CHAPTER I

Introduction

Fenced-Off Corners,
Wider Settings, and the
New American Landscape

Edwin Reller Jr. will never occupy the place in the annals of American urban history that is reserved for such luminaries as Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham. But in September 1994, when he and the Cotton Building Company announced their plans for a new subdivision in the far western reaches of St. Louis County, the developer found himself playing a small but key part in the changing way that Americans look at cities.

Reller enthusiastically described his $50 million project as a complex of five adjacent "villages," each characterized by common lot sizes and similar housing values. With its range of densely developed housing, its curving streets and its carefully separated land uses, the project was bigger than—but not categorically different from—many others launched by developers in the suburban area known as "West County" in the boom years of the 1980s and 1990s. But before the first surveyor had arrived on the wooded site, before the first load of dirt was hauled away, this particular developer found his project mired in legal difficulties and public criticism; the development ultimately stumbled amidst a transformation of public attitudes in St. Louis County not unlike the transformation already at work in large cities across the country. That transformation saw the widespread decline of a century-old article of faith: that aggressive public and private development should serve as tools in enhancing a "wider setting" of shared civic values across the metropolitan landscape. In the place of this assumption has come a growing acceptance of

a phenomenon once dismissed, in this particular city, as that of the "fenced-off corner": small communities inspiring localized political loyalty and promising to their residents a life distinct from that enjoyed by residents of the surrounding region.

This book is written in an effort to understand how such concepts as these first developed in urban America, and how they have subsequently served or misled us in our efforts to guide or adapt to the changes that continually face our communities. The book's focus is St. Louis, a city that is unique in many ways, but typical in far more. St. Louis's story stands for the story of all those cities whose ambitions and civic self-image, forged from the growth of the mercantile and industrial eras, have been dramatically altered in the years since. More dramatically, perhaps, than most—but in a manner shared by all—St. Louis's shifting economic base, population, and altered landscape have forced scholars, policymakers, and residents alike to acknowledge the transience of what were once assumed to be inexorable metropolitan trends: concentration, growth, accumulated wealth, and generally improved well-being among them.

To understand the source of these changes, I have chosen specifically to look at the "urban landscape"—a term that encompasses buildings, parks, streets, and infrastructure—both the grand and deliberate variety, shaped by architects, planners, and engineers, and those ordinary, allegedly "unplanned" spaces that equally form a part of the daily experiences of city-dwellers. I take as axiomatic not only that these structures and spaces are inherently social in their origin and effect (and that the landscape is, therefore, a vital document in which to "read" urban social history), but that, to a more striking extent than other social productions, they are key factors in triggering the dynamic and often unsettling changes that have characterized our society over time.

The second point bears some elaboration, for it informs much of what follows. Cities are concentrated sites of an inherently unstable tension between persistent physical environments and fleeting social change. The fit between intent and realization in the urban landscape is rarely perfect or long-lasting. Instead, as Lewis Mumford once wrote, "the rhythm of life in cities seems to be an alternation between materialization and etherialization: the concrete structure, detaching itself through a human response, takes on a symbolic meaning . . . while subjective images, ideas, intuitions, only partly formed in their original expressions, likewise take on material attributes, in visible structures, whose very size, position, complexity, organization, and esthetic form extend the area of meaning and value, otherwise inexpressible."'

The elements of the urban landscape are at once the product of countless previous decisions, and the instigator of many yet to come. The "materialization" of needs and desires, of which Mumford writes, projects those ephemeral wants far into the future. The cost and sheer scale of effort involved in building even a single home ties up labor and money for months

or years at a time. Once built, that structure is then implanted in the landscape, in all likelihood, for generations to come. The circumstances under which others will then see, use, buy, or sell it will, of course, change enormously over time. Yet its physical persistence serves, literally, as a touchstone, uniting socially and temporally disparate experiences around a common, palpable reality. In such manner does a relatively intractable landscape forever restrain and reorder the otherwise more fluid migration of people, capital, and ideas — all of which concepts have tended, incidentally, to be treated in the scholarly record as being either independent, or determinant, of their physical surroundings.

Mindful of these assumptions, I want to look again at the urban landscape as both repository and catalyst of Mumford's "images, ideas, intuitions." More specifically, I will focus on the ways in which St. Louisans defined their individual and collective identities through the processes of dividing, trading, improving, and dwelling upon land — acts that, as I will argue, not only reflect but actively shape social relations. This focus, which takes us back as far as the city's founding in 1764 and forward to the present, concentrates on the critical period between 1850 and 1910, when the notion of a clear opposition between fenced-off corners and wider settings was articulated, in form and in word. We will see how a convergence of political intention and geographic happenstance during that period was vested with an aura of inevitability. We will see, too, how that aura gained sufficient power to direct future political and financial capital toward the maintenance of a city form that had long since ceased either to reflect or to serve the interests of the majority of the city's residents.

For this reappraisal to work, we need to look anew at both the fenced-off corner — the small, closely limited spaces of the home and the street — and at the wider setting, or the city itself. Much of the book will refer back to the streets in a two-mile-square area that includes the heart of what is commonly referred to as South St. Louis (Illustration 1-1). In addition to the fact that much of this portion of the city looks today as it did eighty years ago, the South Side (as it will alternately be called in the pages that follow) survives as a recognizable, distinct entity within the changing whirlwind of neighborhoods and communities that make up contemporary St. Louis. While its problems today are legion, the area has suffered fewer of the social and physical ravages that have plagued much of the rest of this shrinking city in the last half-century. The reasons for this relative good fortune will concern me later; for now, it is the fact that South St. Louis opens a window on America's urban past that makes it such an appropriate place on which to focus our historical gaze.

If looking at a distinct, small area helps us better to understand the city as a whole, the reverse is true as well: to know these neighborhoods, we had better track the changing city of which they are a part. Like any urban area, the

TIME
PUBLISHING CO.'S
MAP OF THE
City of St. Louis
1889.
Showing Railroad Terminals and location of Merchants Bridge
now in course of construction.

