THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Expanding opportunities in America's cities

Speech by Rip Rapson:

Milwaukee's Moment: Community Progress through Planning and Process

February 13, 2017

Plenary address delivered during the annual meeting of the Greater Milwaukee Committee in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Thank you, Mayor Barrett, for such a gracious introduction. It is inspiring to witness – even if from afar – your extraordinary efforts on behalf of the citizens of this great city.[1] Your administration's ambitions for Milwaukee are exciting and inspiring. There is a sense of the boundless possible here.

I also want to thank Julia Taylor, Ellen Gilligan, Ralph Hollmon and the Greater Milwaukee Committee—including GMC Milwaukee United Co-Chairs Alex Molinaroli, Greg Wesley, and Linda Gorens-Levey[2]— for including me in your gathering. The GMC is an exemplary organization. Over the years it has provided Kresge with strong and reliable ground-wire to guide our investments here. I have the privilege of visiting lots of cities, and not many are endowed with such strong and courageous civic leadership. And the list becomes smaller yet when you factor in your vision for growth and equity.

It is easy to overstate the proposition that the great cities of America's heartland find themselves at a watershed moment. But the proposition is true, and important. It is in the Detroits and Rochesters and St. Louises – and Milwaukees – of our country that we are incubating strategies for the reclamation of abandoned industrial land, the diversification of our local economic base through new forms of entrepreneurialism, the exploration of new forms of distributive leadership among the public, private, philanthropic, and nonprofit sectors, the reweaving of a diverse, inclusive, immigrant-rich social fabric. Places like Milwaukee are demonstrating that it is at the city level that we can create a machinery of problem-smashing that is at once effective and nonpartisan. That was true before the election, and it will be true after the election.

By some odd serendipity, I've had the pleasure of coming to Milwaukee in five-year increments over the past 20 years. I don't know how it looks to a Milwaukeean, but to an outsider, the differences are breathtaking: the waterfront; the cultural vibrancy and the power of creative placemaking; the sense of vitality in the core with the growth in jobs,[3] entrepreneurship[4] and millennials.[5]

---

[1] http://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/news/2017/01/10/milwaukee-mayor-barrett-offensive-will-seek-to.html

[2] Ralph Hollman (Urban League), Alex Molinaroli (Chairman of Johnson Controls), Greg Wesley (Medical College) and Linda Gorens-Levy (General Capital Group)

[3] 12,500 jobs have been added since 2002; 5 of 11 greater Downtown neighborhoods have experienced greater than 50% job growth over the last ten years. Source: Greater Downtown Action Agenda (Page 14)

[4] The Scale Up Milwaukee task force of the Greater Milwaukee Committee seeks to help birth 200 high-growth companies in the region by 2020, with an additional $2 billion of revenue. Source: The Greater Milwaukee Committee Annual Report 2015.

[5] Greater downtown holds 74,000 people, many of whom are millennials. 64% are between the ages of 18 and 34. Source: Greater Downtown Action Agenda (Page 5).

But, like virtually every American city, the stubbornly intractable complexities of poverty, race and economic disparity cloud the total picture. The flashpoints are all too familiar and painful – whether Matthew Desmond's chronicling of poor peoples' ruthless eviction from rental properties in his disturbing book "Evicted" or last year's events in Sherman Park.

The explicitness of your intent to address these issues is a powerful statement of a unique commitment that this civic community has made to advance equity, inclusion and opportunity. But I think it is increasingly important that our cities understand that their counterparts are struggling with the same issues, even as each community differentiates along unique historical, social, economic, and political axes.

So I wanted to say just a few words about whether Milwaukee might draw some lessons from Detroit.

I'll ask you to suspend – at least for a few moments – your understandable resistance to being compared to a city that summons for many people dystopian images of a post-apocalyptic, post-industrial wasteland, leveled by the nation's largest municipal bankruptcy, corrosive political dysfunction and long-standing corporate disinvestment. Not because substantial parts of that characterization aren't true, because large pieces of it are. But instead because the drivers of those realities – corrosive economic segregation and urban disinvestment, proliferating blight, increasingly brittle racial polarization, yawning health and educational disparities along racial and class lines – are present to varying degrees in cities all across the country.

And I'll ask you to suspend your judgment because Detroit has demonstrated, with remarkable force, that a city can deeply and swiftly reimagine itself and change its course:

- We emerged from bankruptcy consensually and at light speed – one year.
- We stemmed the hemorrhaging of our population, with indications of growth in the last two years.
- We have birthed a very different prevailing narrative of Detroit as a creative, artistic and edgy city.
- We have created the preconditions for burgeoning business investment.

