Architecture: Fitting Site

American Institute of Architects Meets in St. Louis, a Changing City

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ST. LOUIS, June 17—More than 2,500 architects and allied professionals are meeting here this week for the 96th annual convention of the American Institute of Architects, in a city that has virtually torn itself apart to rebuild itself in a new image.

While the architects discuss the forces that shape cities in their professional programs, they are seeing a city that has more shapeless, bulldozed open space and more ambitious and debatable plans for renewal than almost any other in the country.

There is no "old" St. Louis any more. The city is celebrating its bicentennial this year, but the site of the original trading and trapping town on the Mississippi is now the flat, bare, unlanscaped 80-acre riverfront park cleared in the nineteen-thirties for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

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Here the city's most spectacular construction, the giant steel Gateway Arch, which will be the tallest national monument in the United States, is rising slowly, slowed further by the technical complexities of its daring engineering.

Eero Saarinen's prize-winning design of 1948, finally begun in 1962, now thrusts its two still unconnected, obliquely inclined sides 250 feet into the air above the flat river and the flat city, its highly polished stainless steel surfaces lookingly surprisingly like lusterless stone or concrete. Occasionally, sunlight gives it a rippling flash of brilliance.

When it is finished, some time next year, the 630-foot inverted catenary symbolizing St. Louis's traditional position as the gateway to the West and called "a triumphal arch for the 20th Century" by its architect, will dominate the area with Eiffel Tower-like insistence.

Like the Eiffel Tower, and St. Louis's own Eads Bridge, a handsome structural steel adventure and local landmark in the eighteen-sixties that stands almost in the shadow of the arch, it will rank as one of the great engineering achievements of modern times. It will dramatize a landscape that is not nearly as dramatic as its history would indicate — St. Louis seems to have muffed at least two physical incarnations and is now working on a dubious third. But to St. Louisans, its taut, incomplete forms are full of vitality and promise for the city's next phase.

There is less promise on the ground. With 465 acres of weedy, bulldozed land in the center of the city, the Mill Creek Urban Renewal Project presents the questionable spectacle of one of the country's most unsuccessful redevelopment programs. It is the largest area of its kind in any major city dedicated to the theory of total slum clearance.

Known locally as Hiroshima Flats, it was leveled in 1960-61 and has never had an over-all development plan. It is now dotted by desultory building that includes a few apartments and town house groups of bravely cheerful design which seem to be whistling in the wilderness, and some spotty commercial and industrial enterprises. A monument to the architectural and planning deficiencies of urban renewal by private developers without adequately coordinated direction or control, it is a mix-matched grab bag of scattered elements that has the look of a slum of the future in the making.

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In addition, St. Louis plans to raze more than 23 city blocks in its downtown area, connecting the Mill Creek desert with the still desert-like Jefferson Memorial Park, for a set of business-sponsored renewal plans that have alarmed some critics.

What St. Louis has done, and is doing, adds up to virtual demolition of the existing central city in order to build a new one.

For its waterfront, it now has a scaleless park. What it is about to construct, in the most important adjacent downtown area, is a sports stadium serviced by parking, motels and commercial facilities, which will include a roofed-over Disneyland with 10 acres of floors substituting synthetic riverboat attractions for the real ones that St. Louis has destroyed. There will be massive and numerous parking garages that consultant Edward D. Stone is trying to disguise as architecture.

Esthetically, and as planning of a sound kind of city architecture based on social and civic as well as business needs, the plan has some professional observers apoplectic. Drawings show a gleaming arch, a shining stadium, a series of high-rise towers and a green continuation of the existing malls with Carl Milles's famous fountains, which will eventually lead to the river, whose traditional muddy waters are miraculously rendered blue.

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A preview of the new downtown is offered by the soaring Bel Air Motel and its Trader Vic Restaurant, constructed recently near the waterfront, a combination of Miami hotel modern and Mississippi Polynesian that might be labelled Pop Architecture.

If the city's urban renewal prospects are gloomy, its rehabilitation record is glowing. Throughout St. Louis, in 13 neighborhoods, over 36,000 modest, small-scale, red brick 19th-century dwellings have been repaired, repainted and restored to health in a remarkably sensitive and successful city-sponsored campaign.

Although it stresses its "glamorous" new developments, it is in this kind of rehabilitation that St. Louis sets an example for the rest of the country to study and emulate, both in conservation of local neighborhoods and the value of the Victorian heritage.