Compliments of
S. F. & T. A. SCOTT,
Real Estate Brokers
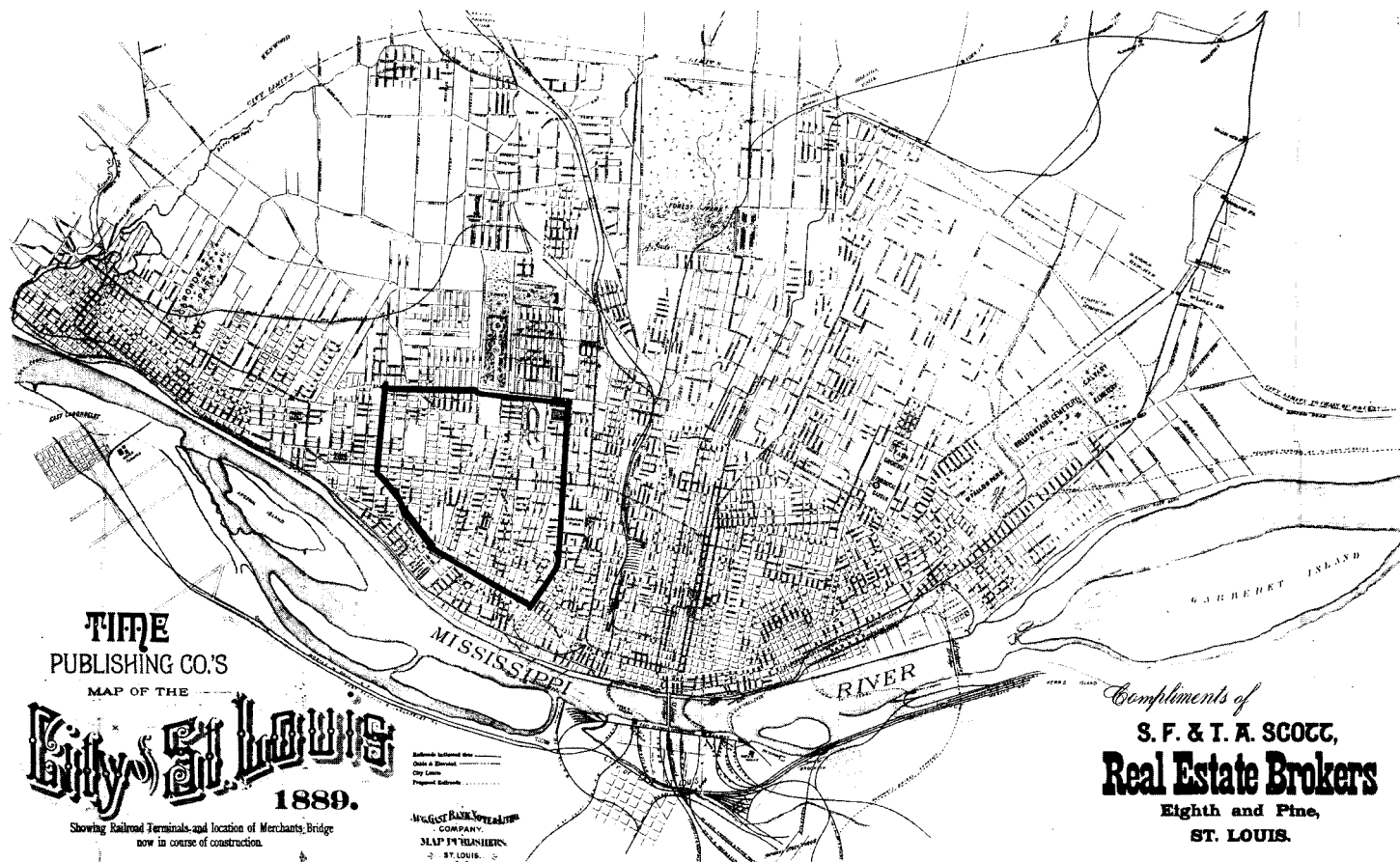Eighth and Pine,
ST. LOUIS.

ILLUSTRATION 1-1. *South St. Louis Study Area.* The two-mile-square area indicated by the outline is bounded on the west by Grand Avenue (the westernmost limit of the city from 1855 to 1875), on the east by South Broadway (known through most of the nineteenth century as Carondelet Road), on the north by Lafayette Avenue, and on the south by Chippewa Street. This area, which constitutes a large part of what St. Louisans know generally as "South St. Louis," forms the focus of much of the research in this book. South St. Louis's built landscape still looks much as it did when the area was developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Original map, A. Gast, 1889, courtesy of Missouri Historical Society)

South Side has historically been defined, conceptually and physically, in terms of its relation to the rest of the city; as the city changes, so too does the neighborhood. I will, therefore, steer a course between the city and the study area in the pages that follow. This shifting focus can help us recapture the ceaseless, shifting imbalance between fragmentation and unity, between shared or clashing notions of what is private and what public, between evolving definitions of what is "ours" and what "theirs," between the wider setting and the fenced-off corner.

The best place to begin, however, is here and now, in a situation that is familiar to most of us in type, if not necessarily in its particulars. Those who want to know, more specifically, how it is that an inert landscape can take on such charged meaning in people's lives should consider Wildwood. This newest of St. Louis County's ninety-one municipalities is dedicated specifically to regulating projects like the one that Edwin Reller proposed in 1994. Tired of a county planning commission that, in one neighbor's words, "allowed builders to just come in and do what they damn well please," the residents of this formerly unincorporated area voted in February 1995 to create a city of their own on land that included the proposed construction site. Reller's development proposal came just as the Committee for the Incorporation of Wildwood was attaining its highest public profile and reaching the peak of its political effectiveness. Rather than signal the beginning of another major West County development, his announcement simply helped to fan the secessionist flames that five months later resulted in the chartering of the new city.[2]

In its first years of existence, this town of some 17,000 people—spread thinly across 67 square miles of land at St. Louis's suburban fringe—has struggled with the challenges that any municipality faces, such as taxation, infrastructure, and provision of police and emergency services. Unlike their counterparts in other newly incorporated towns across St. Louis County, however, Wildwood's residents have placed a rather different priority at the top of their list: the self-conscious pursuit of "community."

"There comes a time," wrote the Committee for Incorporation in their Plan of Intent, filed with the St. Louis County Boundary Commission late in 1992, "when everyone must choose to find a better way." Staking their right to "control their own destiny," the committee asserted that "we seek a government which is of, for and by the people to protect their interests and not that [sic] of others, to ensure their values and not those of others." The rhetoric of the Plan of Intent balanced inclusion with exclusivity—a desire to build one community with a complementary wish to reject all others.

