

Revival in St. Louis

Cities are built by time and money, and both were running out for downtown St. Louis. A rash of conventional renewal—luxury apartments, a sports stadium, and similar kinds of investment guaranteed to undercut the character of a city—had produced an uneasy air of sterile rebuilding and unfinished urban business.

Token landmarks remain, but the old waterfront building and all of their associations are gone. History and identity are as hard to find today as the granite levees below the city's modern landmark, the Jefferson Memorial Arch. It is possible to shoot up to the top like encapsulated peas in a pod but not to see what made the Mississippi cities great.

But now it appears that both time and money are on the side of two nationally significant St. Louis landmarks—Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building and the superb Union Station of the 1890's, as well as of an impulsive recent import, the Spanish Pavilion of the 1964 New York World's Fair. The first is being bought by the State of Missouri for new State offices, and the other two have found commercial purchasers with plans for rehabilitation tied to multi-use additions. Three up, instead of down, is a commendable score.

The point here is a double one: The city is being enriched both economically and esthetically by these acts of preservation; and public and private funds are being invested in landmark structures for their restoration and re-use as highly desirable alternatives to new construction. Good urbanism can be good business.

It is increasingly evident in American cities that money does not replace what time has produced in style and substance, and the speculative vacuum that follows the destruction of character turns out to be no city at all. St. Louis's early downtown clearance taught the bitter lesson of historic loss; its slow commercial revival has saved some monuments until the practical virtues of the past have become clear. This is genuine renewal.