Cover, Uncover: The Changing Face of Architecture on Locust Street

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Locust Street was once a vibrant banking and commercial district in downtown St. Louis. Today, it is an untidy collection of new, old, dilapidated, semi-intact, restored, and vacant buildings punctuated by crumbling parking lots and garages threatening imminent collapse. To understand why, we must reassemble Locust Street. As St. Louis watched its wealthy, white population flock to the suburbs at mid-century, the revitalization of the decaying urban center became one of the city’s primary preoccupations. Beginning in the early 1950s, a calculated and conscious physical transformation of the central business district began, lasting through the 1960s. This essay, which integrates my personal experience walking and exploring downtown with archival research, reconstructs the fierce modernization arms race that consumed the street’s large financial institutions, the competition between small commercial businesses for the most modern storefront, and the drama surrounding the construction of a contested parking garage. These events have shaped the subsequent development and current preservation agenda of the street, both of which have contributed to the street’s indecipherability. Understanding the impetus for and enactment of Locust Street’s architectural transformation helps newcomers to St. Louis, visitors, and long-time residents alike empathize with a city that has been poked and prodded, built and rebuilt, by city planners, boosters, and elected officials for more than a century.
We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.


Architecture never lies. Architecture invariably expresses its age correctly.

Hugh Ferriss, The Metropolis of Tomorrow. 1929.
I grew up in mid-Missouri, right off the highway that links Kansas City and St. Louis. It’s a place where many residents have split loyalties between Missouri’s two largest cities. Two hours west on I-70 brings you to the glitz and glamour of Kansas City’s Country Club Plaza, but two hours east, well that’s another story. Two hours east is the murder capital of the United States, neighbors told my family when we moved to Columbia in the early 2000s. If you take a daytrip to St. Louis, stay in Forest Park. Or just go to St. Charles. So that’s what we did. Visiting St. Louis was only ever a trip to her suburbs and sprawling soccer complexes to participate in the cut-throat, competitive world of youth soccer.

Until I moved to St. Louis in 2023, my perception of the city was still the one formed in my childhood—soccer in the suburbs, crime in center.¹ Looking for a sense of belonging and community, I joined a cycling group and explored the city on two wheels. Like my tires, my naiveté was quickly punctured by many sharp shards of glass.

¹ Throughout the 1860s, the entire area that today makes up St. Louis and St. Louis County was governed by the St. Louis County Court. In 1876, St. Louis, tired of paying more than its fair share of taxes, voted to succeed from the leeching county. While other cities in the twentieth century grew and expanded by means of annexation, St. Louis’ city limits remained fixed. Today, the city’s low population and small footprint (one of the smallest among major U.S. cities) makes its issues with violent crime look even worse than they are. For more on St. Louis homicide statistics, see Tony Nipert, “Dissecting homicide statistics in St. Louis City and looking at 2022 projections,” NextSTL, published February 1, 2022.
Above
Figure 1. St. Louis native Hugh Ferriss’ rendering of the proposed St. Louis Plaza.
One evening, we rode the downtown circuit. Besides an obligatory school trip to the Arch, I had never been downtown. As we flew down the narrow streets, densely lined with old skyscrapers, the steel parabola rose from behind the Old Courthouse’s oxidized cupola. A light drizzle broke free from the sky, and light reflected off the wet streets. A humid mist set in. It was like riding into one of Hugh Ferriss’ dramatically rendered metropolises (figure 1). A whole new world opened before my eyes. This dark and moody Gotham sparked my interest.

A few weeks later, I returned downtown to explore. The crunch of glass under my shoes was deafening on this quiet Monday afternoon. Downtown wasn’t what I expected. Things were decaying. An abandoned fast-food restaurant with plates still on the table sat languishing next to a chained off ramp leading into the dark mouth of a crumbling parking garage. Boarded-up buildings were tagged with graffiti and weather-beaten condemned notices. On Locust Street, I walked by a forlorn 1950s office building with two large “FOR LEASE” banners tacked to the front. I peered through aluminum windows to see cardboard boxes, a microwave, and planks of wood scattered across an abandoned construction site. The concrete wrapping the building’s load bearing columns had been partially hacked away, revealing florid ionic capitals, an adornment typical of St. Louis’ nineteenth-century stock of buildings, but hardly indicative of a mid-century build. How strange...

Pulled from my contemplation by a man asking for a lighter, I took in the rest of Locust Street. It was a collection of seemingly new, old, dilapidated, semi-intact, and vacant buildings punctuated by more crumbling parking lots and garages threatening imminent collapse. The former density of a city that once boasted 800,000 people was palpable. I felt a sadness for something lost, something forgotten. It wasn’t the clean, slick drawing of a modern, orderly metropolis I had seen in my fourth grade Missouri history textbook. It was something else entirely. What was it and what happened?

As Hugh Ferriss urges at the end his introduction to The Metropolis of Tomorrow, “Let us go down into the streets” and find out.2 I walked up and down Locust Street again and again trying to make sense of this jumbled landscape. When I got home, I dug into the Post-Dispatch and Globe-Democrat archives and sifted through National Register of Historic Places nominations. Scrolling through hundreds of photographs in the Missouri Historical Society’s online collection, I visually reconstructed and pieced Locust Street back together. I unearthed some answers, blew dust off old stories, and brushed away layers of negative rhetoric to see the street, and city, in a new light.

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Progress or Decay?

Left
Figure 2. An etching of St. Louis’ new Municipal Plaza by Fred Graf.
John Ring Jr., St. Louis as it is Today (St. Louis, MO: Industrial Club: St. Louis Chamber of Commerce, 1929), 8.