This was not a slow build over the course of decades, but instead a decisively structured set of inflection points pursued by The Kresge Foundation and other civic actors committed to recasting past attitudes, roles and expectations. Because this path was bold, even audacious, I believe it has application to other communities.

One of the most important civic undertakings during this period was a project called Detroit Future City – a community-led comprehensive planning process quite similar to the planning process you are now undertaking. It was a process that resulted in much more than an articulated, written action plan for the future of Detroit, as important as that was. It also was powerful vehicle by which our community re-set how to take on a defining challenge, how to recalibrate civic roles, how to equip a generation of civic leaders with new capacities.

So I'd like to talk about the Detroit Future City process and the implications it may have for the MKE United process.

I. The Imperative of a Land-Use Framework in Detroit

So first, a word about the situation that led Detroit into a land-use planning process.

The Detroit Context

Detroit's population – once some 2 million residents – is now 700,000 people and they are scattered over 140 square miles – a mass that could hold San Francisco, Boston and Manhattan, with room left over for St. Paul. It's not possible to spread municipal services across that expanse with anything resembling cost-effectiveness. Of the city's 380,000 individual land parcels, some 75,000 are vacant and blighted, consuming more than 50 percent of certain communities. It made for an urban reality far too complex for traditional planning and land-use development constructs to handle.

After his election in 2009, Mayor Dave Bing announced his intent, in effect, to shrink the city's footprint by developing a master plan that would concentrate city services in select neighborhoods. The reaction was scorching – many residents were livid at the thought that they could find themselves in neighborhoods deprived of basic services, or could be forced to move.

Realizing that he had stepped on a political third-rail, the mayor asked Kresge if we would help. We agreed, provided he make a robust community engagement the essential predicate of the planning process. He did.

But we needed someone to lead the effort. A colleague encouraged me to get the very finest urban planner in America. So I flew to New York City to try to convince her to take on the job. She was just coming off a stint as Cory Booker's Planning Director in Newark, so she agreed. It was one of the most important decisions I've ever made. Because Toni Griffin – whom many of you have had the chance to get to know – was every bit as good, indeed better, than her reputation had suggested.

Toni assembled a half-dozen teams from around the world to assess water and soil resources, housing patterns, clustered economic development and countless other dimensions of city life. We interwove those analyses with the most extensive community engagement process our city had ever seen, using every method conceivable to tap community insight and voice: from social media and Internet-based tools to targeted canvassing and door-knocking; from mass phone mobilization to intimate gatherings in people's homes and places of worship. The process eventually actively involved more than 100,000 residents, businesses and other stakeholders.

The result was Detroit Future City, a 400-page blueprint, complete with thousands of pages of technical appendices. It's become the city's investment and decision-making framework for every dimension of community life – where the city might prioritize investments in commercial corridors and emerging job centers, pursue new mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhoods of choice, sequence our demolition activities, adjust transit service or test ideas for urban farming, reforestation, and innovative storm-water management.

It is in equal parts a vision document, a decision-making framework and an investment plan.

The Imperative of a Land-Use Framework

In a nutshell, Detroit Future City has helped Detroit set an overarching course for our community. It calls for doubling down on areas of strength, while converting blighted or underutilized land to the asset side of the municipal ledger.

The existence of a comprehensive, long-term framework has yielded three concrete benefits.

- **First, it has helped us maintain the long term perspective we need to place individual transactions in the context of a larger set of core principles.**

  Following the framework helps to reduce the possibility of substituting short-term advantage for the kind of uncompromising discussions we need to have about how to prioritize, sequence and align the wide spectrum of activities underway in our community.

- **Second, it helps ensure that we face all dimensions of the challenge.**

  Public agencies may organize vertically into silos of expertise – housing, economic development, health, transportation – but people live horizontally. A community member's livelihood may depend on the convenience of travel between her home and her workplace. Her health may be compromised by the diesel emissions generated by a nearby rail-yard. Her children's development may be shaped by her access to affordable, high-quality childcare.

  If, therefore, we are to move the needle on poverty, economic mobility, climate change, educational attainment, or health disparities, we'll need strategies that anticipate that these systems ricochet against one another – dynamically morphing, re-combining, and inter-braiding. There is no such thing in this work as a singular set of causes or a one-and-done effort.