In the brief time since Wildwood's highly public battle for incorporation, the pursuit of this complex mission has been most clearly manifest in one particular aspect of civic activity: the design of the municipal landscape. Just as the initial election was characterized partially in environmental terms ("a victory for the trees," as one supporter dubbed it), so too was the early course

of the new city defined largely by decisions about land use and physical appearance. City officials spent the bulk of their first years in office crafting zoning ordinances and building codes, all in an effort to make a place that would be distinct from its suburban surroundings. To guide them in their work, they engaged preservationists, ecologists, and the "neotraditional" Florida-based planning firm of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, which recommended among other things that the city adopt a "Jeffersonian grid," within which small neighborhoods ("the optimal size . . . is $1/4$ mile from center to edge") would give physical definition to the community's social goals.4

In their quest to preserve political and architectural control within their newly defined community, the citizens of Wildwood, Missouri are not alone. Throughout North America, and amidst great media attention, Wildwood and towns like it have arisen in common reaction against the growth that encircles not only big cities like St. Louis but most of America's small towns as well.5 Politically, Wildwood's citizens have attempted to carve a sympathetic niche out of the monolith of St. Louis County. They have set about to make a place that will function as our cities and small towns used to function, a place where the values and interests of "others" outside the community need not interfere with their own, a place where—to borrow from television vernacular—"everyone knows your name." Their efforts to give shape to this vision through urban design reflect not only a desire to set themselves apart from the surrounding sprawl, but also an earnest belief in the power of physical planning to aid them in realizing their broader social goals.

The suburban landscape against which Wildwood's residents chose to react in 1995 is familiar to most of us. Across west St. Louis County, along arterial roads that once brought truck produce into the city, mansarded shopping centers enframe spacious parking lots; in adjacent residential subdivisions, frame-and-veneer houses with gabled roofs and pedimented entries rise on concrete platforms surrounded by new-laid turf. The names of these new subdivisions, like the styles of the homes within them, belie their almost-urban density. Motorists cruising Manchester or Clayton Road pass gateways and billboards announcing all manner of "creeks," "oaks," and "estates," not to mention enough "meadows," "summits," and "trails" to make this mostly low-lying region sound like a Swiss canton.

Despite the disapproval with which Wildwood's citizens—echoing a growing number of social or architectural critics—might view such familiar landscapes, they are the products of developers who operate from motives and means essentially similar to those employed by their predecessors for more than a century. While it is tempting to join the ranks of writers who dismiss the outcome of those developers' efforts today as a "geography of nowhere," an irredeemable "empire wilderness," the quality of this contemporary metropolitan landscape concerns me less, in the pages that follow, than the long history—most of it unseen—that frames our current reluctance to claim it as

our own, to acknowledge the order and the historical patterns that lie within its apparent chaos. This is, after all, *our* city; it has developed neither (as the earliest city planners once believed) through autonomous, almost biological tropisms, nor (as revisionist critics maintained in more recent decades) through decisions forced down our throats, but through the highly responsive—if flawed—mechanisms of free-market capitalism and representative government.[6]

The passion with which Americans debate the appearance of their cities reflects a common recognition, beneath our differences, that the urban landscape is an inherently social product. Developers of subdivisions like Summit Heights or The Meadow at Cherry Hills (to name just two of the current crop in St. Louis County) know that too—which is why they choose names that correspond more closely to idealized images of the nearby landscape than to its actual appearance. So, for that matter, do Duany and Plater-Zyberk, when they flatter their client's revolutionary spirit with talk of the "Jeffersonian" grid, as though a community of sturdy husbandmen were only awaiting the arrival of front porches and four-way stop signs to make its presence known.

Given the charged social meaning of urban space, then, it does not require a tremendous stretch of the imagination to find in the controversies surrounding communities like Wildwood a larger tension at work than simply the conflict of trees versus highways. This book presumes instead that the seeming contradiction so evident today in American cities like St. Louis—their expansion into broad metropolitan regions, and their simultaneous atomization into small municipalities and fragmented neighborhoods—is one symptom of a particularly American tension. It is a tension that has dogged American culture since this nation ceased to be the commonwealth of small villages and yeoman farmers envisioned by men like Jefferson; a tension that lurks between the often conjoined terms of "liberty" and "justice"—between the rights of individuals and the responsibilities of citizens. It is the tension of fenced-off corners and wider settings.

According to the ideals to which most Americans would still subscribe (whether they live in Wildwood or in the impoverished city of East St. Louis, Illinois, across the Mississippi River), these poles must hold each other in check. As long as they are balanced—as long as society functions collectively to protect the liberties of each of its members—then democracy works. When that delicate balance is broken—when political bodies run roughshod over the rights of their constituents, or when the liberties accorded society's "factions" (to borrow from James Madison) threaten the overall social compact—then, it is said, either anarchy or tyranny beckons.

It is this larger, underlying dynamic that makes the politics of everyday urban development seem so urgent to its participants. Our choices about whom we will associate with and whom we will ignore, about which responsibilities

and privileges belong to "the people" who deserve them and which to the "others" who do not, do more than reflect the happenstance of political boundaries. Wildwood is but one more reminder that those boundaries are themselves products of our decisions about how to tie together or break apart the elements of our social fabric. The city is not only a political entity but a *place,* and we engage in the political process largely in order to manage our conflicting claims on that place. The patchwork of streets and survey lines etched across the land becomes in this way a blueprint for mediating between the larger, corporate interests of abstract institutions like cities and counties, and the more particular interests of the citizens who go about their daily lives there. It diagrams the limits of private rights and public responsibilities — and it does so in ways that we seldom notice until we find ourselves on the wrong side of a "No Trespassing" or "End County Maintenance" sign.

