

# Tool Libraries: Hammering Equity Home

Daniel White

## What is a Tool Library?

A tool library is a place where community members can borrow tools for set periods of time for free or at a low cost. It is an example of a “real sharing economy:” a neighborhood-focused, not-for-profit network where community members share practical resources in a centralized space. There are similar libraries for toys, musical instruments, and other items. Real sharing economies capitalize on the people-power in communities. They can help address social problems such as income disparity, resource segregation, and political disenfranchisement.<sup>1</sup>

These resource sharing systems help sidestep top-down institutions such as Lowes, Home Depot, Toys R’ Us, and Best Buy that promote financial and physical waste, treat people as nothing more than consumers, and cut them off from the informal wisdom of their neighbors and peers.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the idea of “the sharing economy” has been coopted by multi-million dollar big businesses such as Airbnb, Uber, and TaskRabbit that do little to improve the quality of life for the entire community over the long term.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is important to emphasize the “real” in “real sharing economies.”

Tool libraries and other real sharing economies democratize access to resources and allow community members to cultivate self-sufficiency. Using them, people can use goods and services that they would otherwise be unable to afford.<sup>4</sup> For example, an urban neighborhood full of houses falling into disrepair can use a tool library to renovate those homes at very little cost. These renovations will increase the value of each property and the neighborhood as a whole, while also giving those living in the area an increased sense of community pride.

Because tool libraries allow local populations to share things but also the aggregated wealth and social power of a community, the social and political importance of whether Person A has more money than Person B down the street matters less. This paradigm flips the model of individualistic, hyper-consumeristic culture on its head. Importantly, in order to take advantage of these “libraries of things,” community members are encouraged to (and sometimes must) actually interact with one another. In doing so, the intangible – but deeply important – social benefits of trust and accumulated neighborhood knowledge are strengthened via proximity and shared problem-solving.

This fact sheet was written by Daniel White, a student in the Fighting Inequality in Buffalo-Niagara class at the University at Buffalo Law School.

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The “lending library model” is in the DNA of tool libraries because many of them were founded in partnership with existing public library systems.<sup>5</sup> For example, Berkeley’s Tool Lending Library, established in the late 1970’s, housed many of its construction and repair-related print materials in an adjacent library branch.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, for the last ten years, the Grosse Pointe Public Library in Michigan has included funds for a lendable Tool Collection into its annual budget.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990’s, the Oakland Public Library established a “Home Resources Collection” to help local residents repair homes devastated in a firestorm and later made it a permanent feature.<sup>8</sup> Just as local municipal libraries can become effective “third spaces” promoting both diversity and community cohesion,<sup>9</sup> so too can tool libraries and other real sharing economy resource hubs.

## Building More Equitable Communities by Responding to Practical Needs

Tool libraries help community members develop personal agency as they equip themselves to meet practical housing-related needs (fixing a mailbox, cleaning gutters, repairing a leaky pipe, building a raised garden bed) – agency that their life situations may not otherwise afford them. Just as traditional libraries try to make it easy to join them, many tool libraries require only simple proof-of-residency and identification.<sup>10</sup> Thus the pool of potential beneficiaries includes nearly any adult within a given area. Now someone who would not have been able to afford to buy a power-washer from Home Depot can finally clean years of grime off their siding and, in turn, feel a sense of pride in where they live.

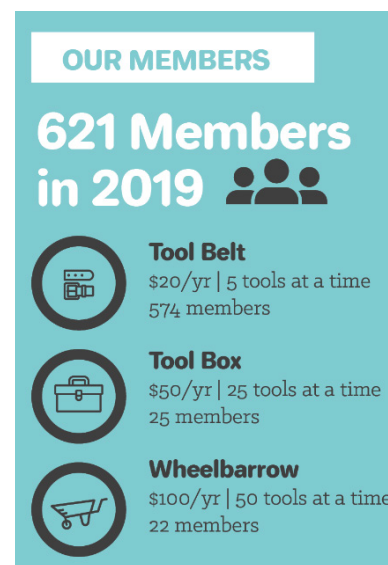




When low-income members (whether homeowners, renters, or landlords) have low or no-cost access to a wide variety of tools, they can save and/or invest their money elsewhere and also preserve valuable square footage in their homes that may have otherwise been committed to superfluous tool storage. Because of this, tool libraries can reduce people’s reliance on steady streams of individual consumption and, as a corollary, begin the process of incrementally leveling out income disparities between those with means and those without.

