalajara (Mexico), and Bergen County (New Jersey) built new train lines ahead of us.

Seattle, however, has been quicker to catch up.

A short light rail line running through downtown Tacoma opened in 2003, a year ahead of our Blue Line, and they inaugurated a second line between the airport and downtown Seattle in 2009. That line is now being extended to the University of Washington and plans are underway to expand light rail service south to Tacoma, east to Redmond (home of Microsoft) and north to Lynwood. Additionally,

Seattle opened two commuter rail lines in 2000 and 2003, well ahead of the North Star Line in 2009.

3 Build a Streetcar Network

An ambitious streetcar system is also in the works. The South Lake Union line began running in 2007 and a second streetcar line debuts this year, with a third line planned as well as extensions to existing lines. The South Lake Union line helped fuel a real estate boom in a derelict industrial area near downtown, which now sports headquarters for Amazon, REI, and the Tommy Bahama clothing chain. Amazon is so convinced that transit connections are essential to its business that it paid for an additional streetcar to be put into service to reduce wait times for its employees. Even Microsoft, which popularized the isolated suburban campus as a corporate ideal, has moved some operations to South Lake Union, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is located nearby.

4 Beef Up Bus Service

Opponents of light rail in both regions touted better bus service as a more efficient alternative to trains, but in Seattle they did more than talk. “For a long time we were held up as the country’s best bus-only transit system,” explains Alan Durning, executive director of the Sightline Institute, a sustainability think tank for the northern Pacific Coast region.

Hopping around the city by bus on a Sunday evening, usually a black hole in transit schedules, I never waited very long at a stop. The buses I rode were comfortable and filled with people of all races, ages and social classes. Even while building many rail projects, Seattle also beefed up bus service in the city and suburbs with six “Rapid Ride” lines, which incorporate many of the advantages of rail systems: frequent service, fewer stops, distinctly recognizable stations, and signs that announce the next arrival. Many buses run through downtown in a 1.3-mile tunnel, which significantly speeds service. Unlike most regions, Seattle did not slash bus service after the 2008 economic crisis but is planning cuts now to fill a \$75 million shortfall.

5 Make Walking Less Dangerous

Despite steep hills and steady rains, Seattle tops MSP when it comes to walking. The Census Bureau’s American Community Survey finds 8 percent of commuters in the city of Seattle travel by foot compared to 7 percent in Minneapolis and 6 percent in St. Paul.

[Walk Friendly Communities](#), a national organization pushing for better walking conditions, singles out the city of Seattle for its highest-level platinum honors. (Minneapolis must settle for gold along with 9 other cities.) The organization cites accomplishments such as: 1) the Neighborhood Traffic Calming Program, which installed more than 1,000 traffic circles, plus numerous [road diets](#), and other improvements to help motorists follow speed limits; 2) the Aggressive Driver Response Team, where neighborhoods work with police to curb dangerous drivers; and 3) 2012’s Vulnerable User Law, which zeroes in on negligent but not criminal traffic errors that injure or kill pedestrians and bicyclists.

Jen Cole of the local pedestrian advocacy program [Feet First](#) remarks that the #1 ranking surprised them, since some outlying city neighborhoods streets still lack sidewalks. She praises the city’s use of red light cameras, which photographically nab and fine drivers running red lights in school zones, with the proceeds going to fund safety improvements in the area. (Unfortunately, red light cameras were ruled illegal by the Minnesota Supreme Court.) On my own jaunts through the city, I noted approvingly 20 mph speed zones on some residential streets and many 4-way stop signs in neighborhoods like the International District, both of which are a boost to walkers’ sense of security.

6 Grow a Market District

In the 1960s, the beloved Pike Place Market looked doomed. The mayor, city council, and large segments of the business community supported plans to demolish it to build a hockey arena with a parking garage, office buildings, and hotel. A group of citizens pushed back, however, and in 1971 the market was declared an historic district. Now it’s the pulsing heart of the city and the most iconic symbol of Seattle. An entire food district with specialty shops and restaurants has grown up on the surrounding streets.

