

Book Review

August 2015

St. Louis, The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape

Eric Sandweiss, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2001.

Summary
YouTube
Published Reviews
Implications
Related Readings

Summary

Many important American cities that have fallen by the wayside; They are no longer among the nation's "first tier" cities. St. Louis is one of these fallen giants. Founded in 1764, incorporated in 1823, St. Louis was one of America's ten most populated cities from 1860 to 1960; a century of national prominence.

This book is a wonderful object lesson in city building. His ideas about "fenced off places and wider settings" provides a sound framework for the discussion.

Now, the City of St. Louis is still a renowned city of the nation, but not first tier as it once was. Mr. Sandweiss concludes his fine book with a chapter entitled, *Epilogue: Rethinking the Contours of Community in the Declining City, 1950 to Present*.

Eric Sandweiss, Ph. D., was the Director of Research at the Missouri Historical Society when he wrote this book. Now, in 2014, he is:

- Carmony Chair, Department of History
- Professor, Department of History
- Editor, *Indiana Magazine of History*
- Adjunct Professor, Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology.

Mr. Sandweiss's story of the St. Louis speculative period is the story of every city dedicated to growth and commercialization. St. Louis struggled with the same forces dominating the discussions in growth towns of the 21st century. The business model of the city considered "...the city as a commodity – a collection of parcels waiting to be bought and sold..." Individual property rights overpowered the common good. "The practice of selling property in a systematic way, and of relying on it as a source of income, rather than simply one method for accumulating capital..." created a continually pressurized system where property had to be sold to maintain the life style of the speculators [p76].

In its totality, Mr. Sandweiss's book is a very sophisticated and in-depth analysis of the evolution of a prominent city through three stages of city building. His stories and information provide insights into why things are the way they are today.

YouTube:

This YouTube is great; it takes the book and translates it into the language of children, with illustrations. More books about cities should be directed at children and students. Remember, *The Plan for Chicago*, as a part of its implementation, was taught in the Chicago public school system.

Children Book Review: St. Louis Architecture for Kids by Lee Ann Sandweiss, Phyllis Harris, Gen O...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaBCzwtitTo>

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Published Reviews



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS

St. Louis, *The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape*

Eric Sandweiss

"Eric Sandweiss's book makes fascinating reading—not only for someone with a love of St. Louis history, but for anyone interested in thinking about the effect of past decisions upon the current state of American cities."

—Vince Schoemehl, former Mayor of St. Louis

"St. Louis's story stands for the story of all those cities whose ambitions and civic self-image, forged from the growth of the mercantile and industrial eras, have been dramatically altered over time. More dramatically, perhaps, than most—but in a manner shared by all—St. Louis's changing economic base, shifting population, and altered landscape have forced scholars, policymakers, and residents alike to acknowledge the transiency of what once seemed inexorable metropolitan trends: concentration, growth, accumulated wealth, and generally improved well-being.

"In this book, Eric Sandweiss scrutinizes the everyday landscape—streets, houses, neighborhoods, and public buildings—as it evolved in a classic American city. Bringing to life the spaces that most of us pass without noticing, he reveals how the processes of dividing, trading, improving, and dwelling upon land are acts that reflect and shape social relations. From its origins as a French colonial settlement in the eighteenth century to the present day, St. Louis offers a story not just about how our past is diagrammed in brick and asphalt, but also about the American city's continuing viability as a place where the balance of individual rights and collective responsibilities can be debated, demonstrated, and adjusted for generations to come."

Critical Perspectives on the Past, edited by [Susan Porter Benson](#), Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig.

http://www.temple.edu/tempresstitles/1503_reg.html

AMAZON

St. Louis: Evolution of American Urban Landscape (Critical Perspectives On The Paperback) – August 2, 2001

by [ERIC SANDWEISS](#) (Author)

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“St. Louis' story stands for the story of all those cities whose ambitions and civic self-image, forged from the growth of the mercantile and industrial eras, have been dramatically altered over time. More dramatically, perhaps, than most but in a manner shared by all St. Louis' changing economic base, shifting population, and altered landscape have forced scholars, policymakers, and residents alike to acknowledge the transiency of what once seemed inexorable metropolitan trends: concentration, growth, accumulated wealth, and generally improved well-being. In this book, Eric Sandweiss scrutinizes the everyday landscape streets, houses, neighborhoods, and public buildings as it evolved in a classic American city. Bringing to life the spaces that most of us pass without noticing, he reveals how the processes of dividing, trading, improving, and dwelling upon land are acts that reflect and shape social relations. From its origins as a French colonial settlement in the eighteenth century to the present day, "St Louis" offers a story not just about how our past is diagramed in brick and asphalt, but also about the American city's continuing viability as a place where the balance of individual rights and collective responsibilities can be debated, demonstrated, and adjusted for generations to come. Author note: Eric Sandweiss is the Director of Research at the Missouri Historical Society.”

Implications for the American City

St. Louis was a top ten American city for a century. Maybe a century on top is enough. St. Louis is still a fine town with many of the problems of other big cities in the United States; but, the question is still there – Why the decline? Only three of the top ten American cities in 1860 survived as such in 2010: New York, Philadelphia and Chicago.

Why the decline? This is a question that should be on the table for any “successful” city today. St. Louis, Buffalo, Detroit and others were prosperous places to live had strong economies. Their stories are different, some externalities brought the doom, but many were the cause of their own demise. A single dominant industry combined with lethargy and “good old boy” corruption eroded their success. A social and economic system based on diversity, constant re-invention and rejuvenation, good government and an open system that readily accepts new people and new ideas; these are lessons to be learned.

Decennial Year	Rank of US Cities	Population
1860	#8	160,773
1870	#4	310,864
1880	#6	350,518
1890	#5	451,770
1900	#4	575,238
1910	#4	687,029
1920	#6	772,897
1930	#7	821,960
1940	#8	816,048
1950	#8	856,796
1960	#10	750,026

Note: 1960 was the last year St. Louis appeared on the list of top ten cities in the U.S.

Source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Largest_cities_in_the_United_States_by_population_by_decade

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Related Readings

1. **American City: St. Louis Architecture: Three Centuries of Design (American City Series)**, Robert Sharoff (Author), William Zbaren (Photographer), The Images Publishing Group, Pty Ltd, Victoria, Australia, 2012.
2. **Design of Cities: Revised Edition**, Edmund N. Bacon, The Penguin Group, NY, 1976.
3. **Detroit, An American Autopsy**, LeDuff, Charlie, The Penguin Press, NY, 2013.
4. **Power Failure, Politics, Patronage, and the Economic Future of Buffalo, New York**, Diana Dillaway, Prometheus Books, 2006.
5. **The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840 – 1917**, Jon A. Peterson, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2003.
6. **The Middle-Class City; Transforming Space and Time in Philadelphia, 1876 – 1926**, John Henry Hepp IV, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2003.
7. **The Sanitary City: Environmental Services in Urban America from Colonial Times to the Present**, Martin V. Melosi, [Abridged] [Paperback], The Pittsburgh Press, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA, 2008
8. **Triumph of the City, How our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier**, Glaeser, Edward, The Penguin Press [USA], London, 2011.

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