Right
Figure 3. Sidney Maestre and Mayor Raymond Tucker inspect a blighted area in Mill Creek Valley slated for clearance.
The New St. Louis of today presents a picture of progress—an old city with new ideals. Its very physical appearance and the conditions of yesterday are being so rapidly transformed that the outside world scarcely realizes what is here evolving. Those who knew St. Louis as it was would hardly recognize it as it is—and as it will be. Behind the vision which is planning for its future is the new ‘Spirit of St. Louis’, a united, driving, tangible public force, independent and forward looking, ever ready to blaze fresh trails toward development and progress.3

The publication’s optimistic boosterism, drenched in praise and civic pride, masked the impetus for this large-scale modernization campaign.4 As early as the 1920s, signs of urban decay were evident in St. Louis. By the 1930s, matters had not improved. The City Plan Commission wearily concluded in 1936 that without an intervention, the city “is faced with gradual economic and social collapse. The older areas of the city are being abandoned and this insidious trend will continue until the entire city is engulfed.”5 Growing suburban enclaves west of the city, such as Clayton, enticed wealthier, white St. Louisans to abandon the smog and soot of the old city for fresher air and larger plots of land on which to build new homes. The city’s shifting demographics no doubt worried downtown property owners and real estate developers whose money was tied up in a district whose banks, retail stores, and light industry could be easily replicated in the suburbs. This kind of urban decentralization did not bode well for downtown’s survival, and stoked fear that if the urban center collapsed, so too, would the entire metropolitan area.

For more than a century, St. Louis has been preoccupied with her “looks,” exaggerating (at times) both her augustness and her decrepitude.6 In 1929, the Industrial Club and the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce published St. Louis as it is Today, a booklet presenting the “truthful picture of a great and growing mid-continental metropolis, a city of unusual enterprise, attractiveness and charm” (figure 2). For a business or family looking to relocate to St. Louis, the Industrial Club and the Chamber of Commerce sketched an enticing picture of St. Louis—a thriving river town with all the conveniences of modern life, a city of “unlimited possibilities,” a city “where you’d like to live.” Few cities, the publication proclaimed, can equal St. Louis in attractiveness, and few cities understand what forward progress looks like:

Downtown property owners and real estate developers, now preoccupied with how to salvage the central business district, invited an expert to share his wisdom. On December 8, 1940, the St. Louis Real Estate Exchange hosted a “Downtown Improvement” luncheon for members of the exchange, affiliates, property owners, and guests. The speaker was Dudley W. Frost, the manager of Oakland California’s Downtown Property Owners’ Association, Inc. His topic: “Defeating Decentralization” and “Downtown Face-Lifting.”7 Using colored slides, Frost illustrated how Oakland’s old-fashioned buildings were “face-lifted” and streamlined to house attractive stores. He presumably boasted the success of downtown Oakland’s improvement program which, according to an

3 After receiving international attention for hosting the 1904 World’s Fair, St. Louis looked to solidify its standing as a major U.S. city. The first city plan was issued in 1907 because St. Louis, per the Civic League, was not living up to its full potential. “St. Louis occupies a magnificent natural situation in the bend of the river, with a topography which might have made it one of the most beautiful cities in America, an undulating surface with ridges admirably adapted to wide and beautiful boulevards, and a fan-shaped arrangement of streets which gave every opportunity for convenient, wide and comfortable thoroughfares extending from a common axis in all directions back from the river. These natural advantages have by no means been fully utilized.” The Civic League noted that competition between cities was growing as mass transportation was becoming more accessible. For St. Louis to be competitive with cities like New York, Cleveland, Chicago, and Boston, a widespread movement for civic attractiveness was in order. For more, see The Civic League of Saint Louis, A City Plan for Saint Louis, (1907).

4 John Ring Jr., St. Louis as it is Today (St. Louis, MO: Industrial Club: St. Louis Chamber of Commerce, 1929), 10.

5 In 1923, the city passed a $87,000,000 bond issue to fund a large array of civic improvement projects. Plans included street widening, a Memorial Plaza, which would group municipal buildings into a “beautifully related architectural assemblage,” new hospitals, and parks and recreation facilities. Ring, 11.

6 Harland Bartholomew quoted in Gordon, 8.

7 Between 1900 and 1920, the Clayton’s population increased from 3,023 to 9,613, a growth of over 200 percent. See Harland Bartholomew & Associates, A Report Upon the Master Plan, Clayton [St. Louis, 1938], 3.
announcement by the Association itself, had attracted “nation-wide attention as an outstanding example of preventing decentralization and maintaining a successful downtown business district in a large metropolitan area.” A whopping thirty-four building modernization projects had been completed to date.

Unfortunately, funds and resources directed to the war effort halted St. Louis’ improvement campaign. By the end of the war, the city’s impending decline was even more evident, and a solution was needed—fast. Wartime migration and an influx of workers from the rural south strained the city’s already overcrowded older neighborhoods, choking the central corridor, and created an unsightly entrance to downtown (figure 3). Building stock downtown, too, was decaying due to deferred maintenance and “benign neglect.” St. Louis couldn’t afford to lose any more of her wealthy tax base to suburban municipalities. The city’s 1947 Comprehensive Plan matter-of-factly stated: “we cannot have a city without people.” The preservation and improvement of the central business district—the “indispensable nucleus of the whole metropolitan structure”—was a top priority. If Oakland could successfully defeat decentralization by modernizing her old building stock, maybe St. Louis could too.

While doctors preached fat diets to 1930s housewives—no carbohydrates, sugar, or fats—trade journals and architectural publications also compiled a no-no list for buildings: no ornamentation, cornices, or arches. If new construction was out of the question, then older buildings ought to be put on a slimming diet of plaster surfaces and extruded aluminum. By 1946, the Post-Dispatch remarked that in recent months, many buildings had “retired temporarily from view behind a screen of plywood and scaffolding, later to emerge with a fresh new face of glass, metal and tile.” The paper’s photo reportage featured four buildings, all of which were transformed from their gloomy, century-old state into “attention-compelling” structures (figure 4).

Although still battling material shortages due to WWII, architects created the illusion of space with ceiling-high plate glass and large window displays, allowing business to prominently display their products. The sleek storefronts would quickly pay for themselves, attracting attention and customers, the paper asserted. In addition to their reporting on the clean, modern lines of this new generation of buildings, the paper’s photo reportage eventually resulted in civic value, too. One project in a run-down block often leads to another and then to an entire district.