While St. Paul boasts a farmer’s market befitting the agricultural bounty of our Midwest, the Minneapolis Farmers’ Market — hidden in the shadow of a freeway — is a missed opportunity. It could be improved through better connections to local farmers and to the rest of the city. Both the Minneapolis and St. Paul markets need to become year-round affairs, a move that some day would look as brilliant to us as saving Pike Place Market does to Seattleites today.

7 Create Conservation District

The Capitol Hill neighborhood in Seattle is historic, but not in the way you’d expect. First there’s no capitol, that’s 60 miles away in Olympia. As Seattle’s longtime countercultural Mecca, the historical ambience here is more funky than pristine — think a tavern where grunge bands Nirvana and Pearl Jam hung out rather than painstakingly restored Victorian houses.

That’s no reason why the neighborhood’s character should be simply wiped away, says Mark Huppert, a real estate developer who is now senior director of the Preservation Green Lab, a research-and-development team of the National Trust for Historic Preservation based in Seattle. Local preservation activists pushed to enact an innovative tool known as a “conservation overlay” districts in Capitol Hill. Conservation districts offer different protections than historic districts, focusing more on maintaining overall character and less on particular buildings. “The goal is not to stop development, but to help think differently about the historic resources here. Growth is going to come here regardless — but we want some protections in place,” Huppert says

Walking me through the Pike-Pine conservation district, he points out how tax credits, bonuses for extra density, and other tools encourage developers to incorporate old facades into new projects and keep the fine-grained urban fabric rather than erecting buildings that overwhelm their surroundings.

Minneapolis is currently debating a proposal to create conservation districts, which some people worry will become an impediment to density. The experience in Seattle shows that such regulations don't necessarily obstruct development, but actually aid it by reassuring people that new projects will fit in with old neighborhoods.

8 Take the "Sub" Out of Suburb

Bellevue (pop. 122,000), once a bedroom burg for commuters, is making moves to become a city in its own right. A downtown district with gleaming office towers, high-rise condos, high-speed bus service, and hearty nightlife rises like the Emerald City out of a tangle of subdivisions and strip malls. Confirmed urban partisans might scoff at the chain stores and 5-lane roads, but everyone else seems to appreciate an opportunity for street life and pizzazz, if only for a few blocks. As many Millennials (and quite a few Baby Boomers) forsake outlying cul-de-sacs for downtown cultural districts, Bellevue offers ideas on reinvigorating suburban life — especially after light rail arrives in a few years.

9 Reinvent the Mall as a Community Center

Downtown is not the only surprising spot in Bellevue. Crossroads, a 1970s-era shopping mall has reinvented itself as something approaching a town center.

You notice something different about this mall immediately. Businesses have grown up in the parking lot — a veterinarian office, cupcake shop, movie theaters — connected to the main mall with crosswalks, as if these traffic lanes were downtown streets. Inside, you hear a jazz band from the local middle school playing. (A sign says African dancers will be on stage next week.) All the outlets in the food court — Korean BBQ, Mexican, sushi, Middle Eastern, pizza — are local restaurateurs, not fast food chains. There's an Old Navy, Jo-Ann's Fabrics, and Pier One, of course, but also a grocery store, used book store, public library and branch of the city hall, where business can be conducted in Spanish, Chinese, Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu. This is not your mother's mall. The lesson here is that to survive, shopping centers must become places to do many things besides shopping.

6 ½ LESSONS FROM DENVER

Denver is not the first place we expect to find fresh ideas for making sure the Minneapolis-St. Paul (MSP) region continues to thrive. We look to economic and cultural powerhouses like New York and the Bay Area, or to cities lauded for livability and sophistication like Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver. Historically Americans outside the Mountain States think of Denver as the place we claim our luggage and rent a car before skiing or mountain hiking trips. Well, not anymore. The Mile-High City boasts some enviable assets that we ignore at our peril.

