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Postcard from Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Washington, DC

by *Rocco Landesman*



Mark Olinger—the director of planning and economic development for the City of Madison—was our tour guide at the site of Madison’s new Central Park. Photo by NEA staff

I was just in Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and in a way it was going home for me—I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Madison is much more vibrant than I remembered, particularly with respect to the arts. There’s much more of an arts district downtown, and I think the arts are much more a part of civic life than they were and not just confined to the university.

We started our day in Madison at Mayor Dave Cieslewicz’s office and from there we went to Central Park, which is a proposed new park in the center of the city. The NEA has given Madison an MICD 25 grant for them to bring in a designer and artist to conceive that park. We toured the raw space, and it was fascinating to visualize how it will be. This type of project is, of course, very consistent with what we’re proposing for Our Town, so it was great to see it in action.

Our next stop was the university. (Full disclosure: We stopped for a Plazaburger on the way, which is a burger that I love in Madison!) I got a chance to spend some time with Chancellor Bidly Martin, who is fantastic. I mean, she is a dynamo, and I'm looking forward to an ongoing conversation.

Our host at the school was Andrew Taylor, who runs the arts program in the business school. He's been one of our heroes for a long time; he's one of the pioneers in this field. It's "the year of the arts" at the university, so of course Andrew is at the center of that. They are highlighting not just the performing arts, but all of the arts. It was great for us to be able to be a part of that, and I think every university should have a year of the arts.

The arts are an increasingly important part of the university, and there's now a full-fledged theater department. It's probably not a surprise that one of the highlights of this trip for me was getting to meet the university's theater students. There was a great Q&A, a really stimulating back and forth; and I really enjoyed fielding their questions. One of the things they asked was what my favorite play was. I'm not a big Eugene O'Neill fan, but, as I told the students, the play that had the biggest impact on me was *Long Day's Journey into Night*. But I guess that's for another blog post...

On Friday, we had a great day in Milwaukee where we started out at the Milwaukee Art Museum, which is a very bold piece of architecture. The original building is an Eero Saarinen building, and then there's this add-on by Santiago Calatrava. The new addition is a very bold work; it looks like this big gull with giant wings that open and close. I think it's a great landmark in the city of Milwaukee; it's a wonderful symbol of their engagement with the arts. Milwaukee is a city that has really been transformed by the arts and a great example of how the arts can make a difference in a place, no question.

At the museum we had a panel discussion moderated by Wisconsin Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton on the role of the creative industries in community and economic development. We were really talking about how the arts can transform neighborhoods and change places. It was a very stimulating and engaged panel. There were artists on it, there were city officials, and it was a really good cross-section of speakers. I felt very engaged by it. By in far, I've noticed that most of the questions at the panels, discussions, roundtables, and luncheons that I take part in on these trips are about the emphasis of the NEA now on arts and community building and neighborhood revitalization. I think these communities are eager to be an example nationally of the kinds of things that can happen and how exciting this process can be.

I should mention that in Milwaukee we were at the Pfister Hotel, which is the only hotel I know of that has an artist in residence, which is pretty cool. We met the artist—painter Katie Musolff—and she is a very accomplished young woman. She actually works at the hotel, so you can go into her studio there and watch her work and see the finished product. She keeps certain office hours so people can come in and observe what she's doing. It's a pretty neat thing to see a hotel make that kind of commitment to the arts. (The hotel's blog has a great [video of my visit to Katie's studio](#).) The Pfister also has an amazing collection of American art from the Victorian era, and it's probably the most beautiful hotel that I've been to in the United States. It was incredible.

I think Wisconsin generally is ahead of the curve in terms of support for the arts. I think they get it. As Lt. Governor, Barbara Lawton has been the creative economy person for a long time, she really understands how this works, and there's much more understanding in Wisconsin about the value of the arts than I think there is in many states. It was good to engage with that kind of thinking and understanding.

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