



The St. Louis Scene:

HISTORY, PLACE, AND THE ST. LOUIS ARCH

KIRSTEN HAMMERSTROM



The Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis can be seen in various lights: a New Deal work-relief project, a monument to national government and the Louisiana Purchase, or the outcome of a long-standing local desire to improve the appearance of the city's eastern edge. But the story of the Arch, and of its site, is also a story of the evolution of a commercial center into a historic site that functions now as a locus of the post-industrial tourist economy.

The Arch's story, however, is not unique to St. Louis. As Kevin Lynch notes in his book *What Time Is this Place?*, "Environments rich in historic remains often follow a particular pattern: once markedly prosperous, they then [suffer] a rapid economic decline and [remain] stagnant for long periods, though continuing to be occupied and at least partially maintained." The St. Louis riverfront proves Lynch's point. As the city expanded westward and railroads proved more efficient and cost effective means of transport for passengers and goods, the riverfront's businesses catering to the fur trade, riverboats, newspapers, and the insurance industry slowly disappeared. By the late nineteenth century, the levee was in need of change, perhaps even clearance. Pierre Chouteau's 1898 proposal to hold the Louisiana Purchase Exposition on the riverfront as a "Museum of American Genius" housed in a permanent, re-created Village of St. Louis was the first expression, and the first suggestion, that a riverfront plan was needed.

Several plans would follow in the coming decades. The Civic League's 1907 *City Plan for St. Louis*, for example, clearly equated riverfront renewal with economic improvement: "The present is an opportune moment to consider improvement of this portion of the city's topography, which will not only give it a splendid and dignified gateway, but will, at the same time, increase its commercial usefulness." Ten years later, the City Plan Commission estimated that a sum of \$25 million was needed for riverfront improvement, including the railroad terminals and the "reconstruction and

rehabilitation of the riverfront between the [Merchants and Eads Bridges.]" The commission deemed these changes necessary to continue to attract riverfront business and river traffic, thereby improving land values.

In spite of these early plans, years of laissez-faire practices continued to leave the riverfront behind as the city spread ever westward. By the 1920s, the nineteenth century had faded into history, and the riverfront had faded with the passage of time. Newspaper articles in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* eulogized the steamboat era "when the Levee was the chief attraction to the sightseers, with a mile or so of steamboat smokestacks . . . in belching activity, and with the paved slope from the river's edge up to the first row of buildings the busiest scene in the Mississippi Valley." The writer continued, "[Visitors from 1857] would be disappointed, to be sure, because the Levee scene would be found exceedingly dull and prosy today—only a short-trip packet or two to be seen lying in the water's edge and hardly any activity at all on the upslope to the front street." Whether nostalgic for the river trade that filled the levee or the economic security it symbolized, the article pointed out the desolate condition of the riverfront, and, by extension, the need for change.

