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Temporal St. Louis: From the Invisible City to a Vision of Futurity

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Invisible City: Temporal St. Louis

Scale Flaneur

“I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering;”

-Henry David Thoreau, Walking

The majority of Americans seldom delve into the time of the city. Beneath the facades swirls an invisible city of temporalities. To enter into this realm requires the eyes of a flaneur, but eyes alone lack vision. Only in the mind may the flaneur take a passage through. Trapped by time, what is real and what is virtual become indistinguishable. The world of man decays to make way for spectacular novelty. Faced with confusing contradictions, the mind offers escape.

City of Time

Take a stroll in this cemetery full of names:

The Mound City, Gateway to the West, St. Louis, River City, Munich on the Mississippi, Rome of the West.

Each name holds certain memories of past, present, and future, revealing St. Louis to be a confluence not only of rivers but also of time. This junction coupled with the city's uniquely liminal geographic location – between old East and new West, between Northerners and Southerners – grant St. Louis the purpose ‘Heart of the United States.’ Joining the opposing shores of the river stretches Eads, the duomo of the American west. Beside the bridge soars the Gateway arch, image of the city and national dream of futurity. Further west the grave of Pruitt Igoe rests in woodland stillness with the epithet “The Death of Modern Architecture” read by most. Further still the hopeful memory of the City Beautiful rests in the fields of Forest Park. East, across the river, a different St. Louis broods in the shadow of past prosperity and dreams as colossal as a mile wide domed megastructure.

St. Louis' multilinear history offers a rare look at the production of time. The flaneur's investigation according to measures of temporal scale, structure, persistence, frequency and semantics reveals the temporal city. A collection of temporal ideas tie places in the city together, resulting in complex interrelatedness resembling Deleuze's rhizome.

Memory

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“One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people, and like memory it is associated with objects and places. The city is the locus of the collective memory.”

-Aldo Rossi, 130

People often attribute meaning to newly encountered architecture through the buildings they remember. The sum of what people remember forms a collective memory which is manifested as the city. Memory is temporal, occupying the time before history and possessing the power of myth. Through the flaneur’s reading of St. Louis, the traces of local and national myth lingering in the architecture as they linger in people’s minds may be discovered. As people inhabit the city, experiencing Rossi’s ‘locus’ of memory, myth is reproduced.

The Gateway Arch distills the memories of St. Louis. As a fundamental component of architecture, arches connect many connotations and scales over time. The most direct antecedent to Eero Saarinen’s arch is the unbuilt “Arch of Empire” planned for Mussolini’s World Fair of 1942, which in turn referred to the memory of triumphal arches as entries into the symbolic realm of cities. The geometry of Saarinen’s arch varies from architectural arches, however, using a flattened catenary curve. The catenary curve draws upon mathematics and also alludes to Gaudi’s use of gravity to shape hanging chains into structural arches. The implied purpose of the arch recalls the national desire to travel east. Among the losing competitors for the Jefferson National Expansion memorial, Isamu Noguchi’s landscape evokes the nearby mounds’ powerful sculptural imprint upon the land. The angular metal form of the arch recalls the projected future of Saarinen’s time, suggesting the ‘Expansion’ in the memorial name refers both to the west and to time.

Arching across the Mississippi instead of along it, Eads Bridge stretches back to the triumph of industrial man over the chaos of nature. A fine lattice of varied chrome steel members produced through tireless experimental metallurgy arcs between tripartite piers standing resolutely against insistent currents. Atop the structure a four lane road connects the east to the west, while within the bridge rail brings goods from the east and beyond straight to the heart of the city. This rail continues to Union station, with pragmatic body and nostalgic face of Romanesque Gothic. Back in downtown Louis Sullivan and Dankmar Adler’s Wainwright building presents a memory of ornamented architecture where once before it relied upon the memories of architectural elements when playing with proportions and shapes to challenge new ideas about the architectural type of skyscraper. Meanwhile, Pruitt Igoe no longer exists as more than memories.

History

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"A people without history

Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern

Of timeless moments."

-Four Quartets, T. S. Eliot

People often identify historical periods and events based upon past architecture. Representations of culture produced throughout history place stories and characters within built environments shaped by architecture. While in the European city history is vertical, extending deep below the present in layers, the American city scatters history horizontally. Many new buildings are built to resemble a memory of history, conflating the persistent buildings enduring time with buildings lacking contemporary meaning. Furthermore, until efforts to preserve historic buildings became organized midway through the twentieth century, demolition removed much of the architecture which would ordinarily contribute to vertical layers of time. Instead of vertical aggregation, American cities separate buildings as islands of time in the neutral ocean of streets, as theorized in Rem Koolhaas' 'Archipelago.' Pier Vittorio Aureli furthers asserts the separation of blocks as not only islands but enclaves. St. Louis exhibits this in both the monuments and the housing.