Echoing the core purpose of many tool libraries across the county, the newly formed Chicago Tool Library frames their mission as to provide “equitable access to tools, equipment, and information [and] allow all Chicagoans to learn, share, and create.”<sup>11</sup> These learning, sharing, and creating components are integral community building-blocks and help to promote equity by expanding opportunities for practical education. Often, educational systems in low-income areas are limited. Young people may not have experienced a shop class or been exposed to what it takes to become a skilled tradesperson. Since members may not have the skills or technical know-how to effectively use their borrowed tools for home improvement/repair projects, tool libraries organize hands-on educational opportunities for neighbors to learn from the practical expertise of their community. Many libraries host regular “repair tutorial” sessions and events themed around specific projects or trades.

Tool libraries also partner with existing educational institutions such as high schools, community colleges, and universities to give students from low-income backgrounds chances to use equipment they otherwise would not be able to afford.<sup>12</sup> The Northland Workforce Training Center, located between Buffalo’s Hamlin Park and Genesee/Moselle neighborhoods, is doing just that – creating a tool library for students in partnership with SUNY Alfred State and Erie Community College.<sup>13</sup> As students take advantage of such opportunities, they increase their chances of developing marketable skills for good paying jobs. Such educational partnerships enable tool libraries to help level income disparities within and between communities.



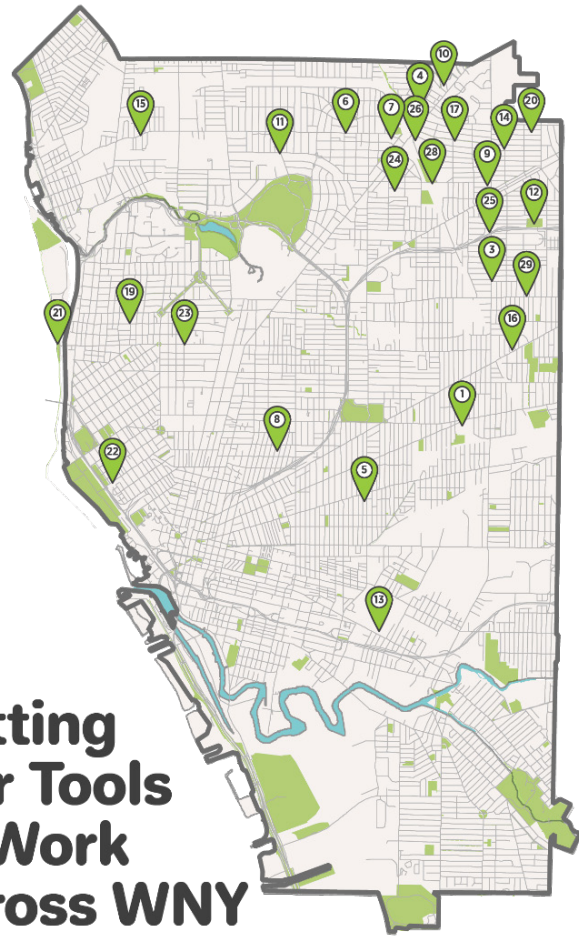
*The Tool Library 2019 Brochure*

Another advantage of tool libraries is that they allow home-owners, “DIY project-doers,” and involved community members to make intergenerational connections in a shared community space. As Gene Homicki, the co-founder of MyTurn<sup>14</sup> points out, “One of the great things about Libraries of Things and tool libraries is that they bring people together. We’ve seen them be a great intergenerational gathering point where typically older people with woodworking, metalworking, and repair skills can share those skills with younger generations.”<sup>15</sup> In doing so, community members become less dependent on outsiders who may not understand the unique character of the neighborhood.

Tool libraries can promote equity within their communities through strategic partnerships with similarly-minded organizations. In Buffalo, the Tool Library’s tools have been used by diverse groups such as ReTree WNY, Bailey Avenue Business Association, and Seneca-Babcock Community Center.<sup>16</sup> By lending out its tool stock to help volunteers build community gardens, plant trees in vacant lots, effectively board up empty buildings, develop public art, and tackle larger-scale neighborhood projects, the Library “builds social capital and capacity in communities through service learning, civic engagement, and volunteerism.”<sup>17</sup> In some cases, such as ReTree the District, the Tool Library actively manages and organizes the project; in others, a partner runs the project, and the Library supplies tools, volunteers, and expertise.