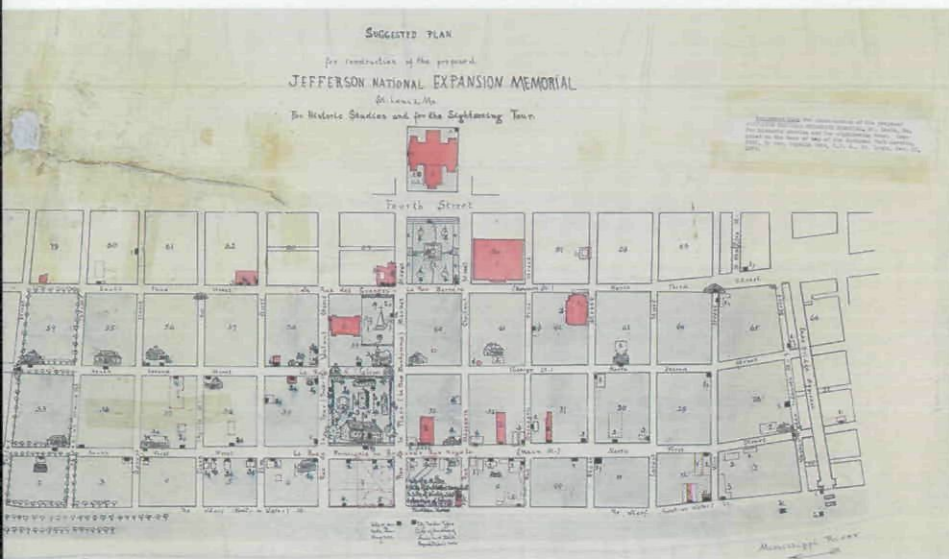
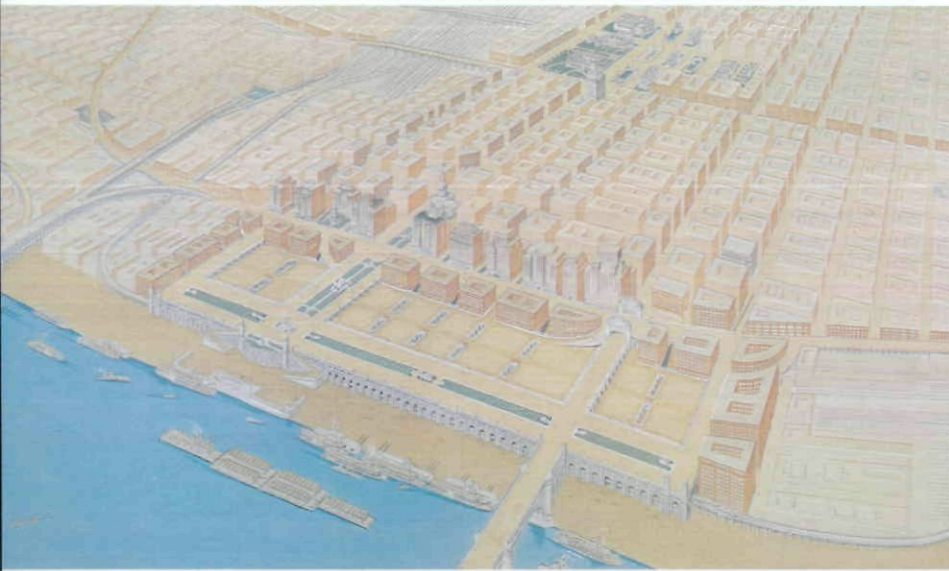
Commercial improvement and beauty were the focus of the City Plan Commission's 1928 *Plan for the Central Riverfront*, which called for a monumental Beaux-Arts arcade of warehouses and train stations topped with a grand plaza. Still adhering to progressive values, the Plan Commission balanced beauty with utility: "To justify

Facing: St. Louis from the East Side. Photograph by Kirsten Hammerstrom, 1996.

Facing Below Left: St. Louis Levee. Though still active at the turn of the century, the St. Louis waterfront had lost business to the rail carriers located farther west within the city. Photograph by Oscar Kuehn, 1904. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.

Facing Below Right: "The Riverfront as It Should Be." Riverfront improvement was equated with economic success in city plan proposals. Engraving by F. Humphry Woolrych in *A City Plan for St. Louis* (Civic League of St. Louis, 1907). Missouri Historical Society Library.

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such large expenditure the plan should serve some great, useful public purpose . . . it is believed that a plan combining great utility with beauty is possible and practicable.” While proposing eminently practical riverfront terminals for suburban and inter-urban passenger railways, the plan also officially suggested making the area a historic site: “[The Old Court House] is rich in historic interest. It is a bond with the day when St. Louis found the Mississippi River its source of life and prosperity. It should again be tied in with the riverfront . . . [by means of a mall four blocks long.] At the eastern terminus of the mall could be a memorial of surpassing beauty on axis with the Court House. . . . This memorial could well be dedicated to the founders of the city who first landed practically at this point.” This suggested memorial, or riverfront plaza, would serve as a model for subsequent proposals for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

While plans throughout the 1920s relied upon rail and barge shipping to restore the riverfront’s economic viability, later plans shifted to emphasize the site’s history, eventually using history—through tourism—as the means to financial revival. The effort to “save the riverfront” for a memorial became a mixture of crusade and clearance, as advocates shifted the focus of history between the buildings and the land itself.