The Jefferson National Memorial to Western Expansion inhabits the entire site of the original French settlement of St. Louis. The remaining buildings were demolished and all was filled with dirt with the exception of the second building of the first Basilica of St. Louis. Replacing the old city fabric, exhibits went up to present a specific historical narrative. In Eero Saarinen's original design for the Memorial, some buildings were kept within the grounds, to be preserved as museum pieces. However the grid of streets begun by the French settlers remains. Blue street signs present the French names of the most dominant of the original streets, alongside the green signs for the current names. Along these streets the courthouse persists, assuming permanence through alignment with the Gateway arch and development of greenways around it through downtown. Market street continues from the Arch and Courthouse to Union Station. Unlike many historic buildings destroyed by demolition after their usefulness seemed expired, Union station adapted to the new city by assuming reuse. In the historic face a hotel now resides, behind which a shopping area and garden stretch out under the visually dense steel trusses of the old roof. Further north once rose earthen mounds left by the Mississippian civilization which once flourished here and in nearby Cahokia. These too were destroyed, scraped away to make room for expansion of the city.

Outside the city rests a garden of historicism on the grounds of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of... Sparsely distributed Beaux Arts buildings built to conform to the City Beautiful

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movement begun by Daniel Burnham dot the landscape, some with new additions stuck on their sides.

Geologic Time

“ I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.

It is geography at bottom, and a hell of wide land from the beginning. That made the first American story (Parkman's): exploration.

Something else than a stretch of earth—seas on both sides, no barriers to contain as restless a thing as Western man was becoming in Columbus' day.”

-Charles Olson, Call me Ishmael

People often view the land as relatively static, a ground against which to read human vitality. However the land is not still but changing slowly at an enormous timescale. The subterranean composition of soil and rock currently beneath the cities of St. Louis and East St. Louis protects the former high on a stable bluff while endangering the latter in the low-lying, silty American Bottom. In America the timescale of geology easily pairs with the vastness of the landscape. The scale of the land and time corresponded to the mounds built in St. Louis by the Mississippian culture. At the foot of these mounds stretched grand plazas, creating a microcosm of plain between mountains. Further, mounds indicated purpose through their shape, with conical mounds often serving as burial sites while rectangular platform mounds served as elevated foundations for public buildings and elite residences.

Though the mounds in St. Louis have long since been either scraped away or built over and the French traders arrived long after the Mississippian culture ended, the earthworks persist as memory. One of the city's nicknames is the Mound City, an identity Isamu Noguchi appealed to in his symbolic landscape design submitted with Ed Durrell Stone for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial competition. Drawing from the memory of the mounds in a less literal way, Buckminster Fuller proposed a megastructure in the shape of a domed crater one mile wide. His Old Man River City project rested in East St. Louis and boasted a potential capacity of seventy thousand inhabitants. Though the project never moved beyond a schematic level of design, the project reveals the deep memory of scale inherent in St. Louis. The discovery of large scale geologic time brought the understanding of vertical stratification of time, which allowed an interpretation of vertical layering above ground into the future.

River Time

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"I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river is a strong brown god - sullen, untamed and intractable, Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier, Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce, Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.

The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten By the dwellers of cities - ever, however, implacable, Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder Of what men choose to forget."

-T. S. Eliot, The Dry Salvages from Four Quartets

People often overlook the river's continuing role in cities as the interstates and railroads assume much of the transportation. Beyond the purpose of conveying barges up and down the country, the river reminds people of the scale of nature and the uncertainty of time. The river imparts a special mythology to its cities. This collective memory is so fundamental to the city that the flag signifies the location at the joining of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Though once the river served as the lifeblood of the city, swarming with steamboats, now the river presents a boundary.

Eads Bridge defiantly conquers the boundary of a river James Eads knew intimately. Early in his career, Eads stalked the bottom of the Mississippi in self-devised diving bells seeking to salvage sunken steamboats. As he wandered between vicious currents in the dark, he sought to understand what physical laws guided the river, confident that with knowledge he could control it. During the Civil War he designed ironclads for the North, further testing the river. Finally ready to challenge the mighty Mississippi with an unprecedented steel truss bridge, Eads began the long work of overseeing construction. After a tortuous process requiring a presidential favor and pushing Eads to the verge of death, the bridge successfully spanned from shore to shore.

