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The Persistence of Vision: A Century of Civic Progress in St. Louis

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THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION  
A Century of Civic Progress in St. Louis




We often overlook the role local traditions play in shaping the life and growth of great cities. There are conventional ways of taking the pulse of a city—such as tracking population changes, observing physical artifacts and measuring economic activity—that are easier to describe and understand. Yet these alone often do not explain why a city is able to sustain visionary civic achievement over decades, even centuries.

St. Louis has overcome periodic episodes of great crisis and self-doubt to build a remarkable civic legacy of a monumental public landscape, which has been developed slowly but consistently over the last century. The city has been able to build over the long-term and upon past achievements, in spite of national changes in planning fashion, because of a continuity of tradition that has been passed down through successive generations of civic leaders.

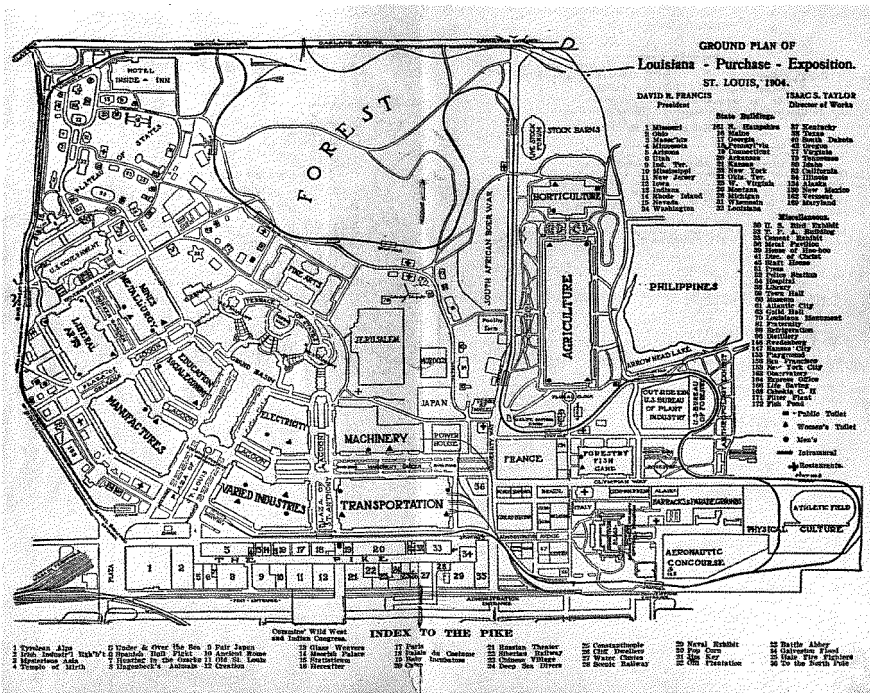
These traditions owe their origins to a unique local self-image, rooted in the pioneer origins of the city. Because civic leaders base this self-image upon a collective sense of “what’s right for St. Louis,” they have been able to develop visionary civic plans through widespread consensus. And even though the self-image appears to be appreciated most strongly by the city’s business leadership, its themes and sensibilities seem to be well understood by municipal officials and even members of the general public.

Like many cities, St. Louis bases its fundamental self-image upon its economy, climate and ethnic composition. But transcending this is a self-image rooted in three historic assumptions: St. Louis has a leadership role to play in the nation, the city is an oasis of culture and order, and while the population is cosmopolitan, citizens embrace a special personal identification with



St. Louis' skyline from the west. The Civic Center and Memorial Plaza are in the foreground, Central Parkway/Gateway Mall is to the right and the Civil Courts Building is in the center.

Photos and graphics courtesy Tom Martinson.



Plan of the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition grounds in Forest Park.

St. Louis itself. Together these comprise a transcendent self-image that forms the basis for twentieth-century civic progress in St. Louis.

The roots of these assumptions are still clear to most St. Louis leaders. As recently as 1919, St. Louis was the fourth-largest city in the nation, and it has long been a major mercantile and transportation center. Its natural cultural domain has long dominated the West, and not just as the last outpost of civilization in the nineteenth century: It is still widely and proudly recounted in St. Louis that until the Giants and Dodgers moved to California in 1960, the St. Louis Cardinals were the “home” baseball team for the western half of the United States.

St. Louis was an early seat of federal government and has supported an increasing array of educational and cultural institutions (beginning with St. Louis University, established in 1819), providing evidence to most citizens that the city is indeed an oasis of order and culture. While the special citizen allegiance to the city is more difficult to explain than to experience, it is apparent that the alchemy of crisis and triumph experienced through the

history of St. Louis—and the mythic retelling of these events—has bonded many citizens closer to their city.