The addition of a few fancy storefronts, however, did not prevent the editors of the Post-Dispatch from casting St. Louis as a city standing at the crossroads: “Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose.” In an eponymous series of articles, the paper warned that if downtown were allowed to fall into obsolescence, the entire metropolitan district would falter and fall—economically, culturally, and physically. “Downtown is the center, the core, the heart that pumps the blood of commerce through the area’s arteries. Without a vigorous downtown, St. Louis loses its chief economic reason for existence,” wrote Richard G. Baumbach in the series’ eighth installment. While the rise of Clayton, with her swanky new office buildings, is formidable and praise-worthy, Baumbach noted, she is only an artery, not the heart. Despite the paltry number of new buildings and storefront renovations in the last decade, downtown still had life and “could be restored to the vigor of youth by treatment that is available through a bit of rigorous surgery. If St. Louis chooses progress, a large-scale architectural transformation of the city would be necessary to cure her ailing heart and keep Clayton in her place.”

As the unrelenting drum beat of “Progress or Decay” reverberated across the city from the Post-Dispatch’s bully pulpit, Mayor Joseph Darst mobilized chief executives under the banner of Civic Progress, Inc. Commenting on the formation of group, Darst said:

A plan such as this, with its unlimited possibilities, needs the backing of the greatest leaders in our community. It would require their personal attention and financial support. Above all, such a corporation would serve as a stimulus to the community and exist as a civic conscience destined to bring about a continuity of purpose to area development. Civic Progress Inc.’s lobbying and boosterism incited a calculated and conscious physical transformation of the central business district, conflating architectural modernization with “progress.” By the mid 1960s, Locust Street in particular, stretching west from Broadway to Tucker, would come to rival the shiny office buildings of Clayton.

9 “First to Make Tour of East, Downtown Property Owners’ Manager to Boost Oakland.” Oakland Tribune, November 23, 1950. Frost had embarked on a speaking tour of Eastern cities. He stopped in Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Kansas City on his way back to Oakland. In addition to speaking engagements, he also stopped in these cities to “study the conditions in the business districts.”


11 In 1942, the City Plan Commissions reported that St. Louis experienced its first actual net loss in population between 1930 and 1940. For more, see City Plan Commission, St. Louis after World War II, St. Louis: City Plan Commission, 1944). Clayton, however, continued to experience massive population growth. Between 1930 and 1950, the suburb’s population increased from 26,613 to 65,139. See Bartholomew & Associates, A Report Upon the Master Plan, Clayton, 3.

12 City Plan Commission, Comprehensive City Plan (St. Louis: City Plan Commission, 1942), 5.


14 “Downtown Facelifting, Remodeling of St. Louis Business Buildings is Catching on—The Trend Is Toward Clean, Modern Lines,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 1, 1946. The face lifted buildings are a factory at 2077 Washington Avenue, a bookstore at 939 Locust Street, a wholesale store at 1927 Washington Avenue, and a service station at 706 Findlay Street.

15 “Downtown Facelifting, Remodeling of St. Louis Business Buildings is Catching on,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 1, 1946.

16 From January to March 1950, the Post-Dispatch ran a series of articles titled “Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose.” In Joseph Heathcott’s words, the Post-Dispatch used the platform to energize the slum clearance debate among St. Louisians. They also cast the city’s urban future in dichotomous terms. This black and white language has had a chokehold on St. Louis. For more, see Heathcott, 232.

17 “Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose. Downtown—The City’s Ailing Heart,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 23, 1950. A sharp political division between the city and the county was one of the unforeseen consequences of the Great Divorce of 1876. Competition between the two cities, the City Plan Commission noted in 1942, had become fierce. For more see, City Plan Commission, St. Louis after World War II, 21.

18 Heathcott, “The City Quietly Remade,” 26f. For Mayor Darst’s own account, see Joseph Darst, An American City. Four Years’ Progress (St. Louis, 1953), 52.

19 Darst, An American City, 12.

20 Only recently has the “conscious remolding” of the large-scale physical environment been possible. For more, see Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1960), 13. That modern architecture had come to signify progress in St. Louis is evident in the St. Louis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects’ 1929 publication, Progress Through Architecture. The publication featured completed and proposed projects by local architects. Nearly all of these projects were in the modern style and located in the downtown area. For more, see St. Louis Chapter, American Institute of Architects, Progress Through Architecture (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis Chapter, 1935).
Art Deco modifications were completed on the 905 and 907 storefronts of the Board of Education Building on Locust in 1937. The new Swopes Shoe storefront took a page out of circulating trade journals.

Alvin Martin Sievers, 1937. Missouri Historical Society.
By the end of the nineteenth century, St. Louis had become a major trade, transportation, and financial hub. A steady growth of industry downtown—shipping, warehousing, meatpacking, and distilling sectors—helped St. Louis rise to the rank of fourth largest city in the United States by 1900.21 During this time, Locust Street emerged as a vibrant banking and commercial district. The U.S. Customs House and Post Office built in 1817 and the Federal Reserve Building erected over forty years later in 1952, still stand as testaments to the street’s former commercial dynamism and economic vitality.22 Many of St. Louis’s “greatest leaders,” signaled out by Mayor Darst, owned businesses or had vested business interests on or near Locust Street.23

While Darst mobilized the city’s most influential men, many smaller business owners on Locust were already in the process of transforming their old storefronts into shiny new, attractive ones. Workers scraped away street-level ornamentation and slapped on streamlined exteriors of granite and limestone paneling punctuated by large aluminum windows to the now naked facades. The City Club Building and the neighboring Saint Louis News Company Building were both transformed in the early 1950s with granite panels and metal display windows (see map on inside back cover, nos. 6-7). A photograph taken circa 1950 of the northeast corner of Tenth and Locust reveals a cluster of three more modern alterations (figure 5). Further down Locust, the Columbia Building was also the recipient of shiny black granite panels and large display windows (map no. 8).24 These modern storefronts, which reflected national trends—modernity and watch your profit soar!—provided a “refreshing contrast” to the dingy, spot covered stories above.25

But that was exactly the problem with storefront modernizations: the old city and everything that it represented—backwards progress—was still visible.

