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Exhibition Explores St. Louis's Built Environment Through Artifacts from its Past

Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis

On View September 8, 2023 – February 4, 2024; Pulitzer is only venue

ST. LOUIS, MO, June 20, 2023—This fall the Pulitzer Arts Foundation gleans insights into pressing issues of the built environment by way of building artifacts, the architectural salvage left in the wake of urban renewal and accelerated material change in St. Louis. *Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis* presents more than 25 objects—from a theater façade to a hand-pressed clay brick—drawn from the National Building Arts Center (NBAC), the nation's largest collection of architectural, structural, and industrial artifacts, located in a former steel foundry 10 minutes from St. Louis's downtown.

On view from September 8, 2023 through February 4, 2024, *Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis* is organized by Michael Allen, director of the National Building Arts Center, Sauget, Illinois, with Stephanie Weissberg, Curator, Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Molly Moog, Curatorial Assistant, Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

"*Urban Archaeology* is intended to spark discussions about St. Louis's past and future," says Pulitzer Executive Director Cara Starke.

"The museum has explored the way we inhabit the urban landscape in prior exhibitions, and we continue to examine the topic from different perspectives to expand our understanding of history so that we might better envision the future of our city. We are especially gratified by this collaboration as NBAC's vast collection is a unique repository that offers fascinating new vantage points from which to view urban change and transformation."



Unglazed terra cotta panels on display at the National Building Arts Center, 2021

“You can pinpoint a spot on a map of downtown St. Louis and pull materials out of our warehouses and reassemble a street corner. That’s how comprehensive the Center’s collection is,” says Michael Allen. “We regard the objects in the collection as a kind of DNA for the larger urban built environment. The late Larry Giles, NBAC’s founder and a salvager himself, described the large-scale systems that he recovered as ‘assemblies.’ In truth, these assemblies transcended the physical – they are systems of cultural meaning that show us how the city ended up where it is today.”

“Urbanists often cite St. Louis as a city that represents what has played out in other areas of the U.S.,” says Stephanie Weissberg. “If that’s so, and I think it is, this exhibition will contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and economic forces that have shaped our American cities.”

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW



Rivoli Theatre, 1983

Urban Archaeology begins on the main level in the Cube Gallery where elements from the façade of the once grand Rivoli Theatre are installed. Constructed in 1924, the Italianate Rivoli Theatre stood in the Central Business District of Downtown St. Louis before its demolition in 1983. For a moment, the museum visitor is transported to North 6th Street in the 1930s, admiring the delicately arcaded cornice, languid Art Nouveau floral pattern, crenelated window shade borders, and graceful hand-painted signage.

The Pulitzer will intentionally break this spell by removing one of the panels and setting it aside. Presenting the facade in a dismantled state invites consideration of what happens when building fragments are removed from their architectural context and displayed in a museum. The questions of what salvage is, what it can tell us, and what it cannot, commence here.

Lower South Gallery

Moving to the lower level, the next gallery focuses on material, labor, and innovation through a display of tiles, bricks, infrastructural elements, and industrial tools. Rich in clay deposits, St. Louis is a city made of brick.

A pallet anchors the space, showcasing a variety of brick types—decorative, paver, and fire bricks (used in kilns). With as many as 60 local brickworks, the city was the largest producer of decorative terracotta brick in the world in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Urban Archaeology highlights the technical progress of the early brick-making industry, but also sheds light on how some innovations carried with them unintended consequences, including the stratification of the labor force. On view here is a Pyrometer, an instrument for monitoring the temperature of kilns at a distance. With its adoption at



Pallet of ornamental bricks, 2023

the turn of the twentieth-century, stokers actions became directed from a supervisor's office rather than self-determined at the kiln.

The extraordinary skill of the artisans of the period comes into focus in the Lower South Gallery with a pair of blue and yellow glazed terracotta reliefs, one of a feminine figure, the other of a heraldic symbol. Created in 1905 and modeled on Renaissance period reliefs by artists like Luca della Robbia, these virtuosic panels are among twenty originally set deep into the arches of the cornice of the Mission Free School, from which they were removed in the 1990s.