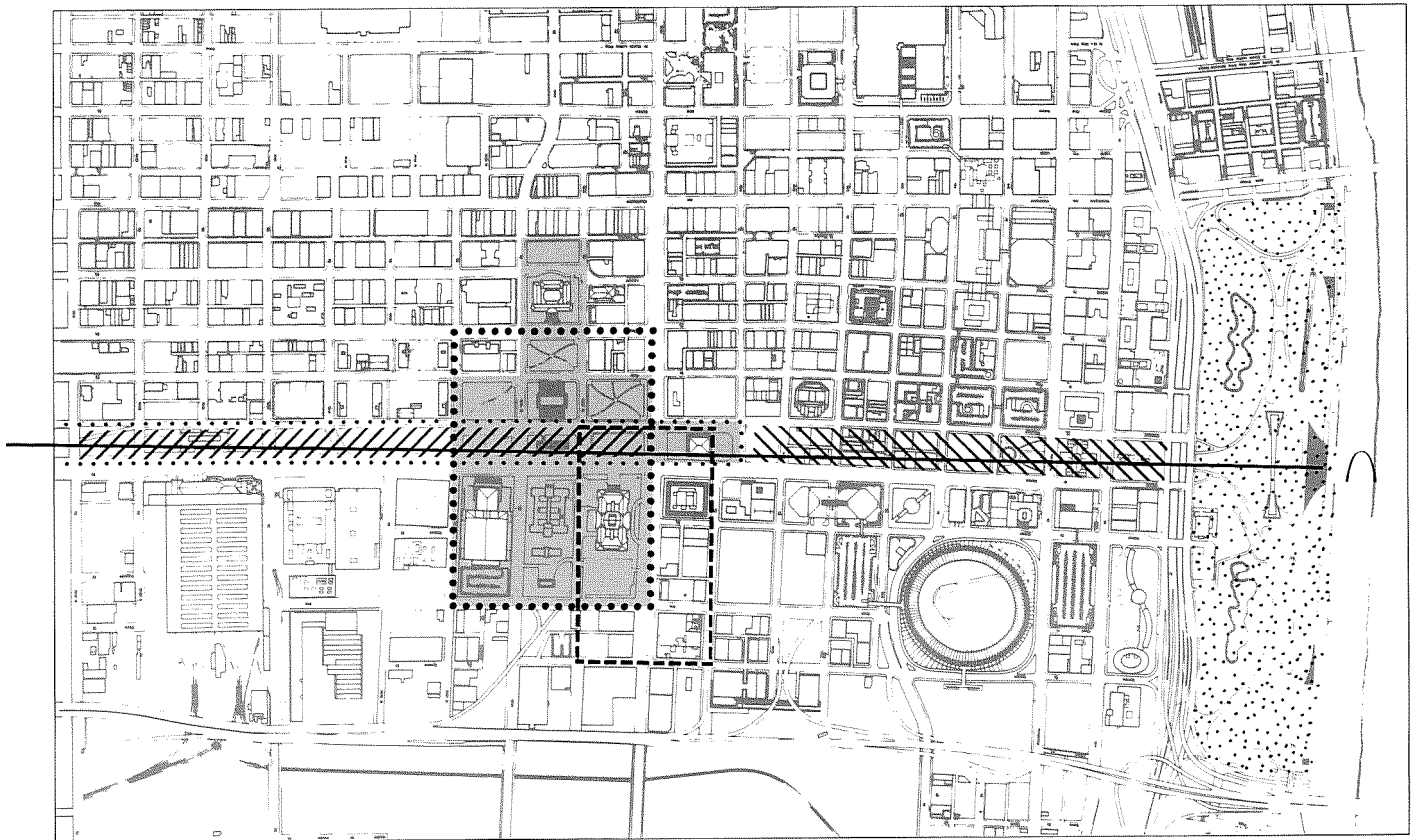
This transcendent self-image is fundamentally different from boosterism endemic to localities, including St. Louis. This self-image is internally directed and often unconscious, while boosterism is a conscious effort to manipulate outsiders. The transcendent self-image in St. Louis has remained remarkably consistent over the past century, while boosters have changed their promotions to adapt to changing economic opportunity.









### Planning as a Civic Instrument

City planning is embedded in the origins of St. Louis, which initially developed along the lines of Auguste Chouteau’s eighteenth-century plan. But it was not until the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition that the potential benefits of formal planning were made unmistakably apparent to St. Louis civic leaders.

The immense show covered most of the 1,300-acre Forest Park and included more than the traditional theme structures and international exhibits (organized around a monumental City Beautiful basin). The exposition’s most prescient feature was a “Model Street” that suggested an ideal city. Supporting exhibits covered topics such as social and educational betterment, child care, recreation and municipal public works.

The Model Street and exhibits comprised a comprehensive proposal for the physical design and social services necessary for a well-functioning community. This was not merely an exercise, since housing and transportation for more than 100,000 visitors a day had to be coordinated with downtown facilities, five miles distant. The fair was an immense success, made



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**Central Riverfront**  
 (1907 Civic League plan). Now  
 Gateway Arch grounds.
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**Civic Center Plan 1**  
 (1907 Civic League plan).
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**Civic Center Plan 2**  
 (1907 Civic League plan).
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**Memorial Plaza (1922-24).**
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**Central Parkway**  
 (1907 Civic League plan).
- 
**Gateway Mall, west section,**  
 1911+.
- 
**Gateway Mall, east section,**  
 1954+.
- 
**Gateway Arch.**

possible through what we would now recognize as large-scale city planning, and a statement that such planning could be a vehicle for civic progress.

### The 1907 Civic League Plan

The following year St. Louis civic leaders initiated work on a comprehensive city plan, which was published in 1907 by The Civic League of Saint Louis. Of the 43 members of the League's six city plan committees, about a third were business leaders, another third professionals (lawyers and architects) and the rest municipal and institutional figures. Most were local citizens, although landscape architects Henry Wright and George Kessler served on the civic center and parks committees.