A solution soon gained popularity—the slipcover. The total recladding of a building in granite and limestone became the preferred modernization tactic on Locust. Although more expensive than a modest storefront renovation, the slipcover offered a complete architectural transformation without the price tag of new construction. The nation’s leading bank design firm, the Bank Building and Equipment Corporation (BBEC), based in St. Louis, were experts at preserving a building’s structural foundation before remodeling and recladding it.26 The nineteenth century had come and gone, and so too, should the top-heavy cornices and gloomy doorways of its antiquated buildings. Forward progress meant leaving material traces of the past behind (or at least hiding them). No longer was St. Louis an “old city with new ideals,” but a new city with new ideals and “new” buildings. To be sure, the mixture of slipcovered and half-modern buildings on Locust during this period suggests that any modernization, no matter the cost or scale, was widely preferred.27

Lecott Street’s large scale architectural remodeling began in earnest in 1915 when the First National Bank announced intentions to remodel and expand its downtown office—a 6-story, 1886 Romanesque structure on the corner of Broadway and Locust (map no. 9, figure 6). The planned expansion and modernization were a response to downtown facelifting, remodeling of St. Louis Business Buildings is Catching on,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 1, 1946. For more on the rise of modern storefronts see Gabrielle Esperdy, Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the Miss Duel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

22 In 1915, William Keeter, the Post-Disciplinary Financial Editor, dubbed St. Louis the “financial capital of the central Mississippi river valley.” Although a grandiose statement, St. Louis does have a long history of banking. In fact, Missouri’s first banks were in St. Louis. Both the bank of St. Louis and the Bank of Missouri were organized in 1819, before Missouri became a state in 1821. Both banks were short lived (unrestrained loans to personal acquaintances and the massive financial panic in the summer of 1819 put the nail in their coffin), but the city’s increasing population and trade interests would necessitate a need for banks in the city in the coming years. For Keeter’s article see, “Growth of Banking in City—Furs Once Used for Money,” St. Louis Post-Disciplinary, February 15, 1819. See also, Andrew Wankel, “What the Bank of St. Louis Left Behind,” Missouri Historical Society, published September 27, 2012.
23 Morton D. May, president of the May Department Stores Company and Sidney R. Baer, president of the department store, Stix Baer & Fuller, were both members of Civic Progress Inc. Famous-Bar, the flagship store of the May Department Stores Company was located in the Railway Exchange building at 600 Locust Street. Stix Bar & Fuller’s headquarters were nearly at 600 Washington Avenue.
24 By 1957, the Columbia Building would be truncated, reduced from 10 stories to only two.
26 The Bank Building and Equipment Corporation was one of a handful of architectural firms specializing in the planning, design, construction, and interior decoration of financial institutions. Between 1911 and 1926, the BBEC designed and remodeled hundreds of banks in Modern Movement styles across the nation. After WWII and through 1955, the firm primarily worked on remodeling and recladding jobs. The BBEC has had a notable impact on the design of St. Louis’ banks and financial institutions. Naturally, that St. Louis was home to the nation’s largest bank building firm was a source of pride. In a special bicentennial issue, the Post-Disciplinary boasted that the firm “has finished an average of one building every third work day.” For more on the BBEC, see Michael Allen, First Federal Savings and Loan Association Building Reevaluation in the National Register of Historic Places, November 27, 2015. See also “Bank Building Firm is Biggest in U.S.,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, February 16, 1964.
27 In 1919, the First National Bank was formed through the merger of three St. Louis area banks: St. Louis Union Bank, Mechanics-American National Bank, and the Third National Bank. That same year, the consolidated bank moved into the Mercantile Library Building (the Mercantile Library Association of St. Louis, the oldest library west of the Mississippi, occupied the top floor) located on the corner of Broadway and Locust. The location was intended to be temporary, but the bank stayed in this building until at least the 1980s. See “The First National Bank in St. Louis,” The Banker’s Magazine, July to December 1919, 326-420.
In late 1951, Roosevelt Federal opened a new building at 913 Locust Street, St. Louis. The bank’s president, and member of Civic Progress Inc., William A. McDonnell, confirmed that the investment backed “up our belief that the downtown district is the vital and lasting heart of the St. Louis area.” The project, the bank’s reskinning job, engulfing neighboring structures to the west and south, now stretched nearly two-thirds of a city block. Like a piece of statement jewelry, the bank’s modernization (figure 7) prompted him to keep the bank downtown and invest seven million dollars into changing the “face of St. Louis.”

The bank’s president, and member of Civic Progress Inc., William A. McDonnell, confessed that in considering the bank’s future, two options had been on the table: expand or relocate (reminiscently to the suburbs). But McDonnell’s “faith in the vigor of the city’s central business district” prompted him to keep the bank downtown and invest seven million dollars into changing the “face of St. Louis.”

Teening Civic Progress’ party line, McDonnell affirmed that the investment backed “up our belief that the downtown district is the vital and lasting heart of the St. Louis area.” The post in the Post-Dispatch reported, sparked another “$50,000 of remodeling and development in the immediate vicinity of the bank in downtown St. Louis.”

30 “Big Bank Expansion Nears End,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, August 5, 1956.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.

When the First National Bank took their turn-of-the-century building to the chop- ping block, other banks took note. Just a year later, St. Louis Federal Savings and Loan Association, in an advertisement extolling the benefits and ease of opening an account with them, announced that they would be moving into their new home on Locust Street soon (map no. 15). At the bottom of the nearly half page advertisement, the Association printed a photograph of their present headquarters, an office (presumably considered “out of date”) on the first floor of the grandiose Gothic Revival Arcade Building. Positioned next to it was an architect’s rendering of the proposed modernization of a three-story building at 913 Locust.

St. Louis Federal’s modernization program removed the 1946 storefront modification (featured in the aforementioned “Downtown Face-Lifting” article) and any remaining ornamentation. The diminutive three-story building, sandwiched between two much taller late nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings, received a new shiny red and gray granite face. What it lacked it stature, it made up for in its sleek facade. It did not blend in anymore.

In the early years of the 1950s, banks felt obliged to compete and stand out in an increasingly saturated banking landscape, as confirmed by the Association’s 1952 grand opening advertisement in the Post-Dispatch. The invitation was printed in a sea of other bank advertisements, all pining for new customer’s attention (figure 8). Employing a line drawing of its remodeled building and nestling text within an Alexander Calder-inspired mobile, St. Louis Federal’s advertisement did stand out from the six other bank advertisements on the page, which all relied on stock images and generic graphics.