### Responding to Common Tool Library Challenges

While tool libraries offer a compelling model for promoting equity and sustainable consumption on a local, neighborhood level, they can experience organizational and



## Putting Our Tools to Work Across WNY

1	BUFFALO PUBLIC SCHOOLS COMMUNITY SCHOOLS	11	COMMUNI-TREE STEWARD PROGRAM	21	NIAGARA RIVER GREENWAY COMMISSION
2	UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO OFFICE OF SUSTAINABILITY	12	ROOSEVELT PARK TREE PLANTING	22	HEART OF THE CITY NEIGHBORHOODS
3	UNIVERSITY DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICE	13	SENECA BABCOCK COMMUNITY CENTER	23	ELMWOOD VILLAGE ASSOCIATION
4	CAPEN GARDEN WALK	14	BUFFALO PROMISE NEIGHBORHOOD	24	JOURNEY'S END REFUGEE SERVICES
5	GREATER EASTSIDE FIELDS OF DREAMS BLOCK CLUB	15	ERIE COUNTY RESTORATIVE JUSTICE COALITION	25	THE FOUNDRY
6	NORTH BUFFALO ORGANIZATION	16	UNIVERSAL SCHOOL	26	UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS BUSINESS ASSOCIATION
7	BUFFALO IN BLOOM	17	MINNESOTA AVENUE BLOCK CLUB	27	MEDAILLE COLLEGE
8	UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO CENTER FOR URBAN STUDIES	18	SUFFOLK-ORLEANS TREE PLANTING	28	UNIVERSITY DISTRICT JR IMPACT TEAM
9	BAILEY AVENUE BUSINESS ASSOCIATION	19	RE-TREE WNY	29	BLACK WALL ST 716
10	UNIVERSITY PARK BLOCK CLUB	20	B-TEAM BUFFALO	30	PCB PIEZOTRONICS

The Tool Library 2019 Brochure

financial challenges. In a 2013 evaluation of tool libraries and community sustainability, researcher Neil Tabor identified a number of common issues that TLLs must address to ensure they are equipped to sustain their missions.<sup>18</sup>

- Ensuring that the organization is protected from liability associated with tool-related injuries by having participants fill out simple hold harmless paperwork
- Establishing and maintaining a reliable and knowledgeable volunteer base to oversee the tool library's daily operations and educate members on project best practices
- Finding an appropriate, accessible location with enough space to accommodate current (and future) tool stock that is also zoned to cover the tool library's activities
- Modulating press exposure so as not to succumb to a problem of "unsustainable growth" that outpaces the library's resources or dilutes its targeted efficacy within its community
- Understanding the unique needs of the communities the library is seeking to serve and acquiring tools and/or equipment that are most needed based on the feedback of members
- Diversifying funding streams: reaching out to private donors, partnering with corporate sponsors, and applying for local, state, and federal community development grants

## The Tool Library: Serving North Buffalo and Western New York

The Tool Library (formerly the University Heights Tool Library) was founded in 2011 in response to lived experience and demonstrated need: in this case, an apartment in disrepair and a landlord unwilling to act. Realizing that this was an instance of more systemic problems, the founders began with a mission to "provide communities with the tools they need to create the change they want."<sup>19</sup> In a TEDxBuffalo talk from 2014, founder Darren Cotton and volunteer Aaron Krolkowski describe how the inspiration for a "centralized resource" originated from their seeds of discontent over the "patterns of blighted properties, disinvestment, [and] absentee landlordism" in the University Heights neighborhood.<sup>20</sup>

The Tool Library was initially funded through discretionary funds from a member of the City of Buffalo Common Council.<sup>21</sup> Now, eight years later, the Library houses a collection of over 3,300 tools and in 2019 made nearly 8,000 loans to over 600 members. The members pay small annual membership fees, as little as \$20 per year, based on a sliding scale.<sup>22</sup>