The 107-page plan applied the comprehensive approach of the 1904 Model Street to a metropolitan scale. While the document featured proposals for large-scale open space systems,

street improvements and a physical transformation of central St. Louis, it also called for small-scale, neighborhood improvements and addressed recreation, health and education issues.

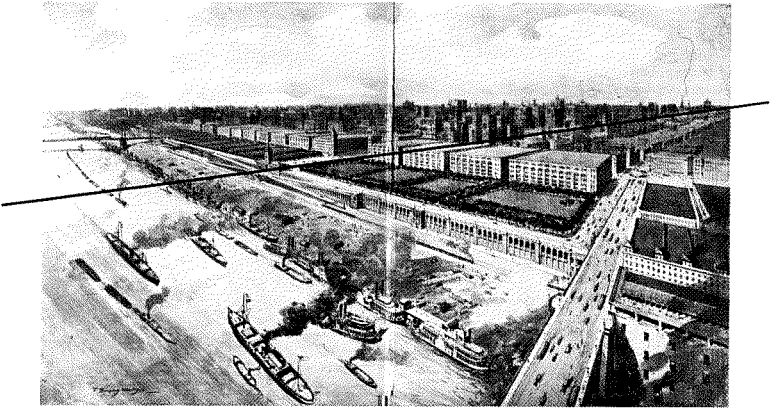
The plan focused on three elements in central St. Louis that neatly parallel the city's transcendent self-image and define today's monumental public landscape: the riverfront, the Civic Center and the Central Parkway and Kingshighway.

*"The River Front As It Should Be."*

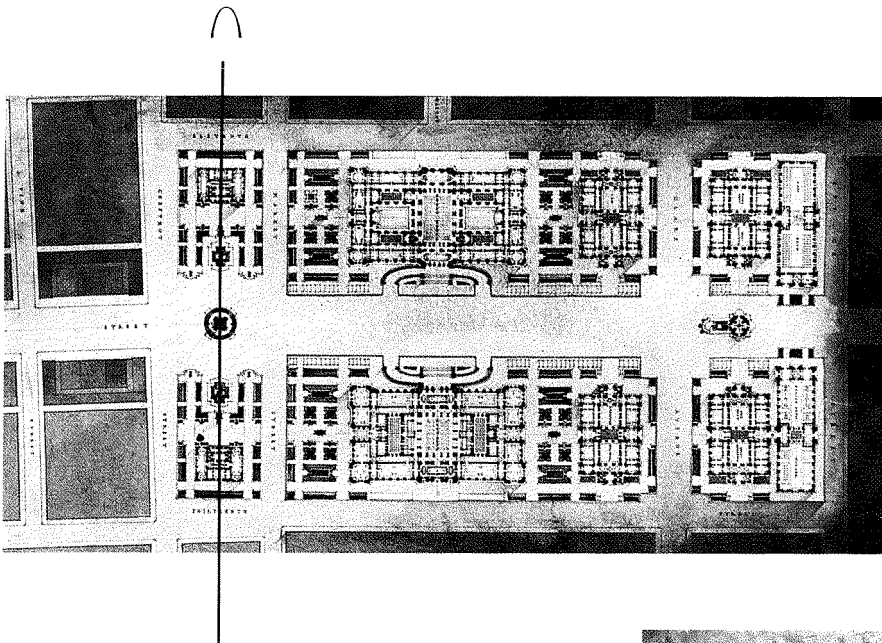
At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mississippi River was St. Louis's front door to the rest of the country. Most civic leaders considered it a dreary, industrial embarrassment, hardly appropriate for a city that saw itself as a prominent player on the national scene.

The 1907 plan proposed a radical transformation of the riverfront. Docking and shipping activities would continue but hundreds of individual warehouses along a half mile of the



