

# Developing the New Barn-Raising Concept— An Englishman’s Visit to Minnesota

By Gareth Potts

In 2012, I took the summer off from my post as a policy advisor in the U.K. government’s Office for Civil Society and came to the United States with the support of a German Marshall Fund Fellowship. I wanted to see how U.S. cities (local government, nonprofits, foundations, and business) were sustaining community and civic assets such as parks, libraries, and art museums. The Twin Cities was one of my three case study metro areas through a visiting fellowship at CURA arranged by Jay Clark. (I also visited Baltimore, Maryland, and Detroit, Michigan.)

The United States has much higher levels of philanthropy, volunteering, and local government autonomy, and it was how these were applied to assets that I was looking to see up close—within the United States the Twin Cities stands out for high levels of voluntarism and corporate social responsibility. Aided by Jay and others, I managed to pack some 60 interviews into my month-long stay in Minnesota.

The core product has taken the form of a toolkit entitled *The New Barn-Raising*. The title refers to the ways in which a range of community stakeholders can all play a role in sustaining assets.

The toolkit focuses upon three key areas:

**1. Raising Awareness:** The United States shows the value of getting away from 11<sup>th</sup>-hour protests against cuts and instead building a sustained evidence base for assets—with funders, voters, and users. Examples from Twin Cities nonprofits, Minneapolis Swims, and Frogtown Gardens figure prominently in the toolkit, as does the role of university support with building the evidence base (needless to say CURA gets a mention here).

I also saw the array of marketing techniques directed at existing and potential users. Methods range from eye-catching freeway billboards for the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) to home-made signs. I do not ever recall having

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**Frogtown Gardens in St. Paul sold buttons/badges to raise money and awareness for a planned 13-acre park, nature sanctuary, and urban farming demonstration center.**

seen roadside signs advertising assets to me in U.K. cities. The DIA’s Inside-Out program also installs replicas of its paintings at strategic city locations. There are apps (of Minneapolis public art) and maps (of Baltimore’s Druid Hill Park). In Baltimore kids are engaged through a zoomobile that visits schools and I-Spy booklets on parks. Asset managers can also draw people in—the Detroit Red Wings hockey team hosting a practice at a park rink or the bar-disco in Baltimore’s Walters Art Museum.

Important in all this is that not everything has been expensive. Nor has it all been done by government—companies, friends groups, and others have been involved. A Detroit marketing firm’s genial hoax “book-burning” campaign helped save the Troy Library and advanced the firm’s reputation.

**2. Raising Money:** Whilst not immune from asset spending cuts and restraints, U.S. cities have various dedicated taxes to help—on residential and

commercial property, on income, and on sale of goods, services, and property. On top of this are powers to use public bond financing and tax credits for donations to nonprofits.

For a Brit this is hard to believe—taxation is heavily centralized and municipal bonds almost unheard of. Powers were announced recently whereby the only real local tax (a property levy known as Council Tax) can be raised by over 2% if a local referendum votes for it. Amongst the most impressive U.S. examples was the Legacy Amendment in Minnesota. This had not only provided money that is outside annual budget procedures but had also provided large-scale, if periodic, debate; so money and awareness get raised simultaneously. That the measure was the result of collaboration between supporters of different types of assets was also important; different asset types need to lobby together.

I was also struck by how numerous city-owned assets are now leased to, and managed by, charities and social enterprises, creating potential for new sources of funding and greater freedoms for managers. This is definitely a desired direction of travel for the United Kingdom, and a few local authorities are dipping their toes in the waters. In St. Paul, for example, Joy of the People has taken on a city recreation center and runs an innovative soccer program; it accesses various grants and fees (balanced with bursaries) to sustain itself. Some U.S. transfers, however, are rushed alternatives to closure, making external funds especially hard to come by even with the United States’s much bigger foundation scene. Prosperous Baltimore County has the best of both worlds; its recreation centers are taxpayer funded but management is contracted to a (nonprofit) Y.

**3. Raising Help:** Volunteers can enhance assets in many ways; my research helped bring home the distinction between supplanting and supplementary volunteering. In Detroit, 100 or so smaller city parks are now tended



**Minneapolis City Council bought four major downtown theaters (including the State Theatre - pictured) that were either closed or moribund. The city issued bonds to fund improvements and then handed management to a new Hennepin Theatre Trust.**



**Soccer sessions run by Joy of the People, the city of St. Paul's nonprofit service partner at the South St. Anthony Recreation Center**

by local groups and businesses (a few even run programs such as yoga and sports). In Baltimore the Power in Dirt initiative has seen more than 700 vacant city-owned lots taken on for use as small gardens and parks. Despite the similarities, the former is filling in for cuts (supplanting), whereas the latter is doing things not previously done (supplementing).

Supplanting is limited by the skill needs of many posts; many asset management roles require at least a specialist university degree such as park management or museology. Baltimore's wonderful nonprofit-run Village Learning Place, which grew out of a closed city branch, has its share of volunteers but still needs a professional librarian.

Supplementing is more about willingness: serving on user panels or as docents in museums; tenants co-managing recreation centers; coaching and refereeing in park sports leagues; helping with friends groups; assisting reading in local libraries; helping the elderly at local senior centers to Skype relatives.

All types of volunteering need managing, which means investment. The Power in Dirt initiative is overseen by a Chief Service Officer who, aided by a small team, enlists support from key city departments on all initiatives in Baltimore's Cities of Service program. A draft of my report included recommendations that this be copied in U.K. cities but it was announced a week before my report came out that this concept was being implemented.

### **New Barn-Raising**

The involvement of lots of actors, over and above local government, was shown to have additional benefits in terms of greater scrutiny and awareness of assets and, ultimately, therefore, their quality. In addition, fundraising activity can often be very social in nature—social capital is drawn upon and built.

The toolkit offers a useful framework for thinking about sustaining assets and lots of practical examples of how to go about this. The broader framework can even be applied to other public services such as policing and education. I hope it is of use to those in the Twin Cities, in the United States, and in my own home country.

Since my own fellowship concluded, my (American) wife and I have now relocated from London and I am trying to develop the assets work. Last year this development meant a webinar program with 28 presentations from 10 countries – including the afore-mentioned Hennepin Theatre Trust and Joy of the People. More details of the toolkit and webinar recordings are available at [www.thenewbarnraising.com](http://www.thenewbarnraising.com).

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