East Gallery

The East Gallery showcases a selection of exquisite panel reliefs, pendants, and spandrels from St. Louis's downtown and Grand Center, the neighborhood where the Pulitzer is situated. The downtown



West End Hotel relief panel, 1891

buildings occupied an area of four square blocks and were built within ten years of each other and demolished within one year between 1983 and 1984. These objects speak to how business leaders in the first half of the 20th century spared no expense in commissioning buildings that demonstrated civic pride and power through artistic, technical, and architectural virtuosity. They date from the time before downtown St. Louis experienced a loss of population density and the next generation of business leaders began to aspire

to a new kind of modernity worthy of a major international landscape.

One example is an unusually fine neoclassical stone carving of fronds, leaves, vines, and a palmette that crowned the Wagner Mortuary (1906), which stood just a few blocks from where the Pulitzer is located today. Rather than being carved by hand, the relief was created with a hand-held pneumatic chisel, a tool that shifted the course of architectural stone working.

Another technical innovation represented in this gallery is the first known example of polychromed glaze on a major commercial building in the U.S. A matte green ceramic orb is set in the center of a six-foot-tall decorative lion pendant from the downtown Beaux Arts Buder building, designed by the prominent architect William A. Swasey.

Here as well is a thirteen-foot-long terracotta spandrel from the Benoist Building, a high prestige stone and brick building in downtown St. Louis. Its intricate Italian Renaissance-style pattern is rendered masterfully, albeit in part by industrial techniques. A nearby carving, saved from the Title Guaranty Building, was produced by the Winkle Terra Cotta Company, a successful St. Louis firm that is the subject of ongoing research by the National Building Arts Center.



Terracotta Lion and Pendant Assembly, Buder Building, 1904

One of the least prepossessing artifacts here is a small marble remnant of the downtown Century Building. Rubble, really. This humble artifact, picked from a wrecking pile, contrasts with building parts that were carefully extracted during demolition, highlighting the role of salvage in preserving architectural heritage.

West Gallery

The last indoor gallery examines how St. Louisans across different neighborhoods have contended with vacancy and the deterioration of historic buildings through preservation, development, demolition, and adaptive reuse.

A prominent artifact here is a terracotta lion head pendant from a demolished building that stood at 2617-2623 Cass Avenue, one of the earliest salvage projects by Larry Giles, founder of the National Building Arts Center. The lion head adorned the façade of a 19th century commercial and residential building in the Jeff-Vander-Lou neighborhood of North St. Louis. For almost a century, the surrounding area experienced racially discriminatory zoning practices, troublesome vacancies, and urban renewal projects, including the housing development Pruitt Igoe. Pruitt Igoe was completely demolished between 1972 and 1976 and today its former site adjoins a new government complex, the National Geospatial Agency.



Cast Iron Column, Clemens House, 1860

Nearby the pendant, a number of tall rusted cast-iron columns lay on their side. Said to represent an early application of cast iron on a residential building, they are among 16 columns commissioned for the loggia of Clemens house, a Palladian-style residence (1859-60) located on Cass Avenue. The mansion was repurposed as a center for different immigrant and religious communities throughout the 20th century but eventually fell into ruin. Before it was demolished, its preservation was a divisive topic. Some St. Louisans wanted the house

preserved since Mark Twain, a cousin, may have visited there and because of its architectural features. Others in the neighborhood wanted the vacant structure torn down due to its disrepair. Still others identified it as a site of trauma since it may have been built by enslaved people for the original owner, James Clemens Jr., a Confederate sympathizer.

Three early cast-iron lintels in the West Gallery invite still more questions about how to achieve the highest public good given the choices implicit in societal change. They come from a commercial building demolished in the late 1930s and 40s to make way for the Gateway Arch. The clearance could be seen as an example of an ambivalent urban renewal process: it resulted in an iconic monument, but it leveled significant historical buildings around the waterfront, as well as a bohemian district that had been home to artists and laborers.