It's the top region in the country for attracting educated people aged 25-34, according to a Brookings Institute study, which ranked MSP 36th. And it appears that many of the sought-after creative types flocking to Denver might once have moved to Minneapolis-St. Paul. A lot of Denver's newcomers hail from the Midwest, say local observers. Indeed, a conversation over eggs at my bed and breakfast one morning revealed that three fellow guests had moved to the Denver region from MSP.

“The outdoor lifestyle and livable qualities here are a big attraction — similar to Minnesota,” says Tom Clark, executive of the Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation. He ought to know, since he grew up in Canby, Minnesota, and attended college in Moorhead before embarking on a career promoting Denver as a great place to do business. Two years ago, the *Denver Post* named Clark [“Business Person of the Year,”](#) citing his role in attracting to town a new U.S. Patent Office, the relocation of several corporate headquarters, the addition of direct flights to Tokyo, and hundreds of new jobs at Hitachi Data Systems and the Kaiser Permanente health care organization.

This is quite a turnaround from the 1980s, when a crash in the energy business threatened to turn Denver into a ghost of its former self. The downtown office vacancy rate was 31 percent. “You could shoot a cannonball down 16th Street after 5 p.m. and not hit anyone, not even a beggar because there was no one to beg from,” remembers Clark.

The region also suffered the second worst air pollution in the country. The city of Denver's population dropped almost ten percent between 1970 and 1990. Since then it's grown by 32 percent. What happened?

Denver climbed back by shaking off the dust of its frontier past, and creating a strong, proud urban identity. A forest of cranes constructing new lofts and high-rise apartment buildings can be seen all around the downtown area. New parks and pathways flank the Platte River, and six light rail lines spread out across the region. Bike share stations dot the center city. The Denver area is attracting clusters of companies in well-paying industries like biosciences, aerospace, and wind power.

The city is strikingly diverse, with 48 percent of residents being people of color and 23 percent speaking Spanish at home. Denver is even making a name for itself in the arts. The Santa Fe

district boasts numerous galleries, theaters, the Art Students League, arts organization offices, studio space, a host of ethnic eateries, and the Museo de las Americas along a three-block stretch just south of downtown.

“Denver’s attracting people by being the best urban place we can be,” explains Thomas Gougeon, president of the local Gates Family Foundation and a former city official and developer. “That’s not a luxury, it’s how you find your role in the world. Even the suburbs now want downtowns, they want transit, they want density, they want public spaces, they want diversity, they want culture.”

Here are some pillars of Denver’s success:

1 Invest Heavily Downtown

A local point of pride, repeated to me several times during my visit, is that Denver’s downtown is 10th largest in the country even though the metro area ranks 21st in population. Downtown is full of people on the streets day and night, even in the sub-zero weather when I was in town.

It’s Tami Door’s job to keep things lively. As president of the [Denver Downtown Partnership](#) (DDP) she’s in charge of everything from throwing a New Year’s Eve party for 75,000 to running an outdoor ice rink that drew 44,000 skaters last winter to organizing 150 events drawing 5,500 people and 650 companies during Denver [StartUp Week](#), a celebration of entrepreneurship.

“Nothing you see in downtown Denver is an accident,” she says. “There isn’t a tree or public space that wasn’t thought about methodically.”

The Downtown Partnership focuses on keeping people happy with programs to expand park facilities for better gathering places, to ease the way for starting new businesses, to improve walking for better connections around town, and to build protected bike lanes for safer, smoother cycling. (Denver was one of six cities that recently beat out Minneapolis for the [Green Lane Project](#)’s pilot program to create the next generation of bike infrastructure.) Last fall DDP launched [City Build](#), an informal network of people in their 20s and 30s that get together online and in person to swap ideas about making Denver better.

2 Collaborate. Collaborate. Collaborate

Tom Clark, who is in charge of boosting business throughout the Denver area, says “the urban center is the shop window for the whole region — even people in the suburbs see the advantage of making it strong.” That’s just one sign of a carefully cultivated collaborative culture that grew out of the 1980s economic bust. “Things were desperate then,” he says. Cities and suburbs knew they couldn’t keep squabbling among themselves.