To judge from the evidence that the urban blueprint presents today, the difficulty that American cities face is not necessarily that either extreme — the fragmented pursuit of liberty or the overweening maintenance of order — threatens to overwhelm the other. The "unified service area" and the consolidated metropolitan government are as much artifacts of our time as are fragmented political landscapes like those of St. Louis County, Missouri or Cook County, Illinois. The problem rests more in the difficulty that we seem to have in negotiating between these extremes. The trouble that we have comprehending our contemporary metropolitan landscape is both cause and symptom of that difficulty. The citizens of Wildwood talk about restoring a sense of community, yet they reject the claims of an existing community, St. Louis County, which served area residents' interests for nearly two hundred years. To which community is the greater loyalty owed? City planners speak of downtown as though it still served uniquely as the region's hub, while developers treat it as simply another cluster of commercial and office functions — another "edge city," in effect, among many. Are St. Louisans somehow responsible for maintaining a single symbolic and financial center that represents the entire region? Many of the neighborhoods close to the urban center, where we expect to find the greatest density, are empty; the suburban fringe — for all of its "glens," "trails," and "creeks" — is often more densely populated. Are we obligated, as some maintain, to repopulate the central city before spreading out along its edges? Such questions force us to reconsider not only the look of the city but the traditional social, cultural, and political expectations that we bring to the urban landscape. It is perhaps because they are so hard to answer today that the current form of our cities is so easily dismissed as a geography of nowhere.

This book is dedicated to the dissenting proposition that everywhere is somewhere, no matter what it looks like. To find that "somewhere" is to do more than recognize the new order of the metropolitan landscape; it is also to see more clearly the conflicting ways in which we construct relations

between individuals and their communities. In the process, we stand at least a chance of finding fresh ways to reconcile the tensions inherent in our culture generally, and in our metropolitan areas particularly.

To make somewhere out of nowhere, however, we must take the trouble to do two things: first, to understand how our cities came to look as they do, and second, to examine why we have such a hard time malting sense of them. As it happens, those challenges—tracing the changing form of the metropolis and tracing the history of our efforts to articulate that form—are really part of the same task. Both, ultimately, lead us back to a time when the fenced-off corner and the wider setting provided Americans with a seemingly clear set of alternatives for urban growth.

Drawing from the history of St. Louis, this book will demonstrate the proposition that changing urban form, on the one hand, and our changing understanding or expectations of that form, on the other, are mutually impressionable and inextricably intertwined. That simple proposition is by no means universally accepted. Many contemporary critics and architects, ascribing to urban forms an autonomy and a power to determine behavior that they have rarely had, treat the elements of our urban landscape as the unchanging carriers of their original shapers' intent. Others, positing that particular social programs must translate into particular images and designs, shortchange people's remarkable ability to adapt virtually any human landscape to a range of needs.[7] Only by reconnecting the phenomena of form-giving and form-interpreting into a singular, dynamic process—a process whose outcome is far less predictable or clear-cut than historians or policy-makers might wish—can we start to make the contemporary metropolitan landscape look less inevitable and more comprehensible than we have imagined, less like nowhere and more like somewhere.

The difficulty of reorienting ourselves in such a way has been compounded, as I hope to show, by the long historical shadow of the city of fenced-off corners and wider settings, a city that dates roughly from the mid-nineteenth through the early-twentieth centuries. It is upon that city, uncomfortable or unjust as it may have been for many Americans in its time, that we have long depended in our effort to express the differing ways in which Americans can reconcile the tensions between individual liberties and civic responsibilities. As the United States begins a third century and a new millennium, the lingering image of this presumably more orderly place still provides us with many of the terms that inform our discussion of an uncertain metropolitan future.

By way of reconstructing at a glance how such a city differed from the landscape of our own time, let us consider St. Louis more than a century ago. We might begin some twenty-five miles east of Edwin Reller's dream development, in a section of South St. Louis known as Soulard. It is a very different landscape from that of late-twentieth-century suburbia (Illustration 1-2). Like
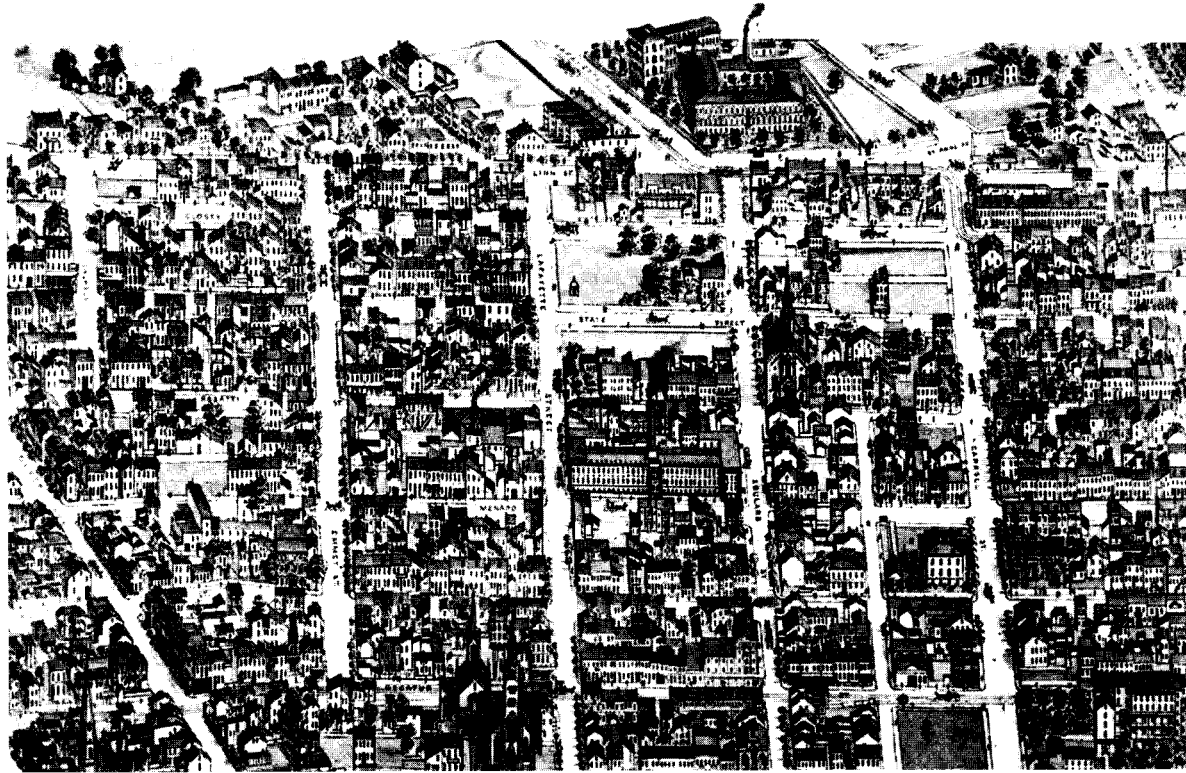
ILLUSTRATION 1-2.   *Soulard Neighborhood, South St. Louis, bird's-eye view, c. 1875.* Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American reformers pointed to the crowded landscapes of working-class urban neighborhoods like this one as evidence of the growing influence of "fenced-off corners" on the city at large. (Reprinted from Camille N. Dry and Richard J. Compton, *Pictorial St. Louis: A Topographical Survey Drawn in Perspective* [St. Louis, 1876], plate 25, courtesy of Missouri Historical Society)