St. Louis Federal no doubt felt mounting pressure from another slipcover transformation underway down the street. Just a few months after St. Louis Federal’s week-long open house in June, Roosevelt Federal Savings and Loan Association announced the grand opening of their new modern building (map no. 17). In late 1951, Roosevelt Federal had bought a three-story building at the northeast corner of Ninth and Locust Streets and immediately set to work transforming the exterior and interior of the old building (figure 9). Huge panes of glass separated by columns of crab orchard stone wrapped the building at street level, affording potential customers a glimpse into the lavish lobby. The Association’s sign, their name written in a scripty typeface, was affixed to the imposing Locust Street facade, composed almost entirely of Indiana limestone (figure 10). The day before Roosevelt Federal’s grand opening, the Globe-Democrat heralded the transformation as “one of the most outstanding ‘face-lifting’ jobs in the downtown area in recent months.”

These laudatory remarks seem to have struck a jealous nerve with St. Louis Federal’s leadership. To make matters worse, Roosevelt Federal’s location on a busy intersection was simply better—it provided greater visibility and multiple entrances to potential customers. Despite its new, sleek facade, St. Louis Federal was obscured by its two much-taller neighbors. A few weeks after Roosevelt Federal’s grand opening, workers installed a massive, 650-pound revolving clock on the front of St. Louis Federal’s red granite exterior. Another piece of statement jewelry. This stunt won the Association coverage in the Globe-Democrat’s “News in Pictures” segment. The clock, the caption asserted, will “revolve twice a minute, greatly increasing its visibility. It is 36 inches in diameter.” This was banking’s “keeping up with the Joneses” at its finest.

For the next several years, there was a pause in grand openings and open houses, the increased financial resources and banking requirements of the St. Louis area, the bank’s president told the Post-Dispatch.32 More space and an up-to-date office would better position the bank to serve the influx of working and middle-class St. Louisans opening savings accounts.33 Thirty months later in 1956, following designs laid out by the BBEC, the old Mercantile Bank building had been transformed into a rectangular box sheathed in polished granite, Bedford stone, brick, and refitted with aluminum windows (figure 7). The new facade, engulfing neighboring structures to the west and south, now stretched nearly two-thirds of a city block.34 Like a piece of statement jewelry, the bank’s modernization and expansion project—a massive, 650-pound revolving clock on the front of St. Louis Federal’s red granite exterior—was banking’s “keeping up with the Joneses” at its finest.
Above, left
Figure 8: St. Louis Federal’s advertisement (bottom right-hand corner) in the Sunday March 21, 1954 Post-Dispatch takes up the most real estate and is the most eye catching.

Above, right
Figure 9: Roosevelt Federal purchased the building on the corner in 1951. They would purchase the building next door, the Singer Sewing Machine Company Building, in 1960 and expand their office space. Note how all three buildings, Comfort Stationers, Singer Sewing, and Queen Quality Furs have modernized parts of their storefronts.


Right
Figure 10: A view of the 800 block of Locust showing Roosevelt Federal (upper right corner across from the Board of Education Building) before the block was demolished in the 1990s.

Date and photographer unknown. Harry Hagen, This is our Saint Louis (St. Louis, MO: Knight Publishing Co., 1970), 302.
but the steady rumbling of construction continued to echo down Locust Street. The First National Bank was steadily making progress on its massive corporate office when yet another reconditioning project kicked off. Farm and Home Savings and Loan Association, eager to join the “cool kids” on Locust Street, purchased the old Kinloch Building and immediately chopped off the cornice, bricked in the windows, and wrapped the slimmed down building in limestone and granite (map no. 11). A year later, oos and ahhs echoed throughout the modernized lobby as Mayor Tucker and Chamber of Commerce president A.P. Kaufmann praised the Association’s investment and faith in downtown St. Louis during the week-long open house.

After Farm and Home and the First National Bank’s grand reveals, in 1955 and 1956 respectively, a quiet spell hit Locust, giving the street time to enjoy her many new faces. 37 Charles Van Ravenswaay quoted in Martin Quigley, St. Louis, A Fond Look Back: An Appreciation of its Community by the First National Bank in St. Louis (St. Louis: MO, 1956). 600 members of the Missouri Historical Society gathered at the newly refurbished Old Courthouse to celebrate the Society’s ninetieth anniversary. William A. McDonnell, the First National Bank’s president, presented the leatherbound book to Judge George H. Moore, who had served as the Society’s president for ten years. Each guest received a paperback copy. During the party, facsimiles of confederate bills were sold by debutantes and entitled the owner to a cocktail. Both the historic setting for the lavish party and the sale of confederate bills signal an interest in a certain kind of past. Coverage of the party was published on the front page of the Post-Dispatch’s “Society News Sections,” on May 27, 1956.

As the 1950s came to a close, Locust Street was reborn. Few buildings had escaped the modernizing mill. During the 1960s, a blind optimism in the vitality of Locust Street funneled money and resources into the futile construction of parking lots and garages — reactionary endeavors to stave off the ever-intensifying westward pull of new financial hubs and office parks in the county.38 Downtown groups and realtors promoted the idea that highways, parking, and new buildings would rejuvenate a (still) “blighted” downtown. Ironically, these ticket items did more harm than good, leaving wounds that would never fully heal.39 Although the City Plan Commission’s 1960 plan for downtown still preached that “many existing structures must be modernized if the central business district is to meet the challenge that the future offers,” the frantic slipcovering characteristic of the previous decade subsided.40 Only two buildings on Locust were targeted for reconditioning. Roosevelt Federal enveloped the building next door, doubling its office space, and the former Rice-Stix Warehouse at 1015 Locust was wrapped in a quasi-glass curtain (figure 11).}