There are now two rules that govern business and civic leaders here, Clark outlines: “You can’t steal from other communities and you can’t speak ill of your neighbors.” But once a firm has

agreed to come to the Denver area, he says, folks will do their mightiest to get it located in their town.

3 Think Big About Rail

Thomas Gougeon credits a coalition of regional mayors for 122 miles of light rail and commuter rail lines now running or under construction throughout the Denver area. The \$4.7 billion proposal based on a 0.4 percent hike in property taxes approved by Denver region voters in 2004 was strongly opposed by then governor Bill Owens but adamantly supported by the Metro Mayors Caucus. There are now six light rail lines heading downtown and a new one slated for 2016, plus three commuter rail routes expected to serve the newly remodeled downtown Union Station in 2016, with another coming in 2018. Together this marks the most ambitious new transit system built in America since the Washington subway in the 1970s, even if some of the project's ambitious goals have been slowed by the recession and accompanying dip in property tax revenues.

“The 20- to 35-year-olds, they're not big on cars,” Tom Clark points out. “They want to ride trains to work and entertainment. From an economic point of view, if you can offer them a number of ways to get around you've got a great advantage.”

4 Welcome Newcomers

Besides its urban amenities and 300+ days of sunshine a year, Denver has become a magnet for newcomers because it makes them feel at home. Michael Leccese, director of the Urban Land Institute-Colorado moved here from Washington, D.C., and remembers how different it felt. “You could go into someone's office and say ‘This is who I am and here's what I do.’ It's a really friendly place. Everyone here is more or less an immigrant.”

Tami Door, originally from Detroit, concurs, “The sense of community is great at all levels. If you have an idea, somebody will listen and take you seriously.”

5 Create City Districts from Scratch

Denver has become a national leader in the movement to create new places from the ground up that embody the qualities we cherish in traditional neighborhoods.

Stapleton, a massive new project occupying most of what was Denver's international airport until 1995, is one of the largest redevelopment initiatives in America. The result is a cluster of charming, handsome neighborhoods, which fall a bit short of the urban ideal due to the lack of nearby shops and public life. An agreeable business district is tucked in one corner of the community, but too far to walk for the vast majority of residents. Closer to a classic city setting is Village Garden, a much smaller project on the site of the old Elitch Gardens amusement park that is only a short stroll from a busy commercial street.

The most promising project I saw is Belmar, built on the site of what was the Villa Italia mall in suburban Lakewood. It bustles with the energy of a downtown thanks to walkable streets filled with diversions such as public art, a pub, a town commons, cinemas, and a bowling alley as well as upscale shops. It feels authentic as a place. Parking is accommodated in a series of small lots and ramps, which for the most part do not detract from the ambience. Nearby housing and office space (some appropriately urban, some not) provide the key ingredient for an urban experience — a mix of uses within walking distance. Most visitors drive here although there is a shuttle to the nearest light rail station. The most important takeaway from Belmar is that it's possible to transform an auto-dominated suburban landscape to a place where people matter as much as cars.

5 $\frac{1}{2}$ Boost Public Education (Although There Are No Easy Answers)

A possible downside to all the talented people moving to Denver, wonders Gougeon (who moved here from Philadelphia), is whether it contributes to the achievement gap because well-educated newcomers scoop up the best jobs — which is good for the economy but not for the region's disadvantaged residents. MSP is not alone in facing a stark racial disparity in economic and educational outcomes.

Reducing the achievement gap throughout Colorado is one mission of the Gates Family Foundation that Gougeon heads. “We’re closing the gap in Denver schools,” he explains, “but at a pace that will take decades to catch up. About half of all poor kids will not graduate from high school, and only one in 10 will graduate from a four year college.”

City schools are seeing a jump in test scores, and in a period when public school enrollment is shrinking in many cities Denver is showing the biggest gains of any big city district in the country. Both trends are explained in part by a switch to neighborhood schools within the context of a citywide choice system as well as the city's growing middle-class population. However Myron Orfield, who charts education trends across the country at the University of Minnesota Law School's Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, says Denver is one of the most rapidly re-segregating school districts in the country.