Baltimore's Fells Point, Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine, Boston's North End, and
dozens of other communities that still stand in America's older industrial
cities, the Soulard neighborhood was first peopled by foreign-born immigrants
in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Most of these people were new to the
city, eager for work, and willing to live in crowded conditions to get it. The
blocks of their neighborhoods were lined with shops and corner taverns, liv-
ery stables, small factories, and cheap housing. Under the church spires that
punctuated their skylines, the language and the customs of Slovenia and
Bohemia, Sicily and Salonika, found safe haven against the unfamiliar world
that pressed from without.

In 1900, the city's intellectuals and social reformers were as horrified by
aging, poor neighborhoods like this as were their counterparts a century later
by the endless tract developments of the suburban edge. The reason for their
critical response, however, was quite different. The problem with Soulard and
areas like it was not that they lacked a localized sense of community but that
they possessed too *much* of one. Separated by cultural and linguistic divides
from the rest of the city, congested and at times ridden with disease, home to
political bosses who derived their power by distributing favors, these enclaves
threatened the welfare of the larger civic community, to which all the city's
residents needed ultimately to be attached. To muckraking reporters like
Jacob Riis, as to crusading mayors like Cleveland's Tom Johnson or to early
city planners like Benjamin Marsh, such quarters would have no place in the
city of the future. The task of opening up the "fenced-off corners," as one
St. Louisan disparagingly called the Soulard area at the time, and integrating
them into a larger civic whole, was one of the chief avowed motives of the
professionals, business leaders, and public officials who united under the
banner of civic reform in cities across America.

Soulard was not an exceptional case, in this city or any other. While con-
temporary reformers may have wished to depict them as isolated outposts,
such neighborhoods actually comprised much of the American urban land-
scape in 1900. They ringed the country's downtowns like barrel hoops, con-
straining once booming centers of commerce and trade from reaching the
more affluent neighborhoods that lay beyond. On the other side of town from
Soulard, to the north of St. Louis's central business district, German-speaking
families crowded the once bucolic streets around Hyde Park, just uphill from
the packing houses and lumber yards that lined the north waterfront. Between
Hyde Park and downtown, the city's newest immigrants—Jews from Russia
and Poland—crowded into aging tenements around the busy Biddle Market.
Farther west, past the new city hall on Market Street, stretched the Chestnut
Valley and the adjacent Mill Creek Valley: a two-mile–long zone of bars, cheap
hotels, pawnshops, and—not least—the homes of a good number of St. Louis's
35,000 African American residents, who enjoyed few opportunities to move
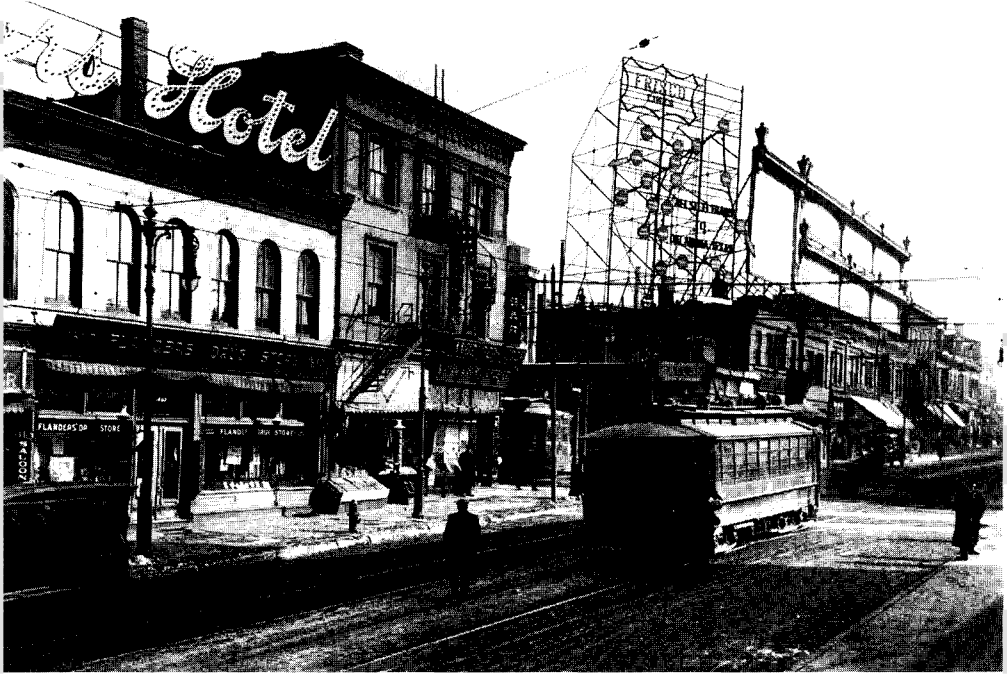to more desirable quarters (Illustration 1-3).

