

Architecture

St. Louis Success

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE spectacular success of the new Powell Symphony Hall inaugurated in St. Louis last week is probably going to lead a lot of people to a lot of wrong conclusions. In a kind of architectural Gresham's law, the right thing wrongly interpreted usually has more bad than good results.

The immediate wrong conclusion being jumped to is that Powell Hall represents the triumph of traditional over modern architecture. False. The correct conclusion here is that a good old building is better than a bad new one. Powell Hall represents the triumph, simply, of suitable preservation. And, one might add, of rare good sense.

This conversion of a 1925 movie palace represents the intelligent re-use of an old structure that was, and is, a singularly handsome and appropriate theatrical setting. It has the added advantage of having started with conventionally satisfactory conditions for good acoustics. (It is quite fair to conclude that this involves less of a gamble than a new design solution.)

The building's elaborate, unreproducible, Silver Screen Versailles features are a fortuitous "architecture trouvé." The result is a concert hall of suave elegance, beautiful sound and stunning economy (about \$2½ million total cost instead of the \$10 to \$20 million required for a new building) with a maximum of glamor and glitter. As St. Louisans danced to Strauss waltzes on the stage and in the Grand Foyer after the opening concert under 11-foot chandeliers in a cream-white, crimson and gold-leaf setting, leaders in other cities were crying quietly over their multi-million-dollar, super-status, super-building plans.

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Most of those cities are engaged in the absurd cycle of tearing down irreplaceable old structures while they promote expensive new projects of depressing vacuity. Perhaps the sheer rationality and taste of the St. Louis venture may set some kind of badly needed example.

A pertinent conclusion that is being systematically evaded would be that we are putting up a lot of bad new buildings in the name of the arts. Somehow cultural centers turn into camels. (A camel, it will be remembered, is a committee-designed horse.)

The well-meant efforts of community groups lead to few artistic triumphs or architectural masterpieces. They lead, instead, to those big, miserably ordinary new houses tricked up with applied art that fall flat on the eye and ear. They lead to compromise and caution (Lincoln Center), and great art is never cautious. They lead to pretty mediocrity on a colossal scale (the Kennedy Center) and pratfall bows to tradition (the Metropolitan Opera House). They produce a comfortable, conservative culture, running slightly scared, in both package and product. Most depressing of all is the fact that so much power and

Continued on Page 35

St. Louis Success—and Blues

Continued from Page 33

prestige stand behind these failures of nerve and style.

It is not that modern architecture has failed. It is that we have yet to use the dramatic beauty or unparalleled design and structural potential of our age. It is not that we are already tired of contemporary halls. We have hardly experienced one, in the proper creative sense of the word.

Any discussion of success or failure in St. Louis leads inevitably to the city's major downtown renewal program. (The decision not to put Powell Hall downtown was motivated partly by the fact that the new Busch Stadium preempts all parking and traffic facilities—a curious shutout for a new plan.)

The completed St. Louis Arch, soaring 630 feet at the river's edge, is magnificent. Its superscaled, stainless steel curve soars grandly enough to justify any questionable engineering rationale. It offers surprising attitudes of contemporary abstract grandeur from almost every angle, and if you must share in the great American tourist compulsion to get to the top of

everything big, you can be shot up in a purple capsule, like one of five peas in a pod, to see the view from its gently swaying apex.

This may be the only way you will see the Mississippi and its historic levee. They are lost to the eye and to the ordinary pedestrian, although it is possible to get to the river if you know how. The stunning, slow rise of textured rose-gray granite that once provided a working slope for riverboat cargo is, as a prominent St. Louisan pointed out, as handsome as a city-size Nagare sculpture. The level of the park created for the arch when the old waterfront with its priceless cast-iron architectural heritage was bulldozed, hides river and levee. The park is still desolately unlandscaped.

The arch stands in a curious kind of limbo called urban redevelopment. It has no setting, and this is meant less in terms of planting or vistas than in its relationship to the city at its feet.

Waterfront St. Louis was a case history of a dying downtown. It can now be judged as a case history of commercially-sponsored renewal.

Except for the arch and the old courthouse, which form some genuinely provocative urban views, downtown St. Louis is a monument to Chamber of Commerce planning and design. It is a businessman's dream of redevelopment come true.

