ARCHITECTURAL VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Design (Good and Bad) Down by The Levee

ST. LOUIS

Nowhere are the mysteries and incongruities of the urban process more apparent than in St. Louis; occasionally the Red Queen seems to have been in charge. Downtown, the handsome pink granite levee slopes to the muddy Mississippi, where a handful of riverboats provide food and entertainment, anchored below the familiar, dense steel of the historic Eads Bridge. Close to the riverfront, the soaring parabola of the stainless steel Gateway Arch frames the high dome and lantern of the old Greek Revival Courthouse with unsurpassed drama.

But this superb 19th to 20th century continuity is an accident; the Courthouse was only saved at the last minute from the near-total bulldozer renewal of some 40 blocks of the St. Louis waterfront in the 1940's. The arch—correctly the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial—Eero Saarinen's prize-winning design of 1948, was built in the 1960's. A set of monumental steps now leads up from the levee to some bland landscaping, and the promised museum that was to be part of the Memorial is finally being built at its base, underground.

The desert that was left by the bulldozer has been filled in over the years with the set pieces of standard Chamber of Commerce renewal—high rise commercial construction, a stadium and parking garages. The formula is being completed by a convention center. (In a tragi-comic subplot of the renewal story, the dismantled iron fronts of historic buildings, stored for indeterminate reuse, were "lost.")

The result is still a desert. The promised revitalization, in the sense of a downtown of pedestrian scale, alive with people and activities, has never materialized. There are busloads of tourists for the Arch, and cars come and go for events at the stadium, with block-long garages filling and emptying, but no one lingers because there is nothing to linger for. It is a dull, desolate, computerized commercial landscape.

This was all predicted, of course, but neither City Hall nor St. Louis businessmen listened. Now they've got

Continued on Next Page

ARCHITECTURAL VIEW

By the Levee

Continued from Preceding Page

what they wanted. The new downtown is a lackluster and ordinary place that clearly demonstrates that this is no way to rebuild a city's heart.

A few projects of greater design sensitivity now in progress may ameliorate this celebration of the tax base. A block-square building by Philip Johnson and John Burgee promises a structure of quality and interest. Two buildings flanking the Old Courthouse, both by Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, make the first real attempt to relate to their surroundings and to suggest human use. Both are divided into larger and smaller units, facing the Courthouse with the lower, cornice-height sections. The newer building, to the north, being completed now, is a sophisticated glass structure that offers both compatibility of scale and an appropriate stylistic contrast to the landmark. This treatment provides an all-too-rare urban design context, but for the rest of the arid, rebuilt area, it is too late.

It is too late because downtown St. Louis has moved to Clayton, about ten miles away. Clayton is a place created by expressways, where there were horses and country roads not long ago. Clayton is also a place like every other place that has grown up in this fashion, consisting of a jazzy hotel and office buildings, offering one of everything from mirror glass to splayed concrete, in a compendium of clichés. This sanitized setting has attracted some impressive corporate names. What isn't a manufacturers' sample catalogue of routine parts and finishes is inflated Colonial Williamsburg. St. Louis might just as well not be anywhere around.

It is there if you look for it, however, in such places as Laclede's Landing, a 19th-century remnant on the downtown waterfront bypassed by renewal that is now experiencing a spontaneous regeneration. The distinctive old office buildings and warehouses are being recycled for everything from a theater to a furniture mart; one lovely building, stripped inside to brick and original wood, has had its generously and beautifully proportioned interiors converted to shops, galleries and showrooms.

Certainly the esthetic and environmental poverty of the new construction has a lot to do with the reevaluation and re-use of the buildings that remain. This applies as well to older residential neighborhoods, which are enjoying a quiet, steady revival. The remarkable renaissance of Lafayette Square and many of St. Louis's serene private streets is part of the same impulse. The city sees this trend as economic revival, and is apparently aiding these middle-class enclaves over the bottomless well of the poverty areas.

This reevaluation of the past also accounts for the current project to save Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building, one of the few landmarks left downtown. When the Wainwright was endangered, the State of Missouri bought it and sponsored a competition for the rest of the block that would use new and old to create a new State office center. The winning design by Mitchell-Giurgola, associated with the local firm of Hastings and Chivetta, is an excellent one that could do much to alleviate the rampant mediocrity and lack of amenity around it.

Belatedly, preservationists have discovered and fought for another interesting old building, the De Menil, adjoining the Wainwright. But downtown has already sacrificed acres of equal and better buildings for substantially less gain; the name of the urban game is tradeoff, and the point is to know a good one. In this case, however, keeping the De Menil endangers the total plan, in which the Wainwright would be saved and a full block of quality and sensibility acquired where little of either exists. The irony of the current protest is profound.

St. Louis also contains some of the most curious and frightening episodes in the recent, clouded history of urban change. Ten years ago a rejuvenated neighborhood called Gaslight Square was a lively center of antiques and entertainment; today it has turned into an abandoned, high crime area. It is, literally, a no man's land—a sinister and unreal place. Entire streets of buildings are deserted and boarded up, patrolled only by streetwalkers and small clusters of life's losers. Some blame it on refugees from the ever-present St. Louis bulldozer, but no one really knows how, or why, these changes occur. The morphology of neighborhoods still eludes the urbanists.

The experts are also trying to find out what happened at Pruitt-Igoe, only 20 years after it was hailed as a model project; now it is a symbol of the failure of the American housing dream. This is another kind of no man's land. Again, no one really knows why these buildings turned into a nightmare of crime and vandalism. Theories range from the poor match of design to the tenants' social capabilities and Federal cutback of all amenities from shops to ground floor toilets, to the brutalization and alienation of a high-rise ghetto of despair. George McCue, St. Louis's perceptive critic, has called it "the project with the embedded social time bombs ticking away." Although an excellent study by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill recommended revisions, the Housing Authority decided to dynamite instead.

The scene, today, is grisly. Following the initial dynamiting, slow, tortuous demolition is going on. Tangles of twisted reinforcing rods snake out of huge, hideous piles of concrete rubble; partly wrecked structures stand like flayed hulks; blind shells with jagged patterns of smashed windows wait for the wreckers.

St. Louis today is a strange mixture of destruction and regeneration, a process that stubbornly defies analysis. Only the river is strong and unchanging, providing permanence and place.