Top: The “City Beautiful” met the “City Practical” in this rendering of “the new front of the business district” prepared by Fred Graf for A Plan for the Central Riverfront (City Plan Commission, 1928). Missouri Historical Society Library.

Above: Suggested Plan for Construction of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial for Historic Studies and Sightseeing Tours. Watercolor map by F. Hugolin, 1939. Missouri Historical Society Library.

Right: Levee district before clearance for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. Architectural historian Sigfried Giedion called St. Louis’s nineteenth-century buildings “far in advance of the ordinary standards at the time of their erection.” Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.



Early preservationists were primarily patriotic, rather than aesthetic, in motive, a pattern that played out on the St. Louis levee as local planners and leaders worked to coalesce plans and intentions.

Luther Ely Smith, for example, conceived of a monument to Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase as “a memorial not to any one man, but to the Territorial Expansion of our Great country, and to the men who made it possible. . . . The area in question is sacred soil and the country is fortunate in being able to . . . develop it as a National heritage.” Others declared the seventy-five-acre, thirty-seven-block site “historically holy ground,” requiring a monument to Jefferson and “Unknown Pioneers” who fostered national expansion. Louis LaBeaume, a St. Louis architect who promoted and organized competition guidelines for the memorial project, asserted that “the people of St. Louis may rest assured that no dead Memorial is contemplated,” while the *St. Louis Star-Times* noted that the memorial’s function would be twofold: “It would furnish employment to men now on relief rolls, and memorialize the Louisiana Purchase under Thomas Jefferson and the accomplishments of Lewis and Clark and other pioneers of the west.” Such plans proposed the complete clearance of the central riverfront site, sparing only the Old Court House and Cathedral. The plans’ emphasis on the historic value of the land itself—rather than the buildings—rose above the pleas of architects and historians.

Most prominent among the dissenters was Sigfried Giedion, a Swiss architectural historian who told the *Post-Dispatch*: “These buildings should be saved because they will form a real monument to the early life and work of St. Louisans. It might first appear that it is not worthwhile, but we can understand their great value when we realize they have no equivalent in other countries . . . it is the duty of historians to preserve that which has no equivalent.” Giedion later referred to the St. Louis riverfront as “witness to one of the most exciting periods in the development of America. Some of its commercial buildings . . . exhibited an architecture far in advance of the ordinary standards at the time of their erection.” Giedion proposed to use some of these buildings as a “museum of the history of the Mississippi region. It would be possible to display its relations with the past and the present, and with the whole United States.” These visible reminders of the past would provide immediate contrast between the past and the present, a tangible statement about the inevitability of change and the belief in progress.

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—architect Sigfried Giedion

Preservationists acting to save early commercial buildings on the St. Louis riverfront worked against time, as planners foresaw other means of expressing progress. Though suggestions for appropriate solutions almost always involved clearing the site between the Municipal and Eads Bridges and from the river to Third Street, the particular forms the suggestions took depended upon the author’s tastes and prejudices. Architectural historian and critic Thomas E. Tallmadge envisioned clearing the historic buildings to re-create the past, believing that “particularly appropriate . . . would be a restored French or Spanish village such as might have been found along the banks of the Mississippi in the early days of St. Louis.” Tallmadge held that a re-created village would be “vastly superior” to an ornamental monument to Jefferson.