37 Charles Van Ravenswaay quoted in Martin Quigley, St. Louis, A Fond Look Back: An Appreciation of its Community by the First National Bank in St. Louis (St. Louis: MO, 1956). 600 members of the Missouri Historical Society gathered at the newly refurbished Old Courthouse to celebrate the Society’s ninetieth anniversary. William A. McDonnell, the First National Bank’s president, presented the leatherbound book to Judge George H. Moore, who had served as the Society’s president for ten years. Each guest received a paperback copy. During the party, facsimiles of confederate bills were sold by debutantes and entitled the owner to a cocktail. Both the historic setting for the lavish party and the sale of confederate bills signal an interest in a certain kind of past. Coverage of the party was published on the front page of the Post-Dispatch’s “Society News Sections,” on May 27, 1956.
38 Between 1953 and 1964, Clayton broke ground on 46 new commercial buildings while St. Louis only claimed three new developments. See Gordon,xi.
39 Gordon, 244–245.
40 After a decade of investment, the City Plan Commission noted that “grimy facades now exist in sharp contrast to attractive windows often only inches away.” The Commission stuck to its philosophy that “the image of downtown can be changed.” Together, reconditioning, rehabilitation, and conservation will “produce the intangible ‘boll’ of a renewed Downtown.” A photograph of Farm and Home’s newly slipcovered office was featured as a beautiful example of rehabilitation. Of equal importance was the need to address the lack of parking space downtown. More high density and multi-level parking garages, the plan urged, should be the direction the city moves on, not the continued demolition of buildings for surface level lots. See the “Central District” section in City Plan Commission, A Plan for Downtown St. Louis (St. Louis: City Plan Commission, 1960).
The Changing Face of Architecture on Locust Street

By the mid 1960s, many of Clayton’s new office buildings and hotels incorporated glass curtain wall facades gaining popularity in the suburbs. St. Louis’s “newest prestige landmark” was the first office building downtown to feature a built-in “ramp-type garage.” This slipcovered building was in direct competition with suburban office complexes—both aesthetically and functionally. Reliance Manufacturing Company, who represented the building’s owners, expressed to the Globe-Democrat that if more downtown buildings considered adding built-in parking, they could “be made more attractive to those who would like to remain in the downtown area.”

Other development companies also placed their bets on built-in parking. In 1965, Centennial Development Corporation announced plans for a ramp-style, four-story parking structure at the southeast corner of Twelfth and Locust. Centennial’s master plan was to create a massive office complex to rival the office parks in Clayton. The parking garage, which required the demolition of three older buildings on Locust, would connect to the former Post-Dispatch Building on the northeast corner of 12th and Olive (map nos. 2, 3, 4, 5; figure 13). As Centennial hatched plans for their parking garage, they were in the process of concealing the old Post-Dispatch building behind a glass curtain wall slipcover (map no. 1). Once the two projects were complete, the buildings would form one integrated structure with the possibility of building a “superstructure of offices” on top of the parking garage.

41 By the mid 1960s, many of Clayton’s new office buildings and hotels incorporated glass curtain wall facades. The office building at 130 Bemiston, which opened in 1964, was the first building to have curtain walls on all sides. See “Party Opens New Clayton Office Building,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, February 9, 1964.

42 Prior to 1961, glass curtain wall construction was prohibited in St. Louis. In 1956, regional building trade leaders lobbied St. Louis Mayor Raymond Tucker to rewrite the city’s outdated building code. On March 31, 1961, Mayor Tucker signed a new code allowing curtain walls of glass and finished metal panels to enclose exterior walls. For more on building codes and the International Style in St. Louis, see Michael Allen, “The International Style in St. Louis Commercial Architecture,” Docomomo, June 1, 2003.

43 The entire basement and north half of the street level floor of 1015 Locust was converted into a “ramp-type” garage. At the time of its opening, the garage could accommodate 100 cars. “Downtown Building will be Modernized,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat, January 1, 1963.


45 The three buildings were the Time Building, the Sayman Building, and the Columbian Club.

46 “Plans for Parking at 12th and Locust,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 7, 1965. The superstructure was never completed.
Demolishing the three buildings on Locust to clear the way for the garage was not the “one and done” Centennial assumed it would be. One pesky tenant, Sam Indelicato, owner of the Vogue Club on the first floor of a five-story building sandwiched between the Time Building and the Columbian Building, proved to be a real thorn in the development company’s side. Indelicato refused to vacate his establishment until his lease expired in several years. Centennial’s solution: raze the two buildings surrounding the club. While they waited for Indelicato’s lease to expire, they could begin constructing the garage over and around the club. “It was a ‘dust out.’ Naturally, Centennial assumed Indelicato would cave and relinquish his lease once the demolition of the four stories above him began. He did not. Instead, he perfected the extra dry martini. The special ingredient? Real dust. By 1966, Centennial looked for another way to forcibly remove the cocktail lounge owner from the building.

From 1965 to 1967, the Post-Dispatch fervently followed Centennial Development’s quest to oust Indelicato from his building, which now stood “forlorn, like the last rose of summer.”47 The Board of Aldermen denied Centennial’s request to declare all the buildings on the site of the proposed parking garage “blighted.”48 A settlement between Indelicato and Centennial was reached on February 6, 1967, and the headache ball finally crashed into the club that had resisted so many previous assaults.49 Perhaps due to convenience or just to spit his temerities, Sam Indelicato reopened the Vogue Club about fifty feet east of the old location.50 From his new club he watched the 430-car parking garage rise and tower over his two-story building.

The demolition of other buildings on Locust Street for surface parking, garages, and new buildings followed in the coming years.51 Downtown St. Louis Inc. even recommended that the entire downtown core, “from the Mississippi river to Twelfth boulevard,” be declared an urban renewal area—that is to say, blighted.52 Declaring a building “blighted” secured a tax break for developers, making new construction more affordable. Slipcovering and storefront modifications were considered old-fashioned, depression-era shortcuts that didn’t hold up against the allure of new construction. The desire for something new, something shiny, buried the “make-do” attitude of the Great Depression six feet under. The solution to “rejuvenating” downtown was no longer the reconditioning and modernization of buildings favored by the city’s leaders, business owners, and editors at the Post-Dispatch in the 1950s. It was a date with the wrecking ball and total rebuilding.