- **The third benefit is that it provided a vehicle through which community residents could feel a sense of ownership in the city's future.**

  With each action item holding out the promise of a more inclusive, opportunity-rich community, the framework

drew residents and neighborhoods into the decision-making process, infusing it with greater insight, legitimacy and staying power.

II. The Essential Promise of Detroit Future City

Now, these outcomes – a framework for land use with a systems lens and community buy-in – are just wonderful in and of themselves. But, I'd like to suggest that the real value of the Detroit Future City planning process was something even more nuanced:

It helped Detroit begin to develop, unlock and maneuver towards new ways of working, new ways of working that we've now unleashed on a multitude of challenges the city has encountered since.

To move to the bottom line: I hope that Milwaukee can follow a similar path – that you will use the MKE United process not only to develop an action agenda, but also to create and cement new ways of working capable of infusing a new kind of dynamism into the city's already powerful civic culture, a dynamism that holds the potential for a strengthened membrane of social cohesion and equitable growth.

But let me be a bit more specific and describe six ways the MKE United process might accomplish that.

1. Lead with your values.

The first dynamic I would encourage you to follow is to lead with values, to stand by those values and to let them drive your behaviors.

At the beginning of Detroit Future City, we laid out a series of core values to guide our shared vision and plan of action:

- First, that the plan be aspirational where it should be and practical where it must be.
- Second, that it blend the past, present, and future – taking full account of the city's history, tapping resident experience and perspective, and looking around the corner for new possibilities.
- Third, that it place a primacy on equity and justice, seeking to create benefits for all residents through a process that is fully transparent and inclusive.

It's easy to trivialize the idea of working from a bedrock of values. But we shouldn't. Not only is it harder than it looks to articulate values that mean something, but it is harder yet to stick with them when the pressure rises – whether in the form of community resistance, political optics or economic expediency.

And yet, values are one of the few antidotes we possess to the increasingly volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous landscape we're seeing emerge at all levels of government and in every dimension of community life. So agree on what you stand for, articulate it unambiguously and calibrate your activities to advance it.

2. Elevate the power of place.

The second approach I would encourage you to take is to elevate the importance of place in building dynamic communities of opportunity.

The author Rebecca Solnit has observed: "Places matter. Their rules, their scale and their design include or exclude civil society, pedestrianism, equality, diversity."[6]

Placemaking is, indeed, about how we create the map for civic life. It's more than just enhancing a location. It's about creating an essence – identifying, elevating, or assembling a collection of visual, cultural, social and environmental qualities that imbue a location with meaning and significance.[7]

---

[6] Solnit, Rebecca, *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*, p.9 (University of California Press, Berkley: 2007).
[7] McMahon, Edward, "The Place Making Dividend." *Planning Commissioners Journal*, No. 80, page 16 (Fall 2010).

Whether we engage places through the arts, neighborhood development, or environmental stewardship, acts of placemaking bring our aspirations into focus. They drive vibrancy. They enable us to create an emotional bond with our community. When we're able to connect to a city or a neighborhood through an individual or shared experience of its public spaces, there's a magnetic pull. You want to stay committed. You want to invest. You want to build a future. These are the preconditions for civic transformation.

A focus on place, moreover, enables one to come at challenges and opportunities from a different perspective, offering up almost limitless possibilities for innovation and creativity. And that kind of creativity is essential if we hope to stay abreast of the seismic economic, technological, ecological and demographic shifts reverberating through our communities. These changes will require that we continually re-examine our assumptions, recalibrate our tools, and reassess what constitutes success.

This might mean:

- Integrating the arts as a way of creating social and economic vitality and of reinforcing community identity.
- Linking at every possible opportunity to your community's heritage, while creating wide berth for exploring a community's changing form and function.
- Protecting and enhancing the city's natural topology as the heart of your civic patrimony.
- Acknowledging the interdependence of urban systems and incorporating major infrastructure projects into the existing physical, social and economic fabric.
- And, perhaps most importantly, ensuring that the benefits of placemaking inure to the full economic, demographic and political spectrum of our citizenry.

3. Enhance Community Capacity

A third way of working is to move **beyond consulting with community to building deep, entrenched community problem-solving capacity.**

Our experience with the Detroit Future City plan underscored that community engagement exists along a spectrum – it is one thing to ask for community ideas and quite another to invite community residents and businesses and institutions into the sacred sanctum of decision-making. The latter is hard, and messy, and often uncomfortable, particularly for those accustomed to maintaining a firm grip on how resources are allocated. But if conceived less as a relinquishment of power than as a new form of shared responsibility, it is not quite so unsettling.