6 Vitalize Public Housing

Disparities in achievement among low-income students cannot be solved solely in the classroom. The home environment exerts a big influence on kids' success in school and beyond. That's one reason for the Denver Housing Authority's Healthy Living Initiative, which promotes fitness, good nutrition, and social well being as steps to a better life.

This philosophy is showcased at [Mariposa](#), a new community just south of downtown where 278 dilapidated public housing units are in the process of being replaced by attractive mixed income apartment buildings (1/3 market rate, 1/3 subsidized housing, 1/3 public housing) that Housing Authority senior developer Kimball Crangles says is designed to help close “the gap in education and job opportunity caused by the cycle of poverty.”

Education and employment services are available to residents, together with cooking classes and plots in a community garden for healthier eating. The DHA's [Osage Café](#) features wholesome meals prepared and served by local students, who acquire culinary and work experience that can open doors in the growing hospitality industry as well as overall employment skills.

Buildings, streets, and public spaces around Mariposa are designed to maximize physical activity. Walking for transportation and recreation is encouraged by wider than usual sidewalks and traffic calming devices to prevent motorists from speeding. A redeveloped park has been installed with fitness stations. Each apartment has an indoor rack for storing bikes. An innovative project in one of the newest buildings entices residents to take the stairs over the elevator by reinventing the traditional open staircase (to meet modern fire codes) equipped with a whimsical light and music show that begins whenever you climb up or down.

6 LESSONS FROM TORONTO

For a peek at the future of American cities — if current trends continue — look at Toronto.

While the population of the metropolitan area is racing toward six million, the urban core of Toronto nonetheless remains an easy-going place where locals have the option of living in tidy neighborhoods of single houses and duplexes or sleek high-rise apartments looking out over the blue of Lake Ontario. Transportation choices abound — a speedy subway, streetcars on all major streets, commuter trains that carry 187,000 passengers daily, private autos, and a growing numbers of bicycles as well walking, which is a popular and congenial pastime despite the chilly winters. So many new parks, public spaces, offices, and condos are popping up along the waterfront that they seem to constitute a city all on their own.

The solid but not necessarily fancy neighborhoods of the pre-World War II city have become increasingly popular, to the point where there are no concentrations of poverty anymore. The downtown, heavily redeveloped in a 1970s aesthetic, is nothing to shout about but the neighborhood “main streets” are a delight, packed with useful and interesting shops, most of them locally owned. It ranks as one of North America’s best food towns, and the selection of art galleries, museums, theaters, music clubs, and concert halls stirs the imagination.

You really feel part of the future here walking down these streets alongside young people of all racial backgrounds. Forty-six percent of residents in the metropolitan area are [foreign-born](#), not even counting children of immigrants. You can tour the world in a single day, visiting Little India, Little Portugal, two Little Italy’s, Koreatown, Greektown, a number of Chinatowns and then hit the Kensington Street Market for a taste of the city’s Latin American, Middle Eastern, Tibetan, Jewish, Hungarian, Rastafarian, and countercultural flavor. While ethnic enclaves spice the city’s atmosphere, people of all backgrounds freely mingle. My most recent visit happened to coincide with Valentine’s Day and when my wife Julie and I celebrated at a cozy Italian restaurant, we appeared to be the only couple in the place who shared the same ethnic heritage.

That’s not to say problems don’t exist. One urban planner has described the Toronto region as Vienna surrounded by Phoenix, meaning a walkable, thriving core city surrounded by vast tracts of sprawl. When a customs agent at the airport asked the reason for my visit to Canada and I replied that I was researching a story about what American cities could learn from Toronto, he scoffed, “Learn from Toronto when we haven’t built a new transit line in a generation?”

The growing wealth of the center city has pushed lower-income people to inner-ring suburbs, where resentments fester. And that brings us to Rob Ford, the embattled mayor who was caught smoking crack on video but nonetheless remains in office and popular with some voters who cheer his populist posturing against urban elites.