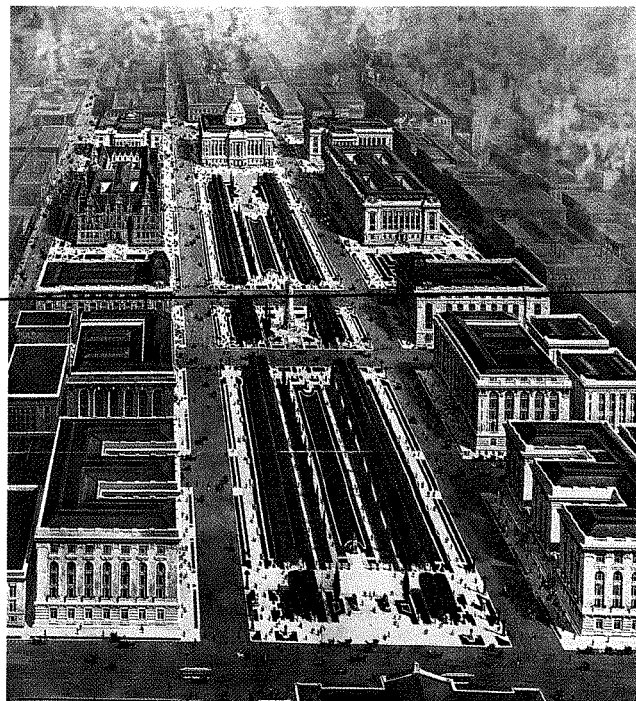


**"The River Front as it Should Be." From the 1907 Civic League Plan.**

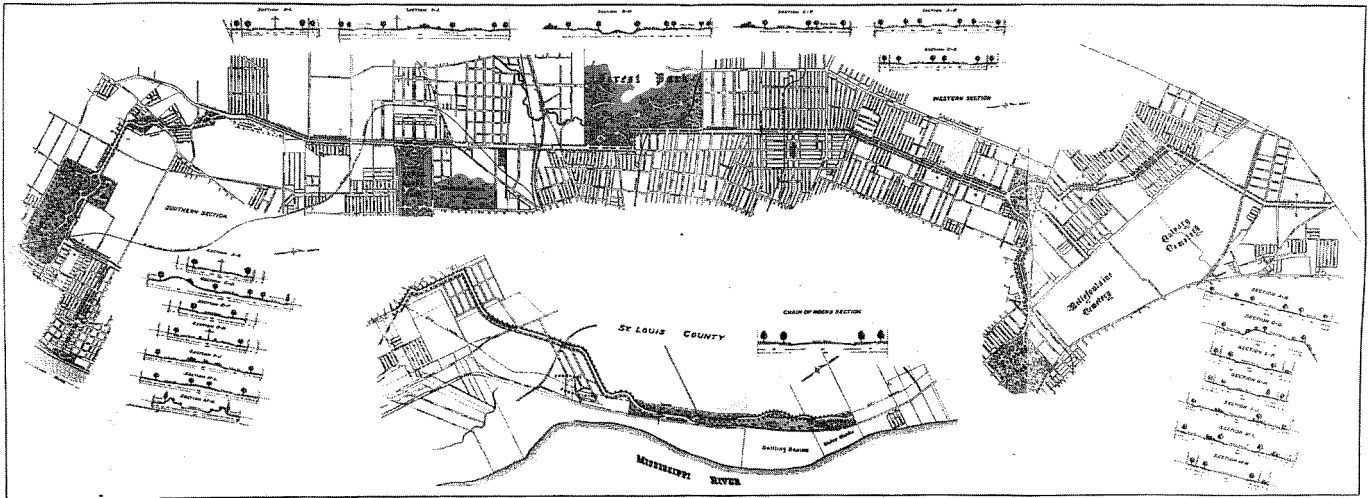


**Alternate plans for the Civic Center. The second plan, which was chosen, is below. From the 1907 Civic League plan.**

**Lines through drawings indicate Market Street and Central Parkway/Gateway Mall axis.**



**Route of Kingshighway. From the 1907 Civic League plan.**



ethnic neighborhoods with each other and with the city's heart. Earlier municipal parkway systems served as models—especially that of Kansas City, whose planner, George Kessler, was a member of the Civic League's Inner and Outer Park Committee.

The city-wide scope of this network indicates the basis of the third self-assumption: the "cosmopolitan" population resided in well-defined ethnic enclaves—German, Irish, Italian and African-American. It was these enclaves that Kingshighway interconnected, and which the Central Parkway—developed in more detail by the private City Plan Association in 1911—was intended to formally connect with the center of this city.

Even compared to the monumental scale of St. Louis today, the Central Parkway plan was extraordinary. It began at the Civic Center at 12th and Market streets and extended two miles west along Market Street to Grand Avenue, where St. Louis University, a symphony hall and several theaters comprised a cultural core. From there, diagonal streets formally connected to Lindell and Forest Park boulevards, which then extended west to Kingshighway.

Kingshighway crossed through the city on a roughly north-south axis, beginning and ending at the Mississippi River, and passing by or through almost all of the city's major parks along its 25-mile length.

**The Continuity of Civic Leadership**

Expressions of St. Louis's transcendent self-image abound in the city's literature and in conversation. It is often described as a sense of "what's right for St. Louis," a recurrent phrase so ubiquitous as to seem unremarkable locally. Yet, even though the city's transcendent self-image provides a basis for reaching consensus on civic issues, its influence on citizens and civic leaders probably is unconscious.

However, once decisions on visionary improvements are made, citizens and civic leaders seem very conscious of traditions and the lineage of individual projects and plans. The city's leaders benefit from a continuing institutional memory found especially in private clubs and civic organizations.

Suburban private clubs have traditionally been favored spots for informal Saturday afternoon discussions of St. Louis civic affairs. But city-wide,

fully-representative dialogue has occurred almost completely within a hierarchy of official private and public organizations.

For example, the Civic League (the private organization that published the 1907 plan) was constituted to address overall betterment of the city and its environs. The City Plan Association (another private civic organization) was established in 1910 to study and define issues raised in the 1907 plan. Specific projects were entrusted to quasi-public bodies like the Plaza Court House Committee, appointed to oversee the building of Memorial Plaza in the 1920s. City government, through its City Plan Commission, has provided legal continuity.

Since the early 1950s, the institutional memory of metropolitan St. Louis has been carried forward by another private organization, Civic Progress, whose membership consists of chief executives of major St. Louis corporations. So the city's traditions and visionary civic decisions are formally passed on from generation to generation, and at the highest levels of corporate power.

Civic Progress members seem most likely to articulate "what's good for St.

central riverfront would be replaced with buildings with a unified architectural treatment. Railroad lines along the river would be partly located in tunnels and a broad landscaped park would be built on a platform above the tracks, warehouses and loading area. The park would be bordered by a uniform row of commercial buildings along the downtown edge, a treatment that would be proposed for the Chicago lakefront in Burnham's 1909 Plan. A monumental terminal would be built in the park and on axis with the historic Old Courthouse.

Unlike the subsequent Chicago plan, the Civic League plan was not identified with a single professional planner. Rather, each plan committee apparently secured its own design and drafting services. "The River Front As It Should Be," issued by the Street Improvements Committee, was designed by Wilbur T. Trueblood, a member of the committee, and presumably reflects the committee's view of an appropriate front door for a city with national aspirations.

*The Civic Center.* Reflecting the second element of St. Louis' transcendent

self-image—the city as an oasis of culture and order—the Civic League proposed that a monumental "Public Buildings Group" be constructed in the center of downtown.

Unusual for a comprehensive city plan, the proposal provided a pair of detailed, alternative master plans "of apparently equal merit," both designed by a team of J. L. Muran, William Eames and A. B. Groves. Both plans featured Beaux Arts public buildings arranged in formal groups around the new City Hall, which had been completed in 1896 at 12th and Market streets. The new buildings would include police, jail and court facilities.

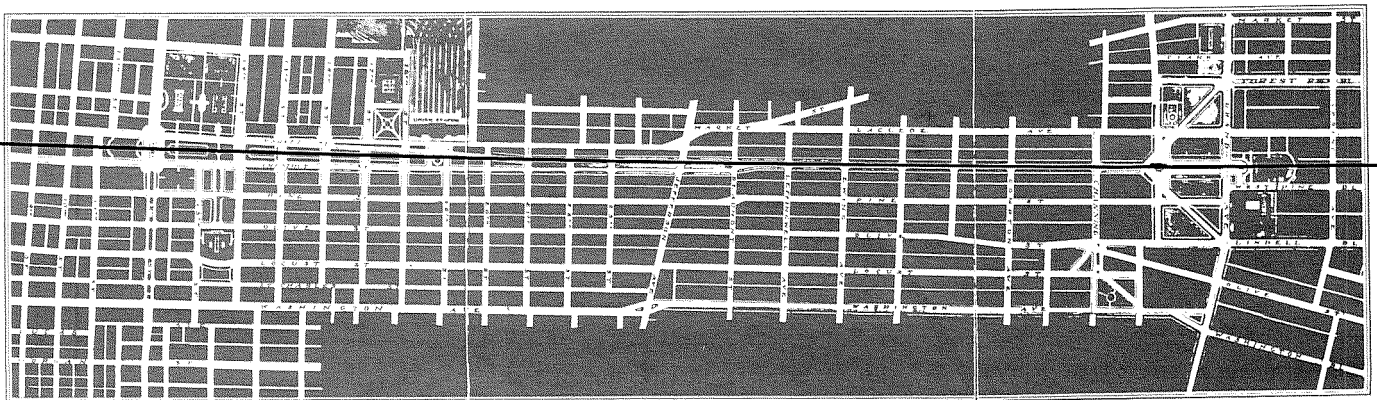
The ostensible reason for developing two schemes was for purposes of comparison, especially in the determination of land acquisition costs. But it is clear that these schemes also represented "practical" and "visionary" alternatives. The first plan would cost less—land acquisition would cost \$2.3 million for the first plan compared to \$2.6 million for the second—and provided for very functional relationships among the existing City Hall and the proposed criminal justice buildings.

The more visionary and expansive second plan was chosen.

Reading between the lines of the committee's report, two objections to the first plan seem apparent. The plan recommended expanding the Civic Center by taking land east of 12th Street (now Tucker Boulevard); this would have infringed upon blocks likely to be needed for future commercial expansion. Moreover, the civic center would be cramped, and the committee report noted that the design would be short-sighted if ample "breathing spots" were not provided.

The second plan provided those "breathing spots," room not only for more public open space but also for civic structures that might be added in the future. But it had other strengths. Perhaps just as importantly, it proposed erecting the public buildings group west of 12th Street, which would allow development of a monumental axis connecting with the Cass Gilbert-designed Main Public Library.

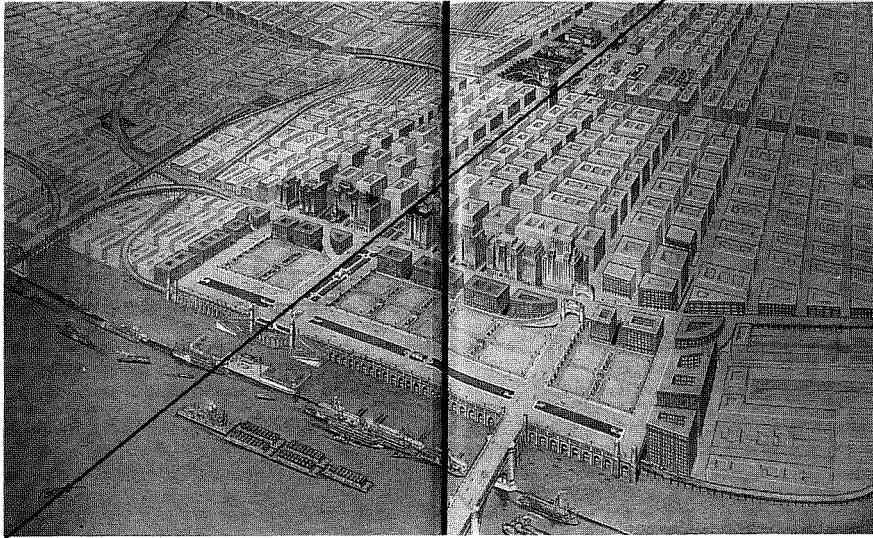
*The Central Parkway and Kingshighway.* Still larger in scale was a vast system of parkways and boulevards intended to connect the city's



