

HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter

Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

Mid-Century Modern

Jeff Merz, AICP – Planner with AECOM

*“Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood
and probably themselves will not be realized”*

We all know this quote from our planning patron saint – Daniel Burnham. We also are likely familiar with many of his buildings and plans from our planning studies – the Flatiron at Madison Square in New York, Carson Pirie Scott department store in Chicago, Washington DC’s McMillan Plan, the Chicago World’s Fair “White City” which ushered in the City Beautiful Movement and my personal favorite - the Reliance Insurance Building in Chicago’s Loop.



Chicago World Fair 1893

<http://www.bing.com/images/>

HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter

Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

From the start of the construction of Gilded Age homes and cityscapes in the 1880's, extending through the urban "skyscraper" boom in the 20's and up to the Eisenhower/Sputnik era of Cold War Soviet one-upmanship, America made a lot of big plans.

One of these big plans was in Saint Louis. I was born in Saint Louis the day before they placed the final "keystone" piece in the Gateway Arch. My mom remembers looking towards downtown from the window of her West End hospital room as they lowered the last stainless steel piece of the Arch into place. Last year, the Gateway Arch celebrated its 50th year.



Architect Eero Saarinen Inside a Mockup of His Arch

Source: STL Today 2013

More than just a brilliantly simple and dramatic world monument, the Arch symbolizes so much of what America was all about in the mid 20th century, in a city that at one time represented all that was innovative, prosperous and productive in America.

The Arch project started by the clearing of 40 city blocks of Saint Louis waterfront under the spirit of a WPA depression era "urban renewal" project (40 city blocks of an area said to have rivaled New Orleans in history, culture and irreplaceable architectural gems with historical roots back to the early 1700's).

HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter

Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

While the cleared site remained a forlorn parking lot through the war years, the post war era put the plans back on track with a bold, international competition drawing interest and commentary (not all positive) from the likes of Louis Kahn, Le Corbusier, Robert Moses, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the ascerbic Ada Louise Huxtable – iconic architecture critic of the New York Times.

Through the 1950's, with the winning Arch design awarded, the development site morphed again, this time with an emphasis for the site to accommodate new massive interstate freeways, off-ramps and bridges under the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act approved by President Eisenhower.

During this time, the Arch project took on a new symbolic role as the savior of dying rust-belt Saint Louis. As people and industry were moving out of the city through the 1950's the memorial was seen as the “silver bullet” to bring life and people back downtown, forge a new image for the city and bring fame and development on an international scale.

Then, in the early 1960's the historic preservation movement was sweeping the country coalescing around the demolition of New York Penn Station and other iconic American buildings and the concurrent construction of freeways rammed through city neighborhoods. The pushback from “urban renewal” and push for historic preservation, had begun. So the Arch grounds design was adjusted to de-emphasize and “bury” the proposed freeway sections near the Arch and design the park grounds to better accommodate and feature the Old Courthouse and the Old Cathedral – two buildings remaining from the 1930's clearance project.

At the time of its completion, Eero Saarinen's Gateway Arch instantly defined an architectural era - clean, simple, fluid lines in modern high-tech stainless steel assembled in austere, bold contrast to its urban surroundings – a Charles Eames chair in a French Second Empire cityscape.

What we now relish as Mid-Century Modern design has its poster child on the waterfront in Saint Louis. Other architectural icons coming into their own from that era include Kennedy Airport's TWA terminal, the Astrodome in Houston, the Fountainbleu Hotel in Miami Beach, the Theme Building at LAX, the Space Needle in Seattle, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge in Brooklyn, the Seagram's Building in Manhattan, and the Eichler homes sprinkled in neighborhoods across the country. Some of these structures have been altered or repurposed while others are threatened with demolition (see Astrodome).

HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter
Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association



Seagrams Building - Manhattan
<http://www.greview.org>



Theme Building - Los Angeles
<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons>



Fontainebleau Hotel – Miami Beach
<http://www.bing.com/images>

HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter

Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

The Gateway Arch was the last of the great government-funded monument-memorials of the American century. It can't and won't be altered or repurposed. It is decidedly "non-utilitarian". It holds no corporate office, nor great art works or irreplaceable cultural treasures, provides no great public works benefits or jobs, and generates no massive amounts of income (other than increases in city tourism revenue and operational money for the National Park Service). Can one even imagine Congress approving federal money for this project today!

On its 50th birthday, the Gateway Arch itself (above its now mature landscape line) looks exactly as it did on the day after I was born. Ironically, it is now eligible for historic preservation, ironic since so much of Saint Louis architectural waterfront history was torn down to make room for it. Last year, civic leaders and the National Park Service began a revitalization project involving demolition of an ugly parking garage on the Arch grounds and constructing a "lid" over the depressed section of Interstate 70. The result: visitors can now walk from downtown to the Arch grounds along a greenway unimpeded by ugly, loud traffic and roadway barriers. Numerous future plans will further reduce car access to the area and increase walkability and greenspace and access to the Mississippi River.

I think of how we have changed as a country since the building of the Gateway Arch. In 1936, Le Corbusier declared that American architecture reflects a country of timid people. I think in many regards his words are more relevant today, whether it be our dull, cookie cutter suburbs, antiseptic office parks, our uninspired modern civic buildings and public spaces or the inane plan to stop our rail system at Middle Street.

Whether we realize it or not, our built environment affects us immensely and changes our dialogue with each other and our surroundings. It therefore should be the best it can possibly be. Like Daniel Burnham said, let's build to "stir men's blood". The Gateway Arch does just that.

While the Gateway Arch didn't stop the decline of Saint Louis, heal its racial wounds (see Ferguson) or usher in a new economic future, it does provide a unifying element and "brand" for the city, acts as the city's front yard for a full range of region-wide events and generates pride among area residents. At 50 years old, I think folks in Saint Louis consider it a rather good investment.

Saint Louis native son and writer T. S. Eliot:

It is self-evident that St. Louis affected me more deeply than any other environment has ever done. I feel that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those people who have not. I consider myself fortunate to have been born here, rather than in Boston, or New York, or London.

HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter
Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association



A Picture of the Arch during the Placement of the Final Section

<http://jimmerkelthewriter.com/2014/03/>