Ford would not be Toronto’s mayor except that the city merged with its close-in suburbs a few years ago. (Wealthier outlying suburbs are not part of the city.) Ford won 47 percent of the vote, carrying nearly every precinct in what were once suburbs while his opponents swept all those in

the center of town. Ford's political capital has been sapped by scandals, but his critics have not been able to extract him from City Hall.

“Rob Ford is the backlash to the new Toronto,” says *Toronto Star* urban affairs reporter Christopher Hume, asking, “Where would you rather be poor? Downtown Toronto or out in the suburbs where there isn't much in terms of services or transit.”

All the markers of urban success I found in central Toronto — the energy, the youthfulness, the multicultural hipness — must make people who can't afford to live there feel left out. *Toronto Life* magazine describes the city's divide this way: “Downtowners look at the suburbs and see small-minded rednecks who imperiled the city by electing a crackhead mayor. Suburbanites see a downtown of entitled, pampered snobs who hog the city's wealth.”

In some ways, Toronto and Minneapolis-St. Paul (MSP) match up closely. Both are cold weather cities, with a reputation for civility, efficiency, and a certain cautiousness in their municipal personality. Both enjoy stable, diverse local economies, where no one industry dominates. And both were hailed for “high quality of life” in the 1970s, a time when the prospects for big cities were viewed skeptically.

But there are enormous differences too. Toronto is the largest city and economic capital of an entire nation. Almost half the metropolitan population is foreign-born, which fosters local connections to virtually every corner of the world. We are not experiencing the rapid population growth, booming real estate prices and accompanying gentrification at anywhere near the same level as Toronto. And the simple fact that Toronto is located in Canada means it plays by different rules in social service programs, immigration policy, arts funding, and land use planning.

Here are areas where the Minneapolis-St. Paul region (MSP) can learn from Toronto's remarkable success and the ensuing backlash.

1 Pay Attention to Unintended Consequences of Urban Revival

Continuing urban revival in Minneapolis and St. Paul does not necessarily mean suburbs will wither, or suburban dwellers will become fueled by rage. Metropolitan success is not a zero sum game, as the example of cities from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco attests. But Toronto's experience should remind us to pay attention to: 1) the impact of gentrification; 2) the need for urban necessities like transit and good public spaces in suburbs; and 3) the paramount importance of urban-suburban cooperation.

“We are facing the problems of success. So the issue for the future is how do you densify the inner-ring suburbs,” remarks Ken Greenberg, Toronto's former Director of Urban Design and Architecture who has also done extensive work for the University of Minnesota and St. Paul.

2 Don't Rest on Your Laurels

A significant factor in Toronto's stark urban-suburban divide is that "the city has rested on its laurels," explains Emily Munroe, program director of 8-80 Cities, an organization working to create more livable cities around the world. Munroe notes that transit expansion has been scant since the 1970s, with only modest subway extensions into the suburbs and no new streetcar or light rail lines developed until recently. Even the sidewalk network trails off beyond the urban center.

That's why Ford's campaign vow that "the war on the car is over" and his embrace of an expensive suburban subway project (instead of an extensive light rail network favored by the retiring progressive mayor) resonated with many voters. But Greenberg notes, "We've reached the point of no return — new roads are not going to solve the problems of congestion."

3 Cultivate Streetlife

Like beloved places in Europe or Asia or Latin America, a lot of Toronto's public life takes place on the street — even in the winter months when MSP largely hibernates. The city's lifeblood are the "main streets" — commercial corridors criss-crossing town with miles of small shops, rarely interrupted by parking lots. Regular streetcar service and narrow road widths keep traffic speeds down, which incites more people to use the (wider) sidewalks as a town square where they can hang out. Narrowing streets, adding streetcars, and creating parking maximums for businesses (rather than the minimums we have today) would make great strides for enlivening neighborhoods in MSP.