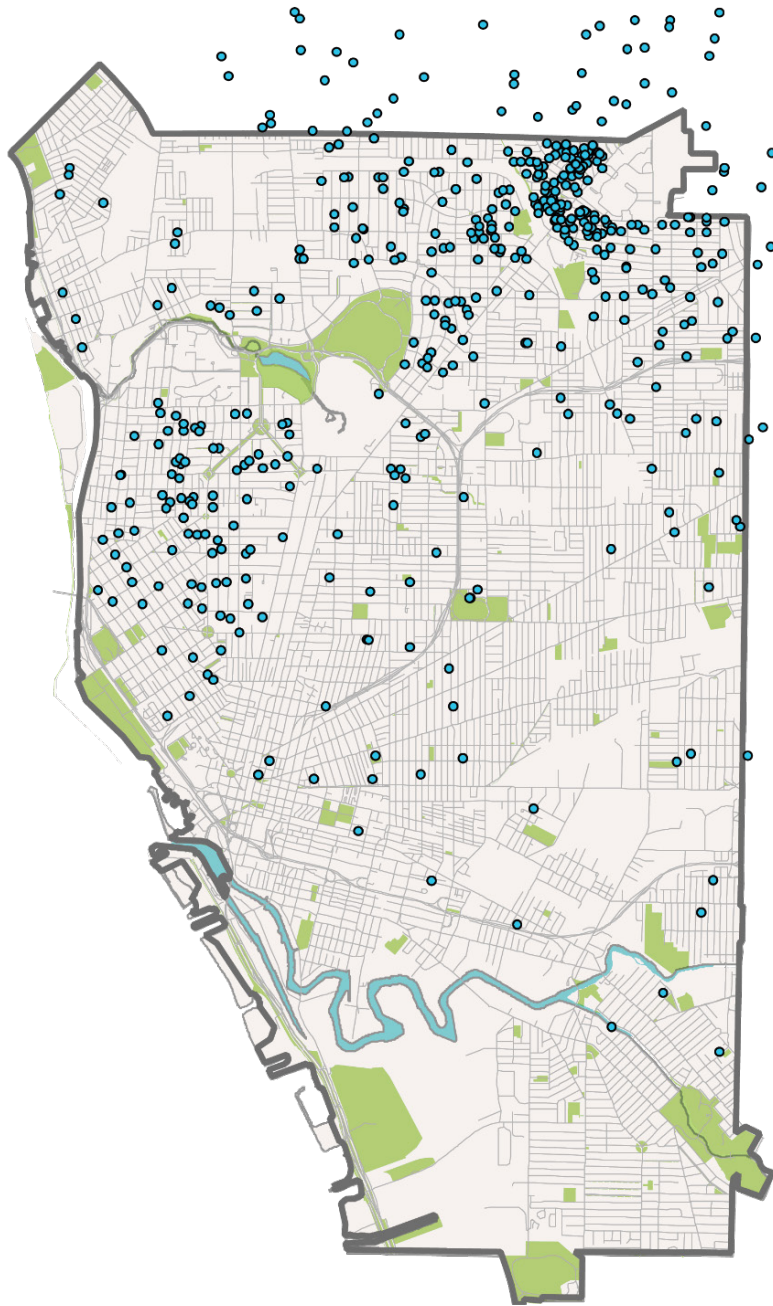
"Over 25% of our members are located within a 20-minute walk of the shop. Coming from diverse neighborhoods and socio-economic backgrounds, 68% of our members are homeowners and 32% are renters."

*The Tool Library 2019 Brochure*

One of the more distinctive aspects of the Library is its “CoLab” (short for Community Laboratory) next door to the space housing the actual tools. The CoLab is “a multipurpose space that provides DIY workshops focused on neighborhood development, community empowerment, and affordable and accessible education.”<sup>23</sup> Community groups can rent the space for workshops, art exhibits, group projects, seminars, etc.<sup>24</sup> Such a space provides a “low threshold” location where neighborhood members can gather and organize themselves around shared issues and projects without the added financial stress of exorbitant rental fees. Collective discussion can lead quickly to collective action when it takes place next to a room filled with tools that can accomplish almost any project.

### Replicating Success: Expanding Neighborhood Tool Libraries Throughout Cities

How can tool libraries grow and serve entire cities without losing the benefits of being embedded in neighborhoods? Different neighborhoods have different needs and goals. One might prioritize lead poisoning prevention, while another needs a different set of tools to focus on urban agriculture. One possibility is a regional organization that oversees the general operational and administrative structure for localized libraries and acts as the “public, fund-raising face” of the network.