ILLUSTRATION 1-3. *Market Street at Eighteenth Street, c. 1910.* Extending west from downtown St. Louis along some of the city's oldest and busiest streetcar lines, the Chestnut and Mill Creek Valleys were poor and working-class, largely African American neighborhoods at the beginning of the 1900s. This area of small flats, tenements, saloons, churches, and neighborhood retailers would see some of the most dramatic clearance in St. Louis during the decades that extended from the City Beautiful movement of the 1910s to the urban renewal era of the 1950s and 1960s. (Courtesy of Missouri Historical Society)

What solution did enlightened civic leaders offer to the problem of the fenced-off corners that proliferated in America's cities? Not surprisingly, considering the spatial terms by which they defined the problem, their response was conceived in physical ways. If people could be debased by their surroundings, reformers reasoned, surely people could be elevated by their surroundings as well. To that end they offered a series of improvements to the urban landscape, ranging from stricter housing codes to great public building schemes. In place of fenced-off corners, growing in distinct manners across an increasingly diverse city, they promoted (to borrow once again from a phrase coined by a St. Louis advocate of the movement) a "wider setting" of civic commerce, culture, politics, and architecture. To this end, the city would be made into a continuous, interconnected, and accessible system of spaces,

closely tied to a prominent core. Its new spatial unity would both reflect and promote a new social unity.

Like the fenced-off corners that linger in American cities to this day, elements of the wider setting remain visible in St. Louis and in cities across the country. They appeared earliest in such grand-scale experiments in landscape engineering as New York's Central Park and Boston's "emerald necklace" of parkways (both conceived, after the Civil War, in the studios of the influential landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted), and they continued in a variety of forms through the century that followed: in the neoclassical stolidity of San Francisco's and Cleveland's civic centers and the landscaped vistas of Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin Parkway; in planned industrial zones like Chicago's Central Manufacturing District; in the comprehensive boulevard systems of younger cities like Kansas City and Dallas; in high-speed expressways, like Los Angeles's Arroyo Seco or Detroit's Davison, and in their larger, postwar counterparts, the interstate highways. In these instances and in so many others, planners and investors justified their work in terms of its benefits to the entire city, rather than to the city's constituent parts. Whether focusing on transportation improvements, facilities for business and industry, government centers, or recreational spaces, theirs was the self-delegated task of reconceiving the city as a single organism, each of whose parts worked toward the smooth functioning of the whole.

St. Louis still shows evidence of these Progressive Era efforts to plan for the wider setting. They survive in broad gestures like the landscaped parkway that stretches along Market Street west of Twelfth Street (Illustration 1-4), replacing a good part of the old Chestnut Valley; in small improvements like the market building and the old Carnegie Library that stand at the northern edge of Soulard; and most conspicuously along the downtown waterfront, where the Gateway Arch rises on a landscaped hill once covered by warehouses, factories, and busy wholesaling establishments.

Even to categorize such pieces of the urban landscape, as I have in this quick survey, is to partake less of an objective description than of a powerful metaphor that continues to cast a shadow on our understanding of American urban life. Yet if this metaphor ever accorded with reality, it does so less every day. The image of the city as a battleground between factional interests and a single, common good (an image propagated by planners, public officials, and even historians from the turn of the twentieth century onward) clearly offers an increasingly inadequate explanation for the shifting picture of development and decay, of concentration and dispersal, of localized and regional ties that characterizes not just St. Louis but virtually all American cities. Even to turn that image on its head, as the residents of places like Wildwood have, by valorizing the fenced-off corner at the expense of the wider setting is to partake of the same dated metaphors.

ILLUSTRATION 1.4
Market Street at Eigh-
teenth Street, c. 1990.
Today, the landscaped
parkway that extends
along Market Street west
from Tucker Boulevard
(TwelfthStreet)to Twen-
tieth Street is all that
remains of the Chestnut
Valley—once one of
St. Louis's most crowded
and vibrant, but impover-
ished, neighborhoods.
(Courtesyof the author)
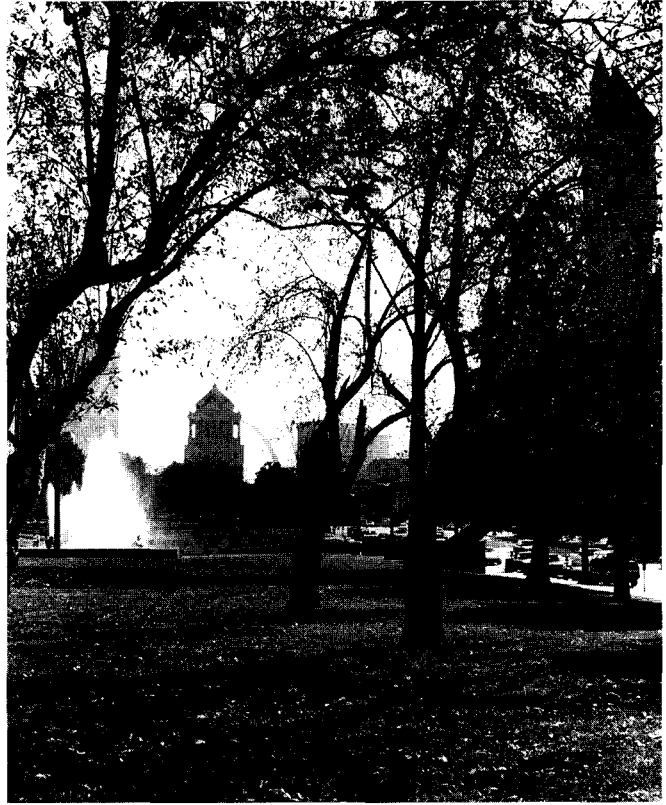
Instead, as this book will argue, the clear opposition of fenced-off corners and wider settings is itself a historical artifact, a response in both real and imagined terms to particular patterns of urban growth during a particular period. It explains neither the tightly limited towns of pre-industrial, early-nineteenth-century America, nor the fragmented, multi-centered metropolises that characterize our own time. It describes one historical stage of an ongoing, dynamic relationship between people and the spaces they inhabit in America's cities. While this stage was not distinguished by tremendous social harmony, it did represent a momentary clarity of contrasts—contrasts not simply between different architectural and urban forms, but of a broader sort as well. The city of fenced-off corners and wider settings—as fact and as metaphor—both reflected and impelled distinct ways of conceiving the balance between individuals and society, between common rights and individual liberties. Its streets and its buildings provided a clear, if contestable, diagram of the tension between a civil society and its component groups. That tension is anything but clear today, as it is likely to remain so long as we seek to explain the city of the present in terms that more closely describe the city of the past.