The promise of modernized buildings and ample parking was not enough to keep businesses downtown. Nor were the guided tours for a rare behind-the-scenes look at modernized financial institutions or free souvenirs enough to compete with the western pull of suburban office parks. Over time, the lustrous glow of Locust Street’s slipcovers and half modern buildings were off, and weeds sprouted in the cracking asphalt of her homes they financed, saw greener pastures in the county (and thicker, greener stacks of money). Banks follow money, and the money went west (figures 15, 16). Ironically, the companies who publicly pledged their loyalty to saving downtown were also the ones who abandoned it.

47 “Tavern Owner Refuses to Move; Garage to Surround His Place,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 19, 1965.
49 “Blight Status in Time Building Rock Sought,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, February 16, 1966. Per the Missouri Urban Development Corporations Law, the definition of “blighted” included age, obsolescence, inadequate or outdated design or physical deterioration. Indelicato brought Centennial to court and won. The judge remarked that in his opinion “the defendants are deliberately trying to put the plaintiff Indelicato, out of business.” If Centennial’s request had been approved, they could have exercised the right of eminent domain to forcibly remove Indelicato from the building and obtain tax relief to build the garage, see “Vogue Club Razes Razing,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 3, 1966.
52 The most notable demolition was Louis Sullivan’s Victorian Building at 800 Locust in 1962. Downtown leaders insisted that new buildings be needed despite the high office vacancy rate. Clarence M. Turley, a long-time downtown realtor (and an original member of Civic Progress Inc.) told the Post-Dispatch that, “Without doubt, people want to be where there are new and modern buildings.” At the time of the Victoria Building’s demolition, downtown office vacancy rates had reached nearly 1,000,000 square feet. Realtors like Turley, however, were proponents of “speculative building.” Speculative construction assumes a full market will eventually exist for a new building. But a new building never replaced the Victoria Building. The empty lot was paved over and became a parking lot. By the 1970s, the entire block was demolished, including Kosewerdi Federal’s too slipcovered buildings. For more than a decade, the entire 800 block of Locust was wasted away as a surface parking lot until ground broke for a new civic plaza in 2009. For more on the Victoria Building’s demolition, see “Reasons for Building,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 18, 1962.
53 “Blighting’ ‘Downtown a Gummy Device,’” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 9, 1966. George McGar writes that most of the buildings (including the Railway Exchange) developers sought blight status for were “as unblighted as the dawn of a new day.”
Unmasking Locust Street

III

Unsheathing the Centennial Building.
Paul Hohmann, photograph, 1999.
Vanishing STL, Hiding in Plain Sight Part 2: Unmasked (blog).

The St. Louis Tribune is an evening paper of great force in the presentation of news. It especially represents the extreme or stalwart wing of the German Republicans.

Of other publications in St. Louis there are hundreds, denominational, society, athletic, agricultural, medical, railway, trades, mining, etc.

The St. Louis News Company is now located in their new building, 1008 and 1010 Locust street, where they carry, as formerly, an immense stock of periodicals, books and stationery. It is through this company that the leading magazines, periodicals, newspapers, etc., are distributed throughout the western country.
In 1999, the Centennial Building lost a piece of her past. Construction workers peeled away the “ghastly black panels,” knocked out the concrete blocks filing the windows, and replaced the shaved off cornices. This was the first step in restoring the building’s “grandeur.” “Everything old is new again,” the Post-Dispatch gushed in an opinion piece as the shiny black and white panels of the Centennial Building revealed beautifully preserved Corinthian columns (figure 17). The excitement of unsheathing the old Post-Dispatch building sounded very similar to Centennial’s enthusiastic concealment of the former newspaper headquarters in 1965—illuminating the city’s fraught relationship with what “old” and “new” have come to signify. Landmark Association’s 1976 Downtown Beauty Contest, in which a group of architects and city planners ranked buildings on a six-point scale, ranging from “national significance” to “little or no architectural merit—demolition would be inconsequential or advantageous,” underscores this point. Most of the buildings in the bottom category were also the newest. Downtown’s parking garages and the Centennial Building were among the contest’s losers. That the Centennial Building is not “new” is indicative of a hastiness to disregard a building’s many facades in favor of subjective and period specific aesthetic opinions. While proponents of storefront modifications and slipcovers had been convinced that modernizing St. Louis’ antiquated buildings block by block would rejuvenate the city, by the beginning of the 20th century, the narrative had reversed. “A rosier future for downtown depends at least in part on restoring our past, a process that occurs a building and a block at a time. The resurrection of the old Post-Dispatch building is a step in that direction,” editors at the Post-Dispatch wrote. The “pleasant contagion” of civic remodeling that hit Locust Street in the 1950s had struck again, and many of the street’s buildings lost their mid-century exterior sheathing (figure 19). The former solution to beautifying downtown’s decaying building stock was now the ugly problem itself. In 2013, workers removed the green granite panels covering the American News Company Building, earning the building a Most Enhanced Award from Landmarks Association in 2016 (figure 18). The award, which in part reflects an aesthetic value judgement, reinforces the cyclical rhetoric that renovation makes downtown, and the city, more attractive.

The current trend in renovation on Locust Street and other blocks downtown verges into what Svetlana Boym has called “restorative nostalgia,” a desire to return to a past state of glory. Unsheathing Locust Street by following a “principle of preference” —the choice of a preferred period or age rather than the sum of all a building’s changes—conceals the multiplicity of pasts and identities of the street’s buildings. The material traces of a city that fought decay with architectural modifications and land clearance policies are erased as the street assumes her old identity in a quest for architectural unity and cohesion, Locust Street loses her many faces and personalities. She loses her grit, her visual interest. The street becomes, like many small-town historic districts riddled with “olde shoppes,” and signs imitating those found in a medieval English village, placeless and forgettable.

