

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 8 Feb 2007, p. 1 of 2.

PRESERVATION



The Laclede Gas holding tank at Chouteau and Newstead Aves. Kevin Manning | Post-Dispatch

Getting creative with the region's exceptional industrial heritage

By Joseph Heathcott

One of the city's most distinctive landmarks soon will fall to the wrecking ball. Looming over Highway 40 just east of Kingshighway, the old Laclede Gas Tower — a gasometer — anchors the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood. It has stood its ground since the very early days of the 20th century, and generations of motorists have marveled at its skeletal grace and otherworldly cylindrical form. It is among the most recognizable structures in a city renowned for its superb architectural inheritance.

When the gasometer was completed in 1901, it was part of a complex that included Pump Station G (still standing) and a twin gasometer long since demolished. When Laclede Gas Co. constructed a new underground facility on the far north side of St. Louis in the early 1990s, they decommissioned Pump Station G, and the complex around it became obsolete.

Long regarded as a white elephant by many residents and city officials, nobody was surprised by the recent announcement that the gasometer would be dismantled and sold as scrap. In its place, a real estate operation called Station G Partners plans to construct town houses and condominium duplexes, which may very well benefit the neighborhood. Some residents certainly are eager for new construction in their area, and many see the gasometer as an impediment to neighborhood improvement.

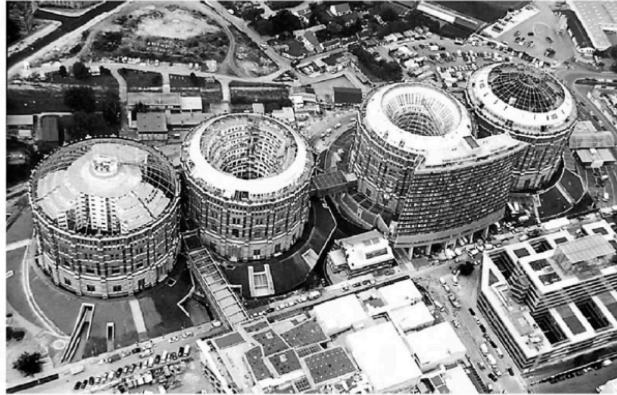
Still, what we all lose as a part of this process is a significant artifact of our past, an anchored steel diorama of the dynamic industrial history of St. Louis. The gasholder and pump station are significant enough to justify their inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, the case for which is under consideration at the U.S. Department of Interior.

Why do we keep losing significant historic buildings in St. Louis, buildings whose demolition we later regret? The problem does not lie with the Station G Partners project or, for that matter, with any specific development/rede-

velopment plans. The problem is our region's lack of imagination to envision and promote innovative alternatives to destruction.

In the case of the gasometer, what if the choice were not between a rusted tank and new housing? What if the gasometer could be renovated and integrated into part of a reconstructed neighborhood? There still could be new housing, but it would share the block with a landmark structure of rare