In a different sort of response to the boundary of the river, the Gateway Arch retains the separation the river provides from the East to assert the unattainable frontier to the west and the future. The scale of the arch only permits passage through in the mind. Standing at the base of the monument, the flaneur walks around the structure but cannot register walking through it.

Speed

"in this country it has given a new celerity to _time_, or anticipated by fifty years the planting of tracts of land, the choice of water privileges, the working of mines, and other natural

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advantages. Railroad iron is a magician's rod, in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Young American

People often bypass more of the city the faster they move. However, the separation of travelers through the city and inhabitants of it changes the architecture and the city, sometimes drastically. The insertion of strange ideas and cultures into the city by travelers entering along 'the stranger's path' J. B. Jackson describes disappears as travelers speed past instead of wandering into the city. First St. Louis clustered at the edge of the water to receive the proud steamboats navigating the deadly waters of the Mississippi. Railroads then reached to the shore of East St. Louis, but goods and passengers were still ferried across. Emboldened by vision and luck, Eads designed a bridge unlike any before it that would span the river's shifting chaos and allow an unimpeded line of travel between the east and the west. The new influx of rail shifted St. Louis' economic center further inland, where Union Station would receive and reorient trains going to and from the city. The advent of trains also necessitated time zones, as trains allowed swifter travel across the vast landscape. However, a dream of greater personal control and prosperity ushered in the era of the automobile, and St. Louis changed again with housing leaving the city for the suburbs. These shifts over time are revealed in palimpsest maps by looking for persistent geometries and variation.

The next shift in speed happened not in the physical space of the city but in the virtual space of the internet. Increasingly travel through images or words could be reached almost instantly. The development of Google Street View and other virtual reality programs offer the flaneur instant travel visually from the comfort of home. The ability to search through locations and information instantly changed the citizen's path through the city, lessening the degree to which they wandered and changing the function of libraries and museums.

Gilded Age

"Time is money."

-Benjamin Franklin

People often view time as a resource to be exploited for financial gain. Money drives the scheduling of construction to structure time in subservience to profit and the payment of workers according to increments of time. The dominance of economy over time and space shapes most of the American city. In East St. Louis first relaxed taxation brought wealth, then as the money left the time and space faltered. In St. Louis money protected some traces of time

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while threatening others with speculation. The wealth of the urban Places in the city holds them in time, whereas the last remnants of the original French settlement were flattened for the Gateway arch and associated tourism.

The Chicago World's Fair and later the Louisiana Purchase Exposition presented the City Beautiful, Burnham's Beaux Arts vision of the American city. The memory of classical architecture asserted stability and allowed uniformity among the many buildings designed in Chicago. Furthermore, to capitalize on the nature of the exposition the buildings grew as monumental as possible but were made of temporary materials. While the affordability of these exposition buildings allowed Burnham to represent his ideas about the scale and structure of cities, the impermanence of their construction repurposed the history of classical architecture as memory. After the exposition, the spectacle of history presented as applied memory became a strategy for suburban development. The purchasing of historically referential time through suburban houses then fulfilled the early American ideal to colonize time. The City Beautiful expositions also served to increase use of rail during the exhibition. The railroad functioned on efficient time instead of historical spectacle, evidenced by the inclusion of clocks into the architecture of Union Station and the one-sidedness of the façade.

Afterlife

"Men's curiosity searches past and future

And clings to that dimension.

But to apprehend

The point of intersection of the timeless

With time, is an occupation for the saint—"

-T. S. Eliot, The Four Quartets: The Dry Salvages

People often formalize the veil between life and death as architecture, imbuing it with temporal symbolism. In the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis, the architecture of the city is signified within the tile work, connecting the buildings associated with the church to the iconography of the afterlife. This inclusion asserts a spiritual persistence of the architecture regardless of physical state. Contrasted to the linear organization of the Cathedral Basilica and the Catholic afterlife, some of the mounds predating St. Louis acted as burial sites. They assumed conical form, possibly in conjunction with the cyclical structuring of time in Mississippian culture including periodically recurring cycles of time.