However, after the fire of 1849, few “original” buildings remained in St. Louis for Tallmadge’s village: by 1935, the only pre-fire buildings on the site were the 1818 “Old Rock House” at Chestnut and Wharf, the 1840 Matthew Rippey House at 217 Valentine Street, and the 1842 Howard Building at 408 North Wharf. In age, none of these would qualify as Spanish or French, and only the Rock House, Manuel Lisa’s fur warehouse, predated Missouri statehood. Consequently, planners faced a dilemma: the history they wished to memorialize had been physically eradicated. As the city progressed, so too did its architecture. Between the destruction of the fire and the realities of nineteenth-century

commercial construction, nothing remained from the time of the Louisiana Purchase, let alone Laclede and Chouteau’s original 1764 village. How then could these “lost” memories be recovered, and then glorified? What would be new enough, or old enough, to stand for the “great deeds” of the pioneers and explorers?

The National Park Service (NPS), architectural historians, and civic leaders attempted to negotiate a solution to the conflict between memorialization and preservation with a proposal to incorporate a Museum of American Architecture and a re-created village of St. Louis into the program for the memorial. A 1936 Park Service report on the proposal for the museum included an abstract on “Architecture as a Graphic Expression of History,” declaring, “What more graphic expression of political and social history can be found than the builder’s art? . . . The nature of the American people and the chronology of their movements are permanently recorded in their structures.” In this view, the historic

buildings would contrast with a modern memorial, heightening the sense of progress embodied in a monument to territorial expansion. Tour brochures for the city of St. Louis described a city renowned for her fine buildings, and, in a moment of historical boosterism, asked, "Who could have imagined that the log cabins of the pioneers were but a crude forerunner to these majestic edifices of brick, stone, steel and concrete, costing millions of dollars to build?" Incorporating historic structures, whether on the grounds or in a specialized museum, would render physical this contrast.



Above: Ruins of the St. Louis Fire. Few "original" buildings remained after the 1849 fire. Daguerreotype by Thomas M. Easterly, 1849. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.

Below: Civic leaders hoped to use proposed memorials to improve views like this of smog over the riverfront in 1938. Photograph by Arthur B. Cozzens, 1938. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.

In 1939, newspapers reported that nine buildings would be saved by the NPS "because of their significance in American history, or American architecture" and incorporated into the memorial, making visual "the tremendous contrast between the St. Louis and the America that were and that now are; a contrast which will not only be interestingly informative, but also definitely inspirational, for we will thereby be impressed with the great deeds our predecessors have accomplished, and will be enheartened to attempt and confidently and enthusiastically to accomplish even greater deeds." Written in 1938, in the midst of the Great Depression and growing international chaos, this view highlights the tendency to look to the past in times of great change, seeking the stability of the known, and the cohesion of seemingly shared memories. As Diane Barthel notes in her book *Historic Preservation*, "the sense that all known patterns of social life were being swept away encouraged early preservationists . . . to protect historic structures still sacred to the collective memory, [which] is shaped by status groups who become society's symbolic bankers, and whose efforts to preserve sites . . . often assume the character of symbolic crusades."

Luther Ely Smith, who called the riverfront "historically sacred ground," led what might well be called a crusade to save the levee area for a memorial to Jefferson, though his plans resulted in the loss, rather than the preservation, of the structures. Smith's drive resulted in congressional approval of a bill appropriating money to acquire the site, clear it, and construct a memorial there. In 1934, Civil Works Administration Project 104 included a Louisiana Purchase Monument and reflecting pool in a plan that bridged the gap between the city's need to address the riverfront area and Smith's desire for a memorial. The Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Association, which Smith chaired,