In order to reveal that past more clearly, this book proceeds in a manner that combines chronological and thematic logic. Chapter 2 focuses on the peculiar way in which the city's origins as a colonial settlement—first of the French, then of the Spanish Empire—colored its transition to an American community. During the sixty-year interval between St. Louis's founding in 1764 and its legal incorporation as a city in 1823, urban form was largely divested of its initial pretensions of reflecting a God-given, universal social order. While this kind of post-colonial transition is familiar to readers of early American history, the manner in which it took place here was rather surprising. First, for all the textual and cartographic evidence that they left to the contrary, the city's colonial overseers never achieved the kind of union of urban form and social order to which they aspired. Political and economic pressures led instead to a city that was, socially as well as physically, disorderly and fluid. More important to the later growth of the city was their rhetorical legacy—a vocabulary for idealizing the landscape as a coherent social artifact and as a means for social control. While the earliest American officials, after their arrival in 1804, had tried to realize that ideal in a manner consistent with free-market practices and republican beliefs, their efforts were stymied by a wariness of enforcing measures that might be seen as infringing on individual property rights. Even as they failed in their efforts to improve the chaotic streetscape and to organize the haphazard land market, however, they etched more deeply into public discourse the idea of the urban landscape as an image of stable social order.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the means for realizing that image were at hand. They came both from above—in the increasing refinement of the city's legal power to articulate a "public" interest in the landscape—and from below—in the efforts of a small and influential group of merchants and professionals who seized the initiative in developing property in the fast-growing town. Chapter 3 looks at the convergence of those two approaches in the decades between incorporation and the onset of the Civil War—a period that saw the city's population grow fortyfold. In the seesawing laws that governed assessments for street improvements, in the city's changing approaches to developing the old town Common, and in the development ventures of men like industrialist and politician Thomas Allen, there appeared the outlines of a resolution to the tension of public and private interests. It was a resolution that responded at once to the mandates of republican, capitalist ideology and to the lingering power of the colonial myth of urban order. The city had in a sense come full circle by the 1850s: the imprint that developers like Allen had begun to stamp upon the landscape—a consistent plan, closely maintained by an elite circle of men—was in a way the fulfillment of the failed promise of the original village. Yet if the practical means for malting of the city a coherent spatial and social statement had at last been achieved, the political and ideological control needed to maintain it had already been traded away. With

the coming fractionalization of the population that resulted from foreign immigration and clashing Yankee and Southern interests, and with the strangling effects of a Civil War that split the city into armed camps, St. Louis would soon lose whatever tenuous union of interests might once have governed the development of its expanding urban landscape.

Part II of this book highlights the subsequent effect of that loss: a splintering of public and private interests in the landscape throughout the late nineteenth century. The development of this city of "fenced-off corners" can only be understood as arising from the interlocking roles of three categorical parties to the shaping of urban space: landscape "producers" (builders, realtors, lenders), landscape "consumers" (residents), and landscape "regulators" (public officials whose job it was to balance the interests of producers and consumers).

Chapter 4 examines the first of these groups. Here I consider the breakdown of the City's efforts to control the Common subdivision as the starting point in the dissolution of the antebellum link of select private interests and public order. From this point on, the various functions of city-building (including the real-estate trade, banking and lending, arid construction labor) came to include an ever wider range of such producers within their purview. With little or no guidance from the public sector, separate communities of increasing complexity and distinctiveness formed around the tasks of buying, selling, and developing property. In tangible, visible ways, the urban landscape began to reflect this fragmentation, forcing into public and private discourse new explanations of the city's spatial order that went beyond the simple, static image long maintained by influential St. Louisans. At this point, practical necessity and republican rhetoric converged on the image of the city as the sum of many interchangeable parts, each molded by independent actors working in their own self-interest.

Yet this revised image, too, proved to be only fleetingly applicable to a city undergoing tremendous social and economic change. The production of urban spaces, as we will see in Chapter 4, underwent a second structural change, as the inefficiencies of a development process resting in the hands of an increasing number of specialized and localized actors were overcome by consolidation and simplification. By the 1890s, a new set of rules applied to the city-building game. A smaller group of participants was able to offer economies of scale unrealizable in the previously fragmented industry, and the developers who succeeded by the turn of the century tended to be those capable of the greatest breadth and diversity of function. This generation was quite unlike the developer elite of Thomas Allen's time, for they no longer presided over a simple and relatively undifferentiated urban landscape. Instead, they used their functional and financial capacities to develop a city that was increasingly stratified, socially as well as physically.

In order to understand how these changes in the production of space led to a new articulation of how the city "ought" to look, I consider their effect on the other two parties to the landscape. Chapter 5 turns to the consumers of nineteenth-century urban space — specifically, the people who lived in St. Louis's neighborhoods during the years of their settlement and most rapid growth. Here, I will look at the differing ways in which rooms, houses, blocks, and neighborhoods (the layered sequence of spaces that resulted from the work of our landscape producers) were intertwined in the lives of the residents of four distinct areas of South St. Louis developed between the 1860s and the 1910s — that period in which the techniques of construction and finance changed so dramatically. A close study of who these people were, and how they arranged themselves within the landscape, suggests the extent and the limits of city builders' power to shape the ways that people live. St. Louisans never lacked for creative choices about how to live under less than ideal circumstances. Yet particular configurations of local space — the arrangement of rooms in an apartment, for instance, or of buildings on a block — were instrumental in determining the various ways in which people simultaneously defined themselves as family members or citizens, neighborhood residents or St. Louisans, and even as consumers or producers of urban space.

While representative government was in theory the means by which these simultaneous identities—like the constituent elements of the landscape itself — were negotiated and held in check, it managed then, as it so often does still, to do something quite nearly the opposite: political decisions hastened the separation of landscape producers from landscape consumers, forced individuals to identify exclusively either with a neighborhood or with the city at large, and hardened visible differences between one part of town and another. As I hope to show in Chapter *6,* this effect was achieved as much by accident as by design. The political process, which largely followed rather than guided the private development and use of urban space, rationalized the *status quo* under the guise of mediating between public and private interests in the landscape.