That won't happen overnight, so in the meantime we should loosen the regulations and cost for events where people take over the streets. "We have a tremendous number of arts and neighborhood festivals," says Peter Sobchak, editor of *Building* magazine. "We're very permissive about street culture. If you want to do something in the streets, just go get a permit. You'll be supported."

4 Help Immigrants Feel at Home

"Toronto is the most diverse city in the world," explains Laidlaw Foundation director Jihad Aliweiwi, a Palestinian immigrant who moved here 25 years ago. Miami, he notes, is home to more foreign-born residents but most are from Latin America while Toronto welcomes large numbers from China, India, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Latin America.

"There's no equivalent of the sentiment where immigrants are seen as a problem," says urban planner Ken Greenberg, who himself emigrated from New York City. Indeed, many residents believe the city's international dimension positions it well in the global economy and numerous immigrants bring entrepreneurial skills to start new businesses.

"A supply of young immigrants brings vitality, inspiration, new ideas, and new energy that makes Toronto very special," says Greenberg. "People are not under any pressure to shed their

culture and language here. That has served us well. Toronto’s unique character attracts people from all over the world to live in relative harmony,” he states.

That doesn’t happen automatically. “Part of the reason that immigrants succeed here is that they are provided with the resources and opportunities to succeed, especially in the first three years,” says Aliweiwi.

The frontline for these efforts are found in a network of more than 30 [neighborhood centers](#) across the city, which focus on three areas:

- 1) Information and orientation about essential services such as schools, banking, translation services and tax registration.
- 2) Language training, both formal classroom instruction and informal cultural immersion experiences.
- 3) Job search workshops, covering the ABCs of the Canadian job market and practical skills like composing resumes and getting accreditation. “It’s about how you market yourself to get the best job for your skills and experience,” says Aliweiwi, who notes that many of these programs are available to Canadian-born citizens too.

5 Make Winter Warmer for Newcomers

“Ninety-nine percent of immigrants aren’t prepared for winter,” Aliweiwi estimates. “The neighborhood centers show them how to dress for the cold and how to put a snowsuit on a kid. How to ski and especially how to skate. We want them to become as fluent in Canada’s national game as in English. I’m amazed how many people from hot places like Pakistan and India come out to play hockey.”

6 Invite an Immigrant Family For Thanksgiving

Another successful effort in uniting people of all backgrounds is the tradition of some Canadian families to invite new immigrants over for Thanksgiving dinner. “As an immigrant this gives you a sense that this is a place you want to be part of — it excites the shared civic spirit,” Aliweiwi recalls.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Exploring these three cities reminded me of MSP's strengths, too. Our extensive park systems and off-road bicycle trails beats anything I saw in Seattle, Denver, or Toronto, offering us remarkably easy access to outdoor recreation. Wonky but worthwhile achievements like regional tax base sharing and the wide-angle focus of the Metropolitan Council would benefit Seattle or Denver.

And just as important to our day-to-day lives, Seattle ought to envy our sunshine, Denver our natural green landscapes, and Toronto our mayors.

In truth, my research shows the number one concern about MSP's future among many people — the achievement gap in education and income between whites and people of color — also haunts Seattle and Denver, which provide no ready answers under current economic and political conditions. Even Toronto is seeing growing social divisions based on income.

Overall, what struck me most in my travels to these peer cities is the transformative role that transit and well-planned urban density play in their success. I came home more convinced than ever of the importance of building an extensive light-rail/streetcar network and creating more neighborhoods with a big city ambience.

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.

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ABOUT THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. Through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, we use our resources to attend, unite, and empower those we serve. Program interests include regional economic and community development, Minnesota’s arts and artists, early literacy, youth development, Midwest climate and energy, Mississippi River water quality, neuroscience, international crop research, and community-building in Southeast Asia. Our primary geographic focus is the state of Minnesota, with significant support also directed to strategies throughout the U.S. and in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.

Founded in 1953 and endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Minnesota-based Foundation had assets of approximately \$2 billion and granted about \$86 million in 2013.

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