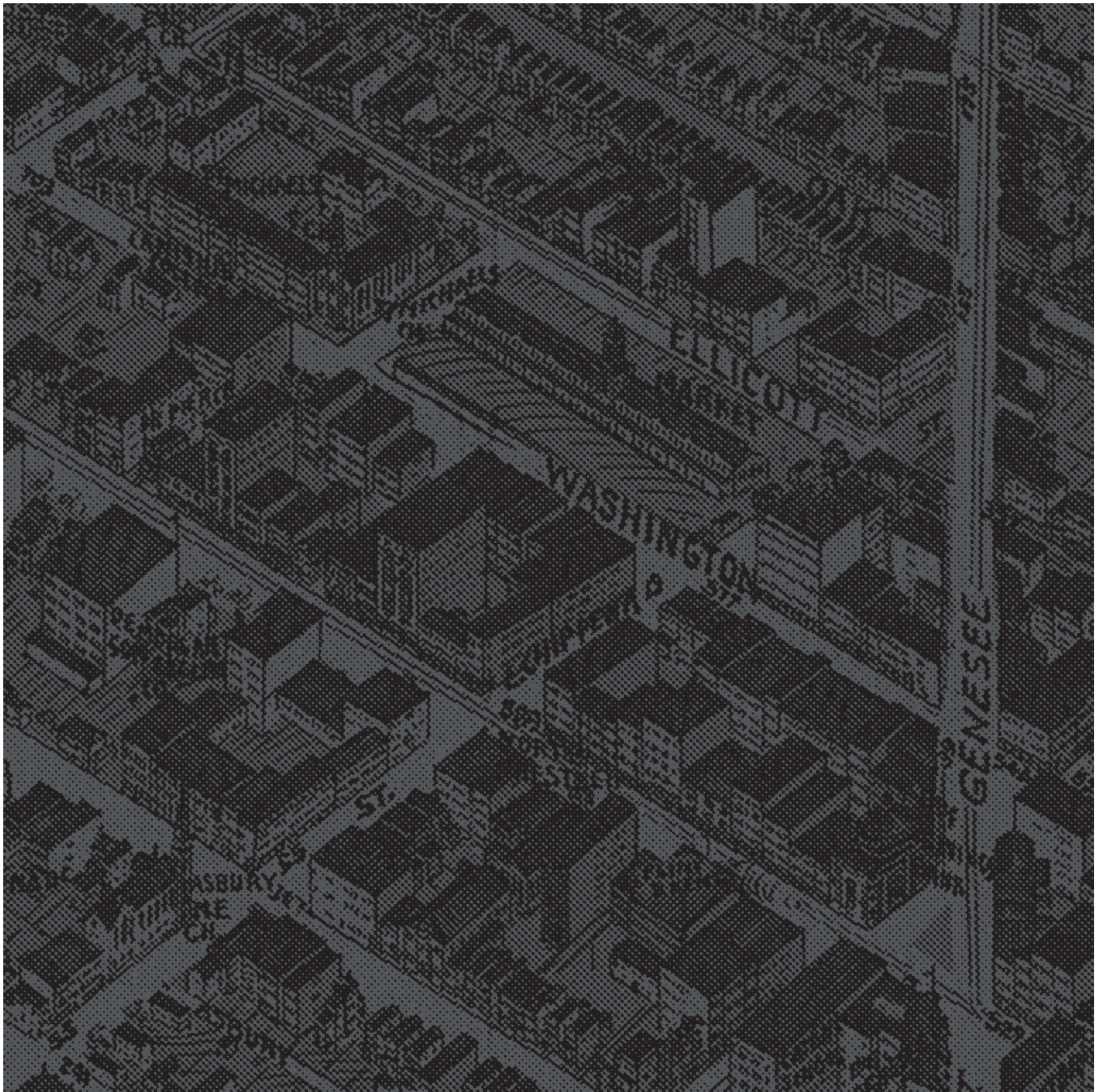


Tool Library members come from  
**over 60 zip codes**  
across the City of Buffalo and  
Western New York.

To work well in unique neighborhoods, libraries should take the time to make connections with groups already established in them: faith groups, block clubs, public school parent groups, service agencies, and others. Tool libraries have the potential to transform how neighborhoods and neighbors support themselves and how they understand their political power by bypassing established systems of economic control in favor of more equitable, embedded civic engagement.

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