To illustrate how this came about, I will focus on the city government's most conspicuous function in the shaping of the landscape: planning and maintaining the city's streets. Streets did more than ease movement from one site to another. They marked, in an actual and a symbolic way, the relation between one place and the rest of the city around it. As such, streetmaking was an intensely political process with intensely social implications. Yet as we will see, the men who ran the municipal government operated throughout the late 1800s with little clear idea of how this important aspect of the city's growth would be managed. If any principle guided their actions, it was an abiding desire to choose the most expedient and least costly course of action at each turn. By 1900, decades of pay-as-you-go street planning—

a variant of the "segmented system" that historian Robin Einhorn identified in Chicago's public improvements during the same period—had created a particular kind of imprint on the landscape, one that made South St. Louis look quite different from other parts of the city.[8] The inadvertently unequal streetscape that crisscrossed the city (and that served the wealthier neighborhoods of the city's central corridor more efficiently than it did the poorer neighborhoods to the north and south) came at last to be treated as the "proper" streetscape, as government officials and influential citizens rationalized public improvements that favored the perpetuation of existing conditions over a more costly return to a vaguely envisioned, egalitarian grid plan that had been articulated in the mid-nineteenth century. Laws and ordinances brushed a public-sprited veneer across the lopsided landscape of private development.

But public policy had less predictable consequences, as well. Undeniable regional differences in urban public improvements helped foster a growing consciousness among city residents that they lived in distinctive and different areas. By the turn of the twentieth century there arose in South St. Louis, in particular, a sense of neighborhood belonging—and of opposition to the center of the city—that was absent from within the traditional, more fragmented landscape that had developed in the area in years past. This new cohesion grew as much from physical and geographic circumstance as it did from such more familiar factors as class and ethnicity that have long been singled out in the literature of urban social history. The egalitarian ideal of public-improvement distribution that developed after the sale of the town Common had been more a commitment to equality of opportunity than to equality of result; couched in the vague, republican terms that were applied to local public policy through most of the century, that commitment had appealed to a wide variety of citizens. But when even the promise of equal opportunity proved chimerical for large areas of the city, the seeds for regionally based political conflict were sown.

It is in this context that we need to reconsider the often misunderstood civic improvement movement of the early 1900s, which forms the subject of Chapter 7. Rather than being an all-powerful drive for order, rationality, and predictability amidst the chaos of the industrial city (to either good or ill effect, depending on one's viewpoint), city planning represented an expedient codification of existing trends; it was an effort on the part of government and business officials to gain hold of existing conditions in the city and to try, once again, to fuse private and public interest in the landscape as powerfully as they had been tied in the mid-nineteenth century. The specific, physical vision that such well-known planning reformers as Henry Wright, George Kessler, and Harland Bartholomew brought to St. Louis was a systematized adaptation of the tight-knit neighborhood units—or fenced-off corners—already developed through the combined effects of private development efforts and general

government noninvolvement. The achievement of the planners was to make this differentiated and hierarchical landscape seem not only natural but good for all of St. Louis's residents, to bring it under the control of a centralized authority, and to describe it as a "wider setting" to be maintained in the interest of all St. Louisans.

South St. Louisans would for several decades resist this vision of a unified city, dismissing it as favoring the interests of other parts of town. By the 1920s, however, it was clear that the South Side would be spared most of the attention of the planning community and, therefore, much of the spatially and socially divisive impact that land clearance and redevelopment would exert on the once wealthy central corridor, which lay just to the north. In that area, more than elsewhere, civic reformers and planners had tried to arrest the continuous and presumably harmful dynamic of urban social and spatial change. They had labored to set into the city's legal and physical infrastructure a particular vision of a hierarchical landscape that derived from the particular point at which St. Louis stood at the time that they began their work. Their own actions would, however, inevitably have unique consequences, and would inevitably set in motion a new sequence of change in the articulation of sectional (andincreasingly racial) concerns in relation to municipal interests. This sequence concerns me in the book's Epilogue, which briefly reviews the aftermath of the early planners' agenda in a quickly changing city. If much of the South,Side remains today as visible testimony to the landscape of another time, that may be due in large part to the fact that the area escaped the inadvertent consequences of the same controlling urban vision that had earlier consigned it to a marginal corner in the redefined form of the city. If the valued and cherished corner bakery, tavern, dime store, and shoe repair shop stand today where they once did, that fact is no credit to the men and women who tried to make St. Louis a better place to live in 1910. It may, however, offer us clues as to what we have lost and gained in our efforts to reshape the city in the last two hundred years.

Sam Bass Warner, writing memorably of Boston, characterized the turn-of-the-twentieth-century American city as a "divided" place.[9] He described that division as a line between the center and the periphery, between the neglected, aging landscape of the urban core and the fast-developing suburbs. This twofold split in the city has been noted not only by Warner and other urban historians, but by the earlier planners and politicians and chroniclers of the city whose records they discovered and whose viewpoints they interpreted. As this study of the shifting fortunes of one city will show, the turn-of-the-century metropolis was indeed a divided place, and its divisions did indeed have a deeper, more monolithic quality than they had had in the past. But they also fell in unexpected places, and they tended to disappear or to reform themselves independently of any system that either the people responsible for determining their locations, or the people responsible for explaining

their history, have ever been able to contrive. Rather than being a monolithic whole, imposed (with either benevolent or malign intent) upon its disparate parts, the "official" city of early-twentieth-century reformers and commercial elites was never more than one — particularly well-defended — solution, among many, to the problems facing a diverse urban populace.

The city of fenced-off corners and wider settings provided a useful metaphor for one generation of Americans seeking to understand and improve upon the divided city. But, like the man who came to dinner, it stayed with us for so long that we forgot, at some point, that it was a temporary guest rather than a permanent resident. Like it or hate it, we have been reluctant to dismiss it from the table. This book is written in an effort to retrace our steps in the American city, to give full due to the historical accretion of nuances and insinuations and contradictions that too often has rested unheard behind the noise of a clear, grand narrative — a narrative that has always consisted of equal parts analysis and wishful thinking. It is a journey that includes not just the Frederick Law Olmsteds and Daniel Burnhams of the world, but the Edward Rellers, too. There is much to be learned anew on this journey, not just about how our past is diagrammed in brick and asphalt, but about the city's continuing viability to serve as a place where the balance of individual rights and collective responsibilities can be freely debated, openly demonstrated, and readily adjusted for generations to come.