ST. LOUIS AND THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN CITIES
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THE architects who came to St. Louis last week for their 96th annual convention saw a city in radical transition. All of the stages of decay, death, rebirth and rebuilding are currently visible — with the usual successes and failures, ironies and anachronisms. The urban spectacular, a characteristic of our time, is a pretty hard show to beat.

The visitor's first impression is that St. Louis has been bombed. There is no waterfront. Eighty acres of buildings along the Mississippi were razed in the 1930's for a riverfront park where Eero Saarinen's striking steel Gateway Arch has now risen to almost half its 630-foot height.

The irony here is that the heart and history of St. Louis were in its waterfront, when the river was its life. A further irony: those historic buildings that were cleared away, one of the best collections of cast-iron commercial fronts in the country, were stored in a warehouse as a kind of backhanded gesture to the past. They have since been buried under tons of fill dumped from the construction of the new Mark Twain Highway. Call it progress and expendable culture.

Renewal and Irony

Not only is there no waterfront, there is virtually no midtown. 465 acres have been bulldozed in the Mill Creek area for the largest slum clearance urban renewal project in the country. The anachronism is that this plan for the future has no plan. Four years after the bulldozer, building is only straggling back in an unrelated catch-as-catch-can fashion that promises nothing for the future except a different and newer kind of mess. Mill Creek remains a weedy wasteland.

The irony: much of the fine wood, marble, iron and glass from the demolished slum houses that were once St. Louis mansions was rescued and installed in the nightclub area called Gaslight Square, a profitable, appealing and highly successful example of spontaneous private renewal, done without public sponsorship or funds. (To St. Louis's credit, however, the City Plan Commission is now concerned with maintenance of peripheral neighborhoods to protect the area.)

Soon, there will be no downtown. Thirty odd blocks are coming out just beyond the waterfront for a redevelopment proposal that is hailed alternately as genius or idiocy, depending on where you sit planning-wise, to use an appropriately awful phrase.

If you are a businessman, and the sponsoring private group consists of all businessmen and no planners, the idea of putting a sports stadium in the heart of downtown to bring people there sounds great. Nor does anyone seem to question the wisdom of turning over the city's center to a group of mammoth parking garages. To planners, it is extremely doubtful that Downtown for Cars is synonymous with Downtown for People, particularly when no provisions are being made for pedestrian pleasures.

There is also some reason to question the logic of a stadium that feasibility studies have proved to be nonself-supporting in this area, and which therefore must be supplemented by an entertainment center. This will be a Disneyland, placed to block the stadium, the riverfront and the city's one cohesive planning factor, the central mall. Add the ultimate irony: it will recreate in full, phony audio-animatronic riverboat glory just those local features that the city has destroyed.

The visitor soon comes to the conclusion that St. Louis has been operating with a singular lack of vision, forward or backward.

If he looks for the special character that the city's past suggests, he finds only the warm rose-pink stone of the handsome sloping levee on the Mississippi's edge built of Belgian granite carried as ship's ballast, a handful of historic houses and a few splendid old buildings that evoke the city's sense of place and spirit of pioneering progress.

The trouble has been, of course, that St. Louis is a Victorian city, and until very recently anything Victorian has been looked on with shame and scorn.

Most of the city's monuments are of the late nineteenth century. Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building of 1891 was one of the first structures to proclaim the esthetic excellence of the skyscraper. A more indigenous building, the 1891-92 Brew House of the Anheuser-Busch plant, is a marvel of cast-iron balconies around an open skylit court, furnished with gleaming copper vats and five-story iron chandeliers wrought in the form of hop vines, as elegant as anything of the eighteenth century. (The beer is good, too.)

St. Louis has one of the architectural gems of all time in Sullivan's 1892 Wainwright Tomb in Bellefontaine Cemetary, and it should not be necessary to point out to the careless custodians of our culture that this small structure is a national treasure in a class with anything similar by Bramante or Michelangelo.

Preservation Problems

Union Station, a magnificent granite pile of 1896 in the rugged Richardsonian manner by Theodore Link, is a building of superb substance and style. A nocturnal visit (or did we dream it?) revealed an empty, benchless, spotless, perfectly maintained palatial interior with a huge arched roof, intricate plaster ornament and tiered arcaded balconies, an adjacent small hall converted into a plush-red catering restaurant, all waiting, at the least, for some splendid ball. For a New Yorker the dreamlike quality is enhanced by memory of the grimy tragedy of Penn Station. Some day St. Louis will have to face the question of Union Station's future. The building is not expendable.

Neither is the Old Post Office, a High Victorian landmark of 1874-82, expendable, and the question is being faced right now after a five-year battle to save it.

The American Institute of Architects passed a national resolution supporting its preservation and backing the local chapter during the St. Louis convention. The Federal Government seems inclined to consider making the building available to the city if it wants it. (To add one more irony to the St. Louis score, the Government cleaned and tuckpointed the old structure at the same time that it announced its demolition.)

No one arguing for demolition has mentioned the windfall to some private operator of such a preassembled parcel on a choice downtown site declared surplus by the government and sold for speculative development.

Nor does anyone stress how badly cities need the contrast and color of these solid stone, strongly sculpturesque Victorian landmarks in an increasingly devitalized urban landscape of pancake flat facades. Downtown may be dying, but it can bore itself to death, too. The fate of the Old Post Office is a test of all cities in crisis with disappearing pasts and dubious futures and a crying need for maturity.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE—The Old St. Louis Post Office, by A. B. Mullett, 1874-82.

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