Philanthropy, the private sector, and all levels of government can invest in building the capacity of a new breed of community-based organizations capable of both being a part of decision-making and delivering results at the intersection of disciplines and across sectors.

Front-line community workers in Detroit have had to be innovative and flexible, cross-braiding skills, experiences, and tools extracted from multiple disciplines: environmental advocacy, community organizing, social justice, health care, food systems, arts and culture, transit, architecture and planning, and much more.

Kresge created a new form of support for this next-generation capacity-building. Called Kresge Innovative Projects: Detroit, it's a commitment to invest in neighborhood efforts that can quickly light up the map of Detroit with the reality of positive change. It might be:

- Revitalization of an iconic neighborhood park
- Transformation of a transit corridor into a greenway with solar lighting
- Expansion of a boxing gym to enable the growth of a youth-mentoring program.

Or countless others – all rooted in the powerful granularity of resident creativity.

So much of this kind of activity is already underway in Milwaukee. A couple of years ago, I had the privilege to travel with the Zilber Foundation to see examples of their support of residents and community groups on both the north and south sides. It was a powerful illustration of how – by firmly embracing community vision, including the

voices of those traditionally left out of decision-making processes – it is possible to build a new level of social cohesion and a civic machinery capable of tackling the most entrenched community challenges**.**

4. **Reimagine Philanthropic Role**

A fourth lesson from our experience in Detroit is the importance of philanthropy reimagining its roles and responsibilities.

As Detroit was buffeted by the Great Recession, pummeled by the foreclosure crisis, brought to its knees by the auto bankruptcies and demoralized by political scandals, it started to become clear that the foundations working in Detroit could no longer sit at the margins, hoping that their good intentions and charitable impulses would help the community slide through tough times.

But for a number of our foundation colleagues, stepping forward seemed an unnatural act. Foundations working in Detroit had long believed that they led best by preserving their mantle of neutrality and avoiding stirring up a fuss. In the immortal words of Adlai Stevenson: "It's hard to lead a cavalry charge if you think you look funny on a horse." And philanthropy did indeed think that it looked funny on a horse.

We had to get over it. In part, we were able to because we knew that we possessed four qualities of particular importance to the moment.

- First, the privilege of being able to serve as a neutral convener, setting the table for discussions about some of the city's most difficult and intractable challenges – whether land-use, economic diversification, public transit, public education.

- Second, the ability to take risk, serving as society's social venture capital – whether providing resources to glue together efforts that would otherwise fall apart, peeling away the first layer of financial risk necessary to entice private capital markets back into the city, or aggregating capital to take on something as momentous as the resolution of the city's bankruptcy.

- Third, the freedom to act as a guarantor of value, investing in public infrastructure projects that signal to investors that the city possesses basic quality of life attributes that will attract and retain employees – whether the reclamation of the river front, the conversion of a barren intersection into a vibrant public park or the introduction of a light rail line along the city's main artery.

- Fourth, the capability to act as a steward of fragile nonprofit ecologies, safeguarding nonprofit and community organizations working at the knife's edge of survival – whether in the arts, food systems, human services provision.

Milwaukee may not have a foundation the size of Kresge. But it does have strong, well-run and visionary philanthropies which are already playing these roles. Bader, Zilber, Northwestern Mutual, Bradley and, perhaps most particularly, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation – through its support of the MKE United Plan to be sure, but also in its consistent leadership on some of the community's toughest issues. As in Detroit, foundations in Milwaukee have a profound opportunity to reposition themselves at the center of a new civic agenda.

5. **Reinforce Distributive Leadership**

A fifth way of working is closely related to the fourth: reinforcing the emerging elements of a flexible distributive leadership model.

Until the 2008 economic collapse, Detroit's civic leadership was emblematically traditional. A strong mayor system, honed by 20 years of Coleman Young's charismatic and forceful leadership. A corporate community dominated by the centralized decision-making impulses of the automobile industry. An isolated and inward-looking philanthropic community rarely inserting itself into the signal issues of the day.

Three events conspired to turn that civic equilibrium on its head.

The first was the rediscovery and reclamation of our cement-siloed, industrially abused riverfront. The dream of making the river the City's front porch, rather than its backyard dumping ground, was spurred by a $50 million gift from Kresge in 2004 – the largest gift in our history to that point – and the dedication of land by both General Motors and the city. The creation of a Riverfront Conservancy to steward a master plan for the full seven-mile stretch of the waterfront cast in bright relief the benefits of a high-functioning, private-public-philanthropic civic partnership.