54 “Everything old is new again,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 1, 1999.
56 “Everything old is new again,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 1, 1999.
57 “Everything old is new again,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 1, 1999. The irony is not lost here. The Post-Dispatch, once St. Louis’ biggest champion of face lifting endorsed the unsheathing of its former building (although they themselves were not responsible for the International Style slipcover).
Local preservation groups have been quick to cast storefront modifications as tacky eye sores that degrade the quality of an otherwise architecturally significant building. But material transformations are part of a building’s life cycle, adding value to both its age and history. Social and aesthetic perspectives concerning slipcovers and half-modern buildings are often at odds when it comes to preservation and restoration. As the American News Company Building’s granite panels fell to the sidewalks, the comment section of a local blog erupted in celebration. One lone dissenter “would have been happy just to see the rest of the facade cleaned up, and the cladding remain (it’s not the worst I’ve ever seen).” But most commenters agreed that small restoration projects such as this gave them hope for the city. With each “restoration of another historic building,” one commenter posted, “another part of the puzzle that is our history is put back in its rightful place.”

Unmasking Locust, however, reveals one history and conceals another. A “fond look back” at the city’s days as a thriving river town mask the mid-century anxiety that infected St. Louis and still persists. Today, the fear of death and decay that pushed mid-century urban planners to modernize the city’s buildings manifests as a desire for a downtown area populated with old buildings that reflect the city’s more prosperous age and history. Social and aesthetic perspectives concerning slipcovers and half-modern buildings pose, see Mike Jackson, “Modernism on Main Street: The Dilemma of the Half-modern Building,” pp. 35, 11.

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For example, according to the Downtown Beauty Contest’s consulting architects, few passersby have noticed the Ackley Uniform Company Building at 511 Washington, a building of national architectural significance, because of its “tacky street level storefront facade.”

“Results of the Downtown Beauty Contest,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 11, 1976.


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Several months later, I returned to Locust Street with fresh eyes. Few traces of the fierce modernization competition that swept the street in the 1950s remain. Rather, it, like the rest of downtown, reflects nearly 165 years of “building and un-building.”

The untidy collection of new, old, dilapidated, semi-intact, restored, and vacant buildings punctuated by crumbling parking lots and garages threatening imminent collapse did not shock me as it had before. In a way, the street felt more intact, more decipherable. Perhaps it was because I understood her struggle for truth and beauty a little better.

New tenants, residents, and businesses have moved into restored buildings, while those that remain encased in their 1950s slipcovers are dying slow deaths. Farm and Home still sits vacant, water stains run down her limestone facade—blemishing her once pristine face. St. Louis Federal, too, waits for an interested buyer. As I walked by, I caught the slightest impression of where the metal letters that made up her sign once hung. The bank’s massive revolving clock no longer rotates, and her hands are stuck forever at 5:30. The employees went home and

67 Heidi Koltz, Taking Possession, 19.
never came back. The towering turn-of-the-century building across the street vainly inspects her terracotta ornamentation in St. Louis Federal’s red granite facade, reminding the former bank that “you used to look like me too.” At least the building is still standing. Roosevelt Federal and her three neighbors took one last collective breath before the wrecking ball silenced them for good. A new civic plaza covers their remains like dirt would a common grave.

The last time I walked this street, I felt sadness seeping through the bricks, the stones, the concrete. I sensed my own nostalgia, and the city’s too, for the day when the streets were packed with people hustling to work, gazing at window displays with mannequins draped in the latest fashions, or popping into the Archdiocese’s downtown chapel for a lunch time chat with God. But it’s the same kind of generic nostalgia that every generation feels—a longing for an idealized past that promises to make the future better.

In 1956, Mayor Tucker said, “It is the duty of each generation to leave St. Louis a better city than it inherited. We have seen this duty and are making up for lost time.” Traipsing through downtown with Tucker’s quote in mind, I am more sympathetic to this manhandled urban landscape, and less hasty to pass judgment. A 2004 assessment of the city’s urban renewal efforts concluded that “It is not a city that looks loved.” But looked at another way, did Mayor Darst and his gang of boosters, businessmen, and real estate developers simply love the city too much? Sometimes we hurt what we love the most. It’s easy to look back, scoff, and judge the attempts of previous generations to leave St. Louis a better city than when they inherited it. When the negative effects of mid-century urban planning and renewal efforts are everywhere, it takes more effort, and an open mind, to look at the city from the perspective of those same planners, boosters, and city officials who had grand plans for the city’s future.

I continued walking east down Locust Street, towards the slipcover that started it all. Besides the transmogrified building, all that remains of the First National Bank is a night deposit box engraved with its logo. I stopped to take a photo. A woman came up to me. If you want a pretty picture, she said, go look at the tulips outside the Federal Reserve. The old bank did look worse for wear, even though it’s smattered with signs advertising luxury apartments inside. But I’ve learned my lesson; the exterior doesn’t always reflect the interior. Now I can empathize with the city and her buildings who have been judged repeatedly for never being enough.


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Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. How to Give your Store the Look that Sells. 1951.


This book was created at Washington University in St. Louis, in the MFA Illustration and Visual Culture program in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, in the spring of 2024.

The body text is set in Dolly Pro, designed by Underwear. The title text is set in Maple Black, designed by Eric Olsen. The book was designed and typeset by Cora Trout based on a page design by Ren Kiel. Text editing by Heidi Kolk.

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ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
(Independent City)

LOCATION: At junction of Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, 296 miles southwest of Chicago.

POPULATION: 856,796. Retail Trading Area (estimated), 1,679,000.

PRINCIPAL MUNICIPALITIES: De Soto, St. Charles, Alton, Collinsville, East Alton, Edwardsville, Jerseyville and Wood River.

ANKS: 30 - Total Deposits, $1,797,700; Total Resources, $1,946,000.

NEWSPAPERS: Globe-Democrat (m. ex. Sat., 282,611; Sat., 270,731; 364,022; post-Dispatch (m. ex. Sat.), 240,052; Sat., 226,302; (S), 450,138.

UTO REGISTRATIONS: City, 226,459; County, 83,839.

COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES: St. Louis University, Washington University, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, Harris College, Stowe Teachers & Junior College; Girl's College: Fontbonne, Maryville and Notre Dame Junior College in St. Louis, Webster College in Webster Groves, St. Mary's Jr. College in O'Fallon, Lindenwood in St. Charles; Kenney College; Concordia Theological Seminary, Chaminade, Eden, Kenrick Seminary, etc.

Looking east on Market Street from Third

Building To Get Face Lifted