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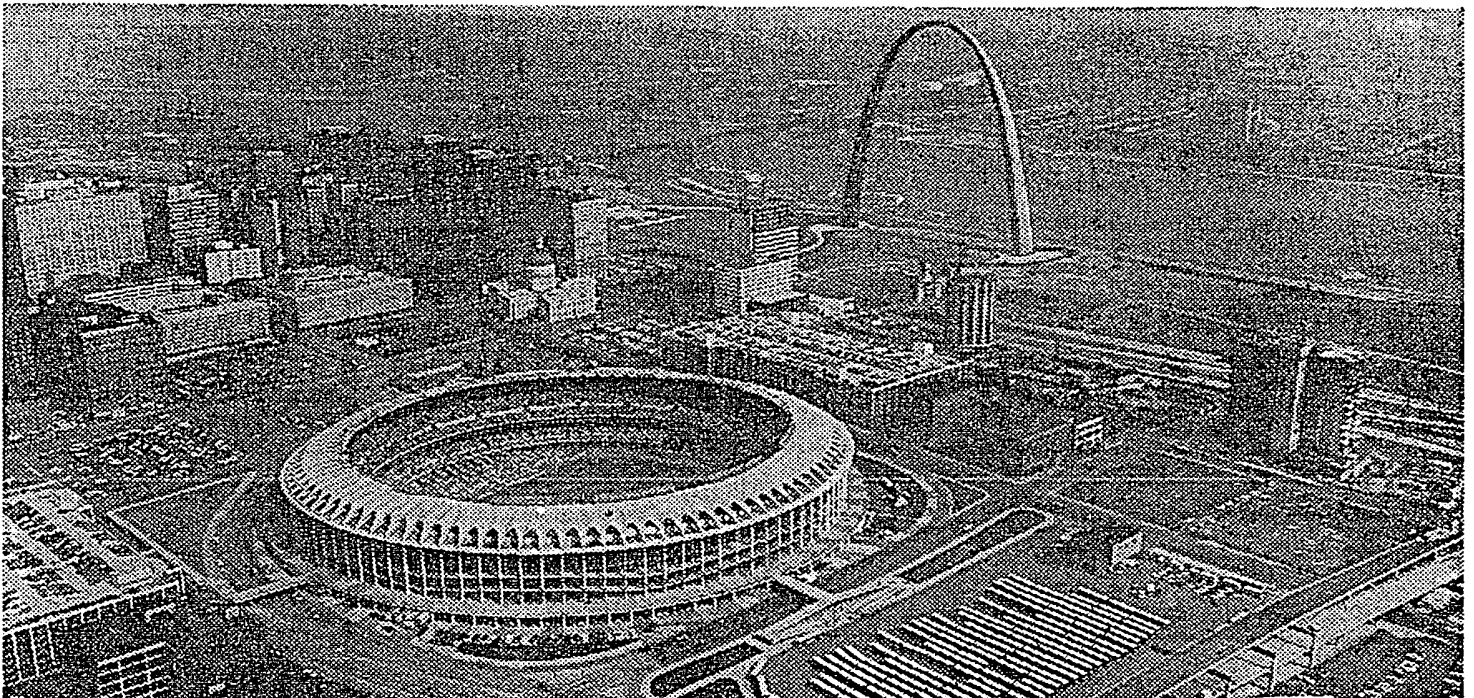
There are all of the faceless, characterless, scaleless symbols of economic regeneration—luxury apartments, hotels, a 50,000-seat stadium and multiple parking garages for 7,400 cars. Sleek, new, prosperous, stolid and dull, well-served by superhighways, the buildings are a collection of familiar profit formulas, uninspired in concept, unvarying in scale, unrelated by any standards, principles or subtleties of planning or urban design. They just stand there. They come round, rectangular, singly and in pairs. Pick your standard commercial cliché. The centerpiece is the Busch Stadium, big and banal, smoothed up by the esthetic ministrations of Edward Durell Stone.

There are none of the traditional values of vitality, variety and humanity that make cities challenging and

great. Sensing something lacking, St. Louisans thought the answer might be to add a kind of Disneyland for those whose interests are not bounded by baseball and football, an idea that was fortunately abandoned.

There was a competition for a mall leading to courthouse and arch, won by Sasaki, Dawson, De May Associates, but no one sees much point in building it, since malls are for people involved in pleasurable urban activities and what is pleasurable or interesting about a promenade bounded on one full side by a parking garage? Particularly when the walk leads to another parking garage? This will not be helped environmentally by the reerection of the Spanish Pavilion from the New York Fair, a building more meaningful for its interior display than its exterior architecture.

The new St. Louis is a success economically and a failure urbanistically. It has the impersonal gloss of a promotional brochure. A prime example of the modern landscape of urban alienation, it has gained a lot of real estate and lost a historic city.



St. Louis downtown renewal, with housing, hotels and parking garages between Busch Stadium and the Gateway Arch
The modern landscape of urban alienation