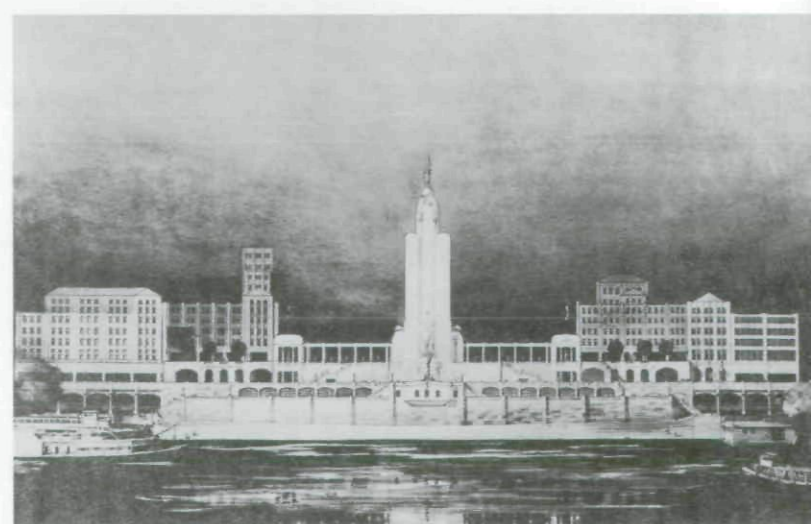
published brochures touting the value of constructing the memorial, justifying it as “a beacon light to the youth of the land and an inspiration to the entire nation . . . it will point the way that Jefferson would lead us, an enlightened country peopled by free citizens with equal opportunity for all.”

The definition of the memorial evolved as years passed, with the NPS weighing in on a memorial to the “penetration, settlement and amalgamation of the heterogeneous group into a nation,” and other groups envisioning the project as a memorial to Jefferson the man. Workers had cleared the site by the end of the 1930s, and while physical progress halted during the war years, the levee became a gigantic parking lot, watched over by the spartan Cathedral of St. Louis, the only structure besides Manuel Lisa’s Rock House east of Third Street to survive clearance. By 1943, NPS plans for the site preserved only the “old street lines [to be] kept as walks,” in addition to the Cathedral and Court House. Authentic structures would be replaced by museums of fur trading, architecture, and national expansion.

Museum exhibits provide greater room for interpretation and selection than authentic structures, effectively allowing planners to edit history. After the Great Depression and World War II, America looked forward to a better future, untrammled by the fetters of the past. For once, American cities’ relative lack of history could be seen as an actual benefit: Americans created the nation and themselves free of the associations of structures left behind in a devastated Europe. A modern memorial would be more appropriate than ever as a physical expression of American youth, freedom, and leadership in the postwar world. Hope, and an eye to the future, surpassed the need to preserve the “historically sacred.” Even Luther Ely Smith had altered his rhetoric, if not his reasoning, by 1944, describing a “living memorial, national in scope and interest, inspirational and educational in character . . . but . . . the Memorial [will] be far more than a monumental structure . . . it should also be of great importance in stabilizing land values, in providing open park space and, in general, contributing to the practical and aesthetic life of the community.”



Left and Below: *These renderings by F. Ray Liemkuehler depict the 1934 CWA proposals for riverfront improvement, which included a central pedestrian mall and a monolithic memorial to the Louisiana Purchase. Both from A Comprehensive Program for Restoration of the St. Louis Riverfront, 1934. Missouri Historical Society Library.*



So, the memorial would not be just a monument to a single man (or his accomplishments), but rather national, and useful. The riverfront continued to be equated with economic utility, both in terms of land values and, later, as a tourist destination. This equation was possible because of the removal of all physical traces of the economic beginnings of St. Louis, the hard physical labor and sometimes brutal conditions of nineteenth-century industry, and their replacement with a clean, gleaming symbol of that labor. If we think of the riverfront as a kind of open-air factory, in the carting of steamboat loads, hauling, preserving and warehousing of furs and other goods, we can begin to see why the old structures were not saved. As Lynch observes, we are less likely to preserve old factories, "places of noise, stress and hard labor. They visibly remind us of what it cost this country to achieve wealth and who paid."

And that is why the riverfront had to be cleared, and why the memorial had to be modern: no one wanted to recall the cost of the labor, but rather the result. Consequently, the design of Eero Saarinen's modernistic "triumphal arch," gleaming in stainlesssteel, becomes highly appropriate, even though the monument fails to refer to St. Louis's architecture or city plan in any way. The ever-gleaming—though sometimes vandalized—stainless steel skin is, in itself, a statement about the newness and invention of the city and the nation. Capturing one moment forever, never weathering or crumbling like brick or stone, the memorial stands for the American dream, untarnished by truth.