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Providing a comparison between the architecture of lifetime and the architecture of afterlife, the Wainwright building and Wainwright tomb use symbolism from nature in different ways. The Wainwright building is adorned with naturally referential ornament both outside and inside the building. The window frames are of wood and the walls are a durable reddish stone. The building stands tall against the sky. In comparison the Wainwright mausoleum rests closer to the earth beneath it, with monolithic pure geometries as the external volume. All four walls bear the same ornamented border over the windows and door. The window and door frames themselves are livelier, suggesting the memory of those within. The interior decoration is flat and colorful with more abstract patterns decorating the walls and ceiling. Rich marbles bring color and texture throughout, suggesting the longevity of the building as protection for the souls continuing to exist in an afterlife.

Junktime

“When did time stop moving forward... begin to spool in every direction, like a tape spinning out of control? Since the introduction of Real Time?”

-Rem Koolhaas, Junkspace

People often lose track of time in the infinite emptiness of the ‘junkspace’ Rem Koolhaas identified in his essay of the same name. Whether working in the fluorescent space of a commercial office, entering a sterile hospital, or attending a modernist high school separation from the natural divisions of time indicated by sunlight, seasons, and changing landscape dissolves the divisions between temporalities. What remains is either timelessness or eternity. Though the facades of buildings throughout the city vary in a vain attempt to achieve spectacle or iconicity, crossing into them moves the flaneur into junkspace. The acoustic panels on the ceiling and drywall on the walls, despite being ephemeral, show no age. Occasionally a leak sneaks in to break the timeless spell, but soon thereafter identical materials replace the damage. Just as the industrial revolution allowed for the infinite reproduction of objects, corporate modernism spawned the infinite reproduction of spaces and with these spaces their time.

The Ageless

“Abstract time became the new medium of existence. Organic functions themselves were regulated by it.”

-Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilization

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People often rely on temporal abstractions such as 'dinner time' or 'work days' to govern their physical life. This abstraction of the physical through time leads to "an acceptance of the immaterial as a purveyor of 'reality' " (Frank Jacobus, Toward), which in turn produces the ageless material divorced from time. Both in the stainless steel of the Arch and in the virtual materials of the Arch's website, the ageless shapes the image of the city. Though the metal of the arch does show some wear, the reflections off it conceal age. By reflecting the lights of the city at dusk or the hue of the rising sun, the arch relinquishes material identity to the surroundings. Also, the minimalist detailing of the arch abstracts the steel beyond any memory of architectural material precedent.

Distorting age in a different way, the Climatron in St. Louis' Missouri Botanical Gardens encloses a space without seasons where tropical plants seem to exist outside of time. However, the dome itself is clearly of material assembly. Another building attempting to dematerialize is the Pulitzer Museum by Tadao Ando. Ando's concrete possesses an inversely smooth and soft concrete surface instead of the expected rough and heavy concrete.

Futurity

"I described the project of colonizing time as 'more ideologically palatable' than the colonization of space."

-Allen, Republic 27

People often characterize frontiers as spatial but the claiming of a future is an expansion into time. With little history compared to most other nations, the United States looked forward to a time to be claimed by American history. St. Louis is the nation's first step into the new West and the future. Marking this national aspiration is the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, whose name absent any form clearly denotes the purpose of the monument. The Gateway Arch presents a passage into a national future, but framed by the arch is the old courthouse, suggesting the future still retains what history the country has already laid claim to. Also, the mechanical systems inside the arch suggest the role of technology in conveying the country forward in time. The embodiment of this technological drive into the west is Eads Bridge, whose exposed steel structure glorifies the strength of new technology. The soaring spirit of the city's architectural future lends emotive strength to the drawings of Hugh Ferriss, a St. Louis native who dreamed of future cities whose scale still seldom appears.

Further outside the city Forest Park holds Burnham's dream of a city future in the remaining World's Fair buildings. Though the style of the buildings references architectural past, the scale and density of the buildings suggests an Imperial nation. In Burnham's time such national status eluded the present. In 1939 at another World's Fair, Norman Bel Geddes presented the exhibit 'Futurama,' including a model loosely based on St. Louis of the city

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twenty years in the future. His vision of “mammoth expressway[s], churning with traffic, that sliced across meadowlands and valleys and a mountain range toward a city” where “expressways split to merge with others, ran side by side and in stacks, rolled past and through pristine high-rises” suggests an American city of uninterrupted flow and sprawling suburban developments. In stark contrast to Geddes’ expanding metropolis, in East St. Louis Buckminster Fuller proposed the Old Man River City. Though the structure loomed massive on the eastern shore of the Mississippi, the design is a miniaturization of the city. Geddes would prove to be more prophetic, as Fuller’s proposal met with concerns of confinement.

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