The second event was actually three for the price of one. In 2008-9, we experienced a nightmarish trifecta as the automobile companies and their supply chains danced with bankruptcy, the economy entered the Great Recession, and the administration of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick imploded under the weight of corruption and racketeering convictions. As I just mentioned, philanthropy had no choice but to step into the void.

The third event was the so-called "Grand Bargain" of 2013 in which philanthropy invested $370 million – led by $100 million-plus gifts from Kresge and the Ford Foundation – to resolve Detroit's municipal bankruptcy. Philanthropy's infusion of cash spurred the creation of an $850 million pool that protected against deep reductions in the pensions of city retirees and prevented the assets of the Detroit Institute of Arts from being sold to satisfy creditors.

These three events recalibrated expectations for how each sector of Detroit's community could participate in civic problem-solving. We have evolved a commitment to reverse engineering – the public, private and philanthropic sectors working backward from the articulation of a challenge to determine who had he tools most suitable to playing what role, and in what proportion.

Concerned about revitalizing the central business district? Dan Gilbert and Quicken loans exploded the mold and now own almost 90 downtown properties comprising more than 12 million square feet, with all of the attendant responsibilities for public space management and the attraction of next-generation talent.

Committed to promoting home ownership? Mayor Mike Duggan called for loans to flow into neighborhoods in which property values couldn't support traditional mortgage instruments, but it took a loan guarantee from Kresge and reformulated lending requirements by a consortium of local banks to create close the deal through the Detroit Home Mortgage program.

Focused on accelerating small business development? Our private and philanthropic sectors have spent a decade creating the infrastructure necessary to support entrepreneurship – whether early stage capital, maker spaces or technical supports.

The list goes on. We have, I believe, created a problem-smashing machinery that is sector-agnostic. It is a form of distributive leadership that not only permits us to mix and match the unique qualities of each sector, but also enables a community to tackle a multiplicity of issues at once as different institutions take the lead on different issues over time.

6. Embrace Heightened Risk

The sixth and final way of working is to embrace an increased tolerance for risk.

In Detroit, crisis enabled our civic leadership to move from a culture of complacency and incrementalism to a culture of urgency and bold bets.

Recklessness has no place in addressing problems that define a community's quality of life or seek to break the generational vice-grip of poverty. But it is anything but reckless to recognize that the enormity of so many urban challenges compels a response of commensurate magnitude.

The objectives listed in the MKE United Action Agenda begin to outline a comprehensive strategy – from building better transportation and prioritizing inclusive development to increasing density. As you develop detailed strategies behind these objectives, it will be more comfortable to only do what's wise or prudent – without trying out a few things that have the potential for outsize return.

In Detroit, we have time and time again taken on a few moonshots. Some of these big bets – like privately funding a public street car line – may look reckless, but all of them have the potential to change lives. For our streetcar line, it's the potential to connect Detroiters to jobs, to open the region to a new era of shared mobility, and to redensify our urban core.

I encourage you to measure carefully, but to not shy away from transformative thinking – from scaling your risk tolerance to the magnitude of the challenges you face.

Conclusion

Milwaukee has a great and proud tradition: a crucible of 20th century immigration; a Midwestern industrial powerhouse – indeed, the world's epicenter of breweries.; the home to historic, architecturally significant neighborhoods; a world hub for water research and policy; a glorious shore- and bluff-topography; a diverse and resilient residential and business community; a vibrant cultural scene.

You are at the front end of what strikes me as another definitional moment for this community. You propose to articulate a path for accelerating the city's progress with the imperatives of equity, opportunity and inclusion in full view.

As you reflect on Detroit – and on others that help you frame your challenge – I hope that you will hold onto the promise of acting on impulses of enlightened long-term vision rather than the reflexes of risk-aversion in the moment, the promise of ushering rhythms of equality and fair play rather than constructs of differential treatment and privilege for the few, the promise of embracing the constructive ambiguities of new roles, relationships and ways of working rather than the relative comfort of the safe and stale and comfortable.

Winston Churchill remarked: "For myself, I am an optimist – it does not seem to be much use being anything else." Knowing that you are in the gifted and committed hands of Toni Griffin and the MKE United team would seem to suggest that Churchill was right. I'm not only optimistic about your future, but energized and inspired.

So thank you for listening. And very best of luck.