Urban Archaeology concludes with a video documenting the stories of two St. Louis neighborhoods where residents have successfully fought to preserve businesses and residences. Jeff-Vander-Lou was

one of the first neighborhoods in the city where Black individuals were allowed to own property. In the 1960s, a grassroots movement led by activist Macler Shephard opposed a highway proposal that would have split the neighborhood and displaced residents. Soulard, on the South side, is one of the oldest city neighborhoods. It developed in proximity to the Anheuser-Busch brewery and in the early 1970s, the neighborhood was subject to vacancy and dereliction. A group of individuals advocated for the neighborhood to be designated as a National Historic District, which enabled the preservation, protection, and enhancement of historic and architecturally significant buildings.

For use throughout the exhibition, an audio guide will be provided that includes oral histories contributed by St. Louis residents, builders, and preservationists.

Courtyard

In the Pulitzer Arts Foundation's courtyard, a cast iron column from the Clemens house serves as a material counterpoint to Richard Serra's monumental sculpture *Joe* (1999) and as the coda to *Urban Archaeology*. It will be placed on a pallet, as it is in storage at the National Building Arts Center.

Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis is the latest in a growing roster of Pulitzer projects engaging issues surrounding the built environment. In 2019, the museum collaborated with Monument Lab on *Public Iconographies*, a St. Louis research residency that explored the question: *How would you map the monuments of St. Louis?* In 2015, the museum invited the German architecture collective raumlaborberlin to create an installation addressing the way St. Louisans inhabit the urban landscape. Other projects have included *Urban Alchemy/Gordon Matta-Clark* (2010) and *Crossing the Delmar Divide* (2012-14), a collaboration with the Missouri History Museum and the Anti-Defamation League.

About the National Building Arts Center

The National Building Arts Center is a unique, emergent institution housing the nation's largest and most varied collection of architectural, structural, and industrial artifacts and a research library. The campus occupies the 40,000 sq. ft. former Sterling Steel Casting Company foundry, just outside of downtown St. Louis in Sauget, Illinois. The collections are staggering, including 23,800 ornamental bricks with the majority made by a patented hydraulic pressure process by the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company; 3,000 pieces of terracotta from the former Granada Theater alone; and 201 cast iron storefronts, the largest such holding in the world.

Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis would not have been possible without the prodigious efforts of the founder of NBAC, Larry Giles (1947-2021), and his crew. Once described in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* as "the man who saved St. Louis," Giles rescued the vast majority of the artifacts assembled at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

About the Pulitzer Arts Foundation

Located in the heart of St. Louis, the Pulitzer Arts Foundation presents art from around the world in its celebrated Tadao Ando-designed building and surrounding neighborhood. Exhibitions include both contemporary and historic art and are complemented by a wide range of free public programs, including music, literary arts, dance, wellness, and cultural discussions. Founded in 2001, the Pulitzer is a

place where ideas are freely explored, new art exhibited, and historic work reimaged. Open and free to all, the Pulitzer is a cultural and civic asset to the St. Louis community and a popular destination for visitors from around the world.

In addition to the museum, the Pulitzer is home to several outdoor spaces, including Park-Like—a garden of native plants and pathways, the Spring Church—an open air stone pavilion and beloved landmark, and the Tree Grove—a shady picnic spot with oak and redbud trees. The museum is open Thursday through Sunday, 10am–5pm, with evening hours until 8pm on Friday. The outdoor campus is open daily, sunrise to sunset. Admission is free. For more information, visit pulitzerarts.org or @pulitzerarts on social media.

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Image Captions

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Unglazed terracotta panels on display at the National Building Arts Center, 2021. Collection of the National Building Arts Center

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Rivoli Theatre, 1983. Collection of the National Building Arts Center

Pallet of ornamental bricks, 2023. Ceramic, 26 x 36 x 48 inches height includes 6 inches pallet. Photography by Virginia Harold, Collection of the National Building Arts Center

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West End Hotel relief panel, 1891. Limestone, 36 x 137 x 6.5 inches (on the cart 53 x 72 x 40 inches). Photography by Virginia Harold, Collection of the National Building Arts Center

Terracotta lion and pendant assembly, Buder Building, 1904. Ceramic, Overall - 72 x 24.5 x 14 inches. Photography by Virginia Harold, Collection of the National Building Arts Center

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Cast iron column, Clemens House, 1860. Iron, approximately 126 1/2 x 20 inches diameter. Photography by Virginia Harold, Collection of the National Building Arts Center