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Governance and the Struggle for the Downtown

St. Louis, 1952–2005

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The official story St. Louisians tell about their city is that the leadership that is needed to solve its problems has mostly been missing in action because the municipal government is hopelessly disorganized, fragmented, and dysfunctional. What this frequently repeated narrative about the city overlooks is that the political and civic elites of St. Louis have been able to sustain a decades-long downtown revitalization effort that rivals cities of much larger size and more resources. If they had been unable to overcome the obstacles posed by a famously fragmented political system, the downtown and its economy might have slipped past the point of no return. In this chapter, we endeavor to explain how St. Louis was able to build a system of governance sufficient to sustain the long, frustrating, but perhaps ultimately successful struggle to regenerate the downtown.

St. Louis began its long slide in the 1930s and even earlier, prompting *Forum* magazine to publish an article in 1939 commenting on "the desolation and desertion characterizing scores of blocks in the business district" (Teaford, 1993, p. 213). By the 1950s, the wasting disease that infected the downtown seemed to be spreading inexorably into the neighborhoods: "No new office building had been erected downtown in two decades, traffic in the central business district was a nerve-shattering mess, and half the city was blighted" (Primm, 1981, p. 493). The same rot could be found in all the cities of the industrial belt, but St. Louis seemed to be among the worst off. Throughout the postwar era it seemed almost as if St. Louis was locked into a dismal competition with its peers to see which of the old industrial cities could sustain the largest population losses, and by this measure it won the race for the bottom by shedding 61 percent of its residents in the half-century from 1950 to 2000. In 1950 it was the nation's eighth largest city, with 857,000 residents, but by century's end, with only 335,000 people left, its status as a big city had all but evaporated (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1951). It had become less important in its own region, too. By the census of 2000 only 13 percent of the metropolitan area's residents still resided in the city, a free-fall from sixty years earlier when, with 57 percent of the population, it plainly was the center of population and economic activity (*Statistical Abstract of the United States,* 1987).

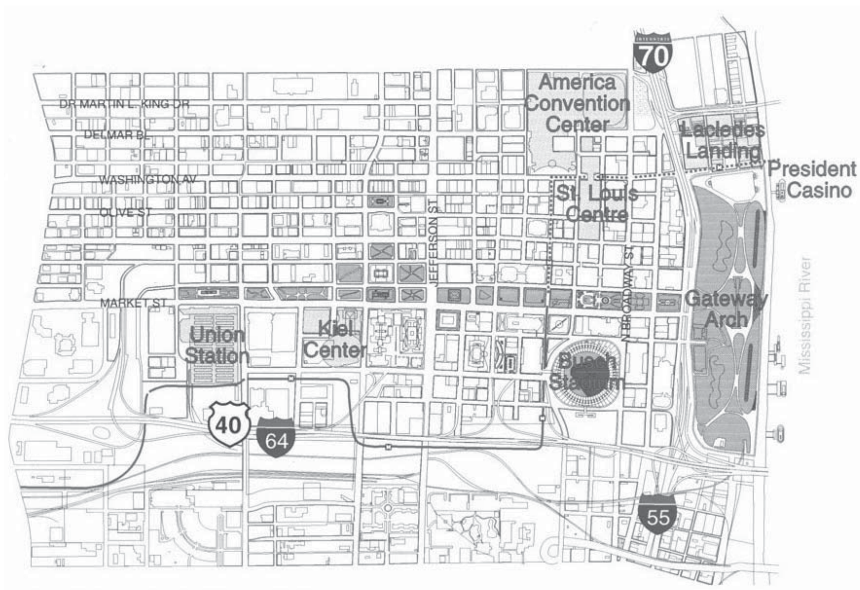
The effects of this demographic disaster were amplified by a process of economic restructuring that began to empty the city of its most vital business sectors. Like everywhere else in the industrial heartland, the region's economy revolved around goods-producing activities. In 1950 manufacturing accounted for 51 percent of the workforce in St. Louis, a figure that precisely matched the national ratio. But a historic deindustrialization process had already set in, and it accelerated decade by decade. By 1980 manufacturing provided just 16 percent of the region's jobs, and by then all but a few of the large manufacturing firms had left the city or had fled the metropolitan area entirely. The same trend unfolded in retailing, wholesaling, and other sectors (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). These developments devastated the downtown, where historically significant but obsolete office, warehouse, and commercial buildings presided over streets that were thinly populated in the daytime and empty at night.

All through this period, civic leaders expressed anxiety about the state of the downtown and the city, and they were determined that market forces would not dictate St. Louis's fate. In 1952 St. Louis received enormous national publicity for being the first city in the nation to receive federal urban renewal funds, and over the next few years, civic leaders raised more than $2 million in public and private funds for slum clearance and related projects. When urban renewal began to lose its luster, the tourism sector carried a large part of the burden of downtown redevelopment. Between 1965 and 2006 almost $1.5 billion of public and private capital was devoted to the task of building an infrastructure to support tourism and entertainment (Laslo, Louishomme, and Judd, 2003).

This infrastructure has changed the built environment in and near downtown, see Map 6.1. The Cervantes Convention Center, the attached Edward Jones Dome stadium (where the football Rams play), and a convention hotel built with public money anchor the northern end of the downtown. The latest Cardinals baseball stadium opened in 2006 and continues to define the southern perimeter. The Scottrade Center, built to house the St. Louis Blues hockey team, is located four blocks to the west, and in two more blocks one comes to a Rouse mall nestled in the bowels of the redeveloped Union Station. A mall opened in 1985, the St. Louis Centre, is now being redeveloped into the largest condominium project in the heart of the downtown. Laclede's Landing, an entertainment district close to the Mississippi River, is the site of a half-billion-dollar gaming complex, Lumiere Place, that opened in 2007. Looming over all of the downtown is the signature symbol of St. Louis, the Gateway Arch, which was opened in 1967 after thirty years of political maneuvering for federal funds.

This cluster of projects helped secure the downtown, though tenuously, until a critical mass of privately financed development began to appear in the late 1990s. By mid-2007 most of the historic warehouses and garment and shoe factories along Washington Avenue on the north edge of the downtown, where the convention

Map 6.1 **Downtown St. Louis**



Source: Map courtesy of Planning and Urban Design Agency, City of St. Louis.

center, convention hotel, and domed stadium are located, have been in the process of being converted into housing, retail, and office space. With the opening of a handful of nightclubs and restaurants, on weekends it began to show fitful signs of a street life. If Washington Avenue succeeds, it may usher in the next phase in St. Louis's quest to become a center for tourism and entertainment—a shift from investment in big projects and sports to an emphasis upon street life and urban culture. Indeed, the Cardinals' management seems to have recognized these possibilities when they promised to build an "urban village" close by the stadium the Cardinals opened in 2006. Population growth in and near the central business district is an important component of what appears to be a historic turning point; for the first time in decades, the city gained population, from 348,189 people in 2000 to 350,759 by 2007 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007).

St. Louis's renaissance, however slow, halting, and uneven, has required collaboration among civic elites to build the capacity to respond to the city's manifold problems. As we demonstrate in this chapter, the mix of participants and the terms guiding their cooperation has changed over time. Sometimes they pursued a clearly defined agenda, but not always. A powerful motive brought them together again and again: the knowledge that the city's continued decline would impose unacceptable costs on each of them unless they found a way to cooperate to produce the resources necessary for shaping St. Louis's destiny. But assembling the capacity to act was a daunting task in a city where the governmental structure and political culture seemed to make coherent leadership almost impossible.