**Plan for the Central Parkway  
from the Civic Center to Grand  
Avenue. The City Plan  
Association, 1911.**



**Central Riverfront Plaza,  
proposed by the City Plan  
Commission in 1928.**



Louis” in terms of a transcendent self-image. They seem keenly aware of not only the city’s history, but also its triumphs and failures in the national arena. They exhibit a strong and continuing sense of cultural stewardship, particularly in their roles as corporate contributors. They often personalize their identification with St. Louis—recounting, for example, how when recruited from elsewhere for a senior executive position in St. Louis, they were assured they would be “indoctrinated” as a St. Louisan, a true citizen.

Civic achievement in St. Louis is the beneficiary of continuity over decades. This, rather than the city’s economy or presence of prominent individual figures, is probably the crucial ingredient in explaining why St. Louis has been so successful in accomplishing its large-scale, long-term visionary goals.

### **The Necessity of Time**

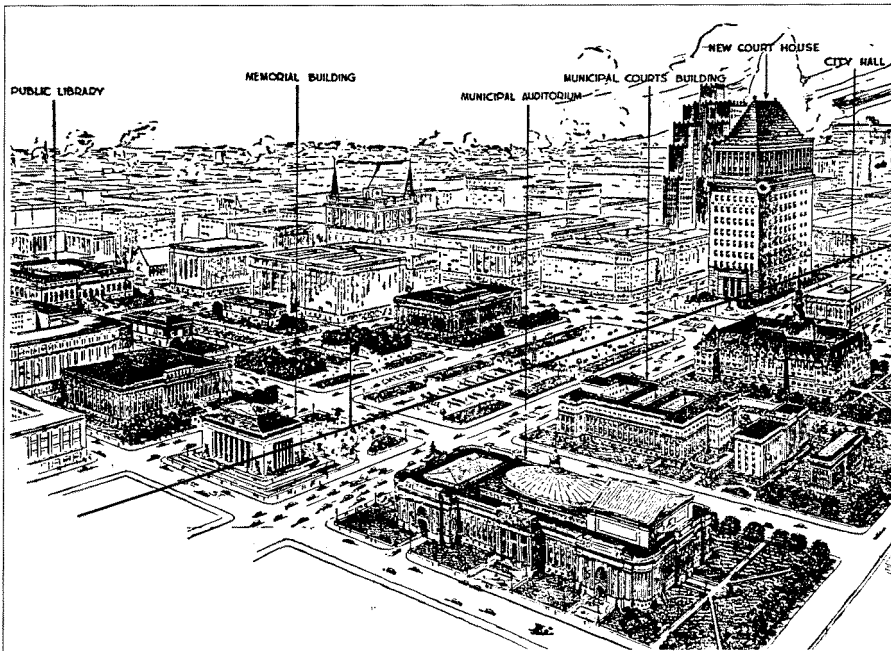
The value of having enough time to wait for a window of opportunity can be seen in the 60-year effort to transform the Mississippi riverfront. After the 1907 proposal, riverfront development took a back seat to comprehen-

sive planning and major civic ventures like Memorial Plaza. But periodic area plans kept the idea of a radical transformation alive.

A 1928 Central Riverfront Plaza proposal by the City Plan Commission indicates very little conceptual change from the 1907 proposal. The space was still to be defined by a uniform line of commercial structures to the west, and a ceremonial monument was proposed instead of the earlier passenger station. Although the idea of a landscaped park was dropped and replaced with a plan for parking lots, the site was still to be cleared of buildings and stand as a grand open space.

**The central riverfront as it  
appears today.**





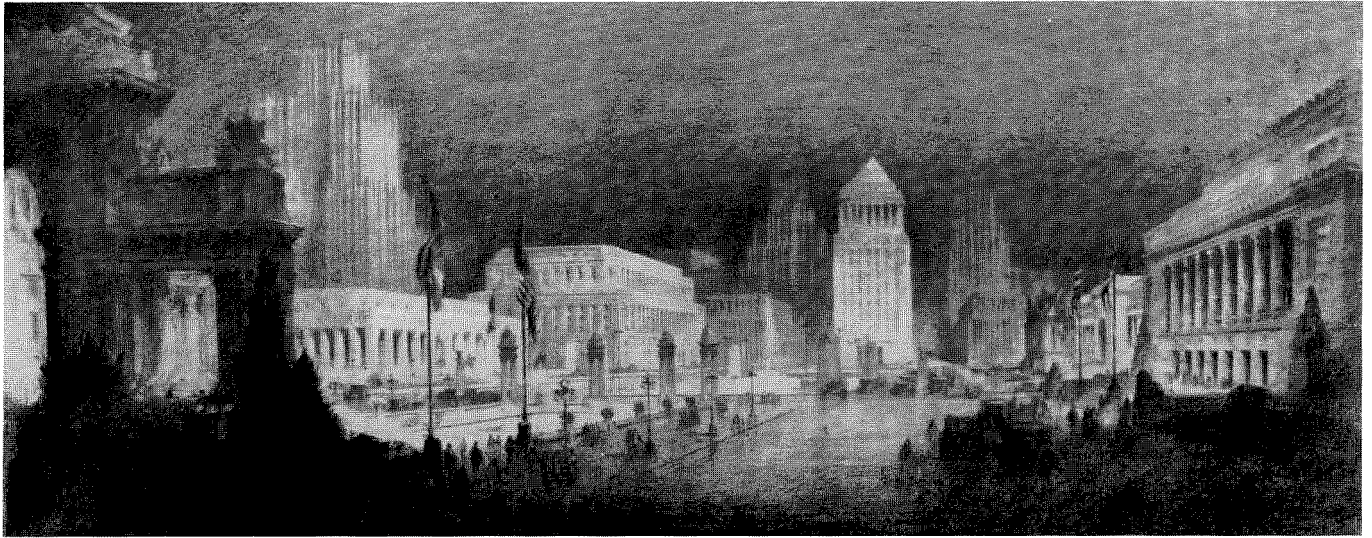
Revised plans for the Civic Center. Above: 1919 "Municipal Buildings Group" plan by Harold Bartholomew. Below: 1930 plan by the Plaza Court House Committee.

During the Depression and war years, redevelopment of this kind was out of the question, but the notion of riverfront redevelopment evolved into the idea of a national Western expansion memorial. Congress established a U.S. Territorial Expansion Memorial Commission in 1934, a concept that was kept alive in Congress by Rep. Leonore Sullivan of St. Louis. Works Progress Administration funding and a 1935 municipal bond issue provided money to clear the 40-block riverfront site. Finally, in 1947, the federal government staged a competition, which was won by Eero Saarinen. Twenty years later, and 60 years after the transformed riverfront was first proposed, Gateway Arch was completed.

A contemporary visit to the Arch grounds and riverfront area reveals a remarkable similarity between the 1907 concepts and the completed development. Both are a unified treatment of the half-mile central riverfront, with rail lines partly tunneled. The Monument as realized is a quantum leap over the 1907 station (or 1928 proposal), but located exactly on the same Market Street axis. While Saarinen may have been trying to establish the same axial relationship, he might have been guided by another factor: The monument is located between two bridges across the Mississippi, at the midpoint of the ceremonial riverfront.

The broad landscaped park, designed by Dan Kiley, is approaching lush maturity. It is visually bordered on the west edge by a wall of buildings regulated to maximum height by code (though not executed as uniformly as proposed in the 1907 plan). Even a scissors-shaped roadway proposed in the 1907 plan for below the monumental terminal has been realized in the shape of a formal set of stairs leading to the riverfront.

**Hugh Ferriss' rendering  
of Memorial Plaza, looking  
east. 1924.**



*Memorial Plaza:* Development of the Civic Center area, now known as Memorial Plaza, was substantially completed about 25 years after the 1907 plan. In this undertaking continuity had another ally: the absence of short-term expectations for results, which allowed repeated redesigns to fine-tune improvements.

Establishing the Civic Center apparently was a high priority among civic leaders, for the city's first official plan was the detailed 1919 "Municipal Buildings Group" master plan by Harland Bartholomew. The scheme, which follows the second Civic Center plan from 1907, encompasses 14 blocks, five of which were to be open plazas. Following the historic assumption in the city's transcendent self-image, the plan develops a literal focus of culture and order: Government buildings ("order") are drawn into a larger composition including the new public library ("culture"), plazas and historic memorials.

Intensive master planning of the Civic Center began in 1922, after consensus was reached on the final location for a new civil courts building at the northeast corner of Market and 12th streets. Planning was under the

direction of the Plaza Court House Committee, a municipally appointed body. As an indication of the civic committee's thoroughness, the initial area study was completely redrawn to depict the final design for the Civil Courts building, which was completed in 1930.

Planning continued on Memorial Plaza into the late 1920s, as Hugh Ferriss developed a series of atmospheric sketches, which remarkably anticipated the eventual environment. The district was essentially completed with the opening of Kiel Auditorium in 1934 and the Soldiers Memorial Museum in 1938.



**The maturing landscape of the  
Gateway Arch grounds.**



**Above: The site of the Central Parkway/Gateway Mall, looking west from the site of the proposed Civic Center, before either the Parkway or Civic Center were constructed.**

**Below: View of Central Parkway/Gateway Mall looking west from Memorial Plaza and the Civic Center.**

*Central Parkway and Gateway Mall:*

The remarkable row of public monuments along Market Street—at first called Central Parkway but now known as Gateway Mall—also owes its origin to the 1907 plan. But unlike the riverfront and Civic Center, Gateway Mall has been developed largely in conjunction with other projects. The first three blocks of Central Parkway west from 12th Street were completed along with Memorial Plaza in the late 1920s. Not until the 1960s was the Parkway extended farther west, when the city used federal urban renewal funds to link Memorial Plaza with Aloe Plaza, in front of Union Station at 18th Street.

Since the 1960s, Central Parkway has been expanded east from 12th Street towards the river, but it dates to the 1950s or earlier. Several of the 1947 national expansion memorial contestants recognized the potential of an axial open space extending along Market Street, but the concept was apparently first formally proposed in a 1954 study by St. Louis architects Russell, Mulgardt, Schwarz, van Hoefen. The plan was donated as a “civic contribution” in the tradition of the professionals who assisted the 1907 plan committee and was intended to “stimulate citizen interest and to serve as a guide to future progress.”

This easterly stretch also has been built on a piecemeal basis, as part of renewal projects or as a result of private donations. In a rare display of impatience, civic leaders in 1982 decided to fund the four remaining blocks by in effect selling half of each block to private developers, who would be required to retain the half adjacent to Market Street as open space.

Yet to be started is the Parkway’s westerly reach, which would link Kingshighway, the neighborhoods and downtown. To some extent, post-war



Looking east from the Morton  
May Amphitheater, in  
Gateway Mall, towards the  
Gateway Arch.

construction of the east-west expressway, U.S. 40, has removed the functional need for the Central Parkway. But the idea is still alive in the minds of some St. Louisans: During hearings on the 1987 Downtown Plan, one member of the public recommended against buildings at the west terminus of Gateway Mall (at 20th Street) so that “we can someday extend the Mall all the way to Grand Avenue.”

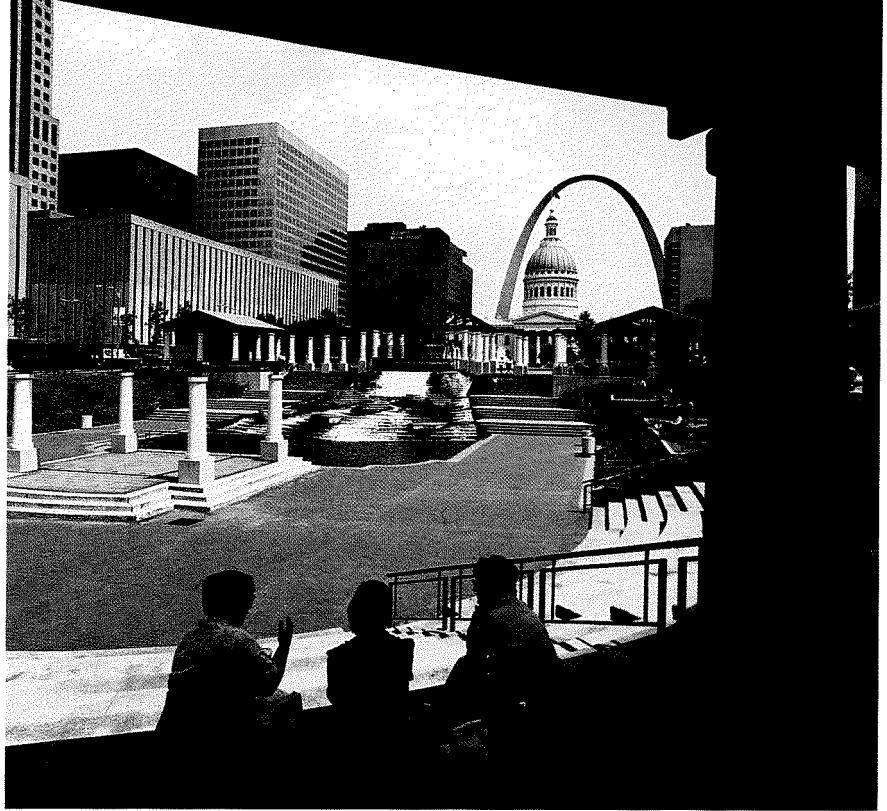
### Lessons from Tradition

St. Louis has been able to develop a remarkable, monumental public realm during the last century despite experiencing extraordinary social, physical and economic changes and despite periodic shifts in planning fashion.

Local traditions have clearly played a central role in this transformation: St. Louis is self-absorbed, with a strong sense of its identity. This identity is rooted in a transcendent self-image, which holds that the city has a national role to play, that it is a center of culture and government, and that its citizens have a special identification with the city.

These deeply held assumptions about the city remain today. St. Louis has continued to play a national role, positively and negatively. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was a leader in urban renewal and achieved an ultimate municipal symbol in the Gateway Arch. In 1970s it was declared “dead” by experts, a national model of all that had gone wrong with our cities. The city’s renaissance in the 1980s, reflective of a conscious effort by its public and private leaders to reassert St. Louis as a national player, has won it recognition as a “comeback city.”

St. Louis also continues to treasure its image as a cultural center, supporting world-class institutions like the Missouri Botanical Gardens, St. Louis



Zoo and Cardinals baseball team. And St. Louis is proud of its role as a cosmopolitan city. The concept of monumental public space is a half-century out of fashion, but Gateway Mall continues to thrive as the site of major annual ethnic festivals and traditions.

This self-image has been the foundation of a vision for St. Louis’s public realm has been passed down through generations of leadership in a network of private civic organizations and has provided a resonance for specific plans and projects. The combination of these three forces—identity, vision and leadership—has made it possible for St. Louis to accomplish large-scale re-ordering of its urban landscape.

### Postscript

In 1987, the city issued a new 20-year downtown plan, coincidentally timed to guide development until the centennial of the 1907 Civic League plan. It is largely a reflection of 70 interviews with business and cultural leaders and elected officials. Not coincidentally, the plan reaffirms the basic concepts of the 1907 plan, expanded and enhanced to address the issues and opportunities of late twentieth-century St. Louis.

Especially in response to this era of developer-driven civic progress, the 1987 plan affirms the primacy of the public city through a quote from the introduction of the 1907 plan:

“... the city must be made attractive, which means clean streets, pleasant homes, good transportation facilities, parks, boulevards and stately public buildings. A city can not, in the modern sense of the word, maintain a high commercial standing unless it maintains, at the same time, a high civic life.”

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