By the 1960s, environmental artists like Robert Smithson began to rethink the meanings of materials. In Smithson's mind, rust was the fundamental property of steel, though "in the technological mind, rust evokes a fear of disuse, inactivity, entropy and ruin. That steel is valued over rust is a technological value, not an artistic one." For St. Louis, reclaiming the run-down face of the city, a non-rusting, non-decaying stainless steel arch provided the best means to ensure a lasting improvement to the "blighted" area.

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Today, as the American economy completes the transition to a service base, the attraction of the Arch and the replicated riverfront as a tourist destination remains more critical than architectural or historic integrity. Even in the planning stages, the memorial project was promised to "make certain the building of the world's outstanding monument . . . [to] be a mecca for tourists from all points of the globe." For the most part, the Arch grounds and the riverfront remain a place for tourists, and for St. Louisans to take out-of-town visitors. Even Saarinen conceived of the memorial as a place for tourists, writing "An Imaginary Tour of the Proposed Jefferson National Expansion Memorial" as a tour made by a St. Louisan with friends come to visit from "far away." Today, gambling boats and floating fast-food restaurants rely in part on Arch tourists for business, providing minimum-wage, service-sector jobs for locals. These decorated barges, tricked out to resemble historic steam and excursion boats, never sail, never leave their moorings, but are rather props in the theatrical setting of "the historic St. Louis riverfront."

As Barthel notes, in a market where cities compete for tourist dollars, with each attempting to create a unique identity built on history, "the line between fake and real becomes blurred. Often, ironically, whatever authentic community identity exists gets destroyed in the process."

That is true of the St. Louis riverfront after the Arch: only a symbol remains, what *Popular Mechanics* called in 1963 "a gleaming symbol of

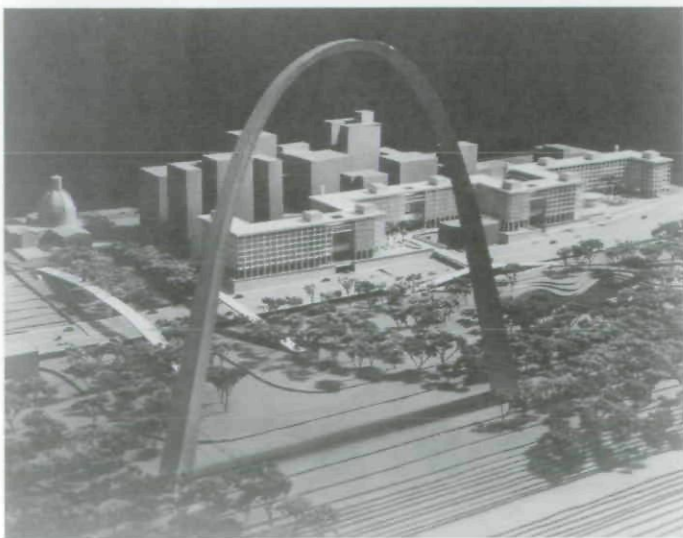
America's proud past—and also of today's impressive skills." The "Gateway to the West" also stands as a symbol of westward expansion and American faith in a better future built with those "impressive skills." The loss of important historic structures notwithstanding, the Arch functions as a living memorial to both the past and the future. When Chouteau proposed the riverfront "Museum of American Genius" and re-created Village of St. Louis, he could not have imagined how Saarinen's soaring monument, with a historical museum in its base, would fulfill that dream. 



Above: St. Louis from the Air. Photograph by Ralph A. Ross, 1948. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.

Below: Today the Arch stands as a symbol of western expansion and American faith in a better future, rather than as a commemoration of the historic qualities of its site. Photograph by Kirsten Hammerstrom, 1996.

Below: Architectural Model of the Winning Jefferson National Expansion Memorial proposal by Eero Saarinen, 1948. Missouri Historical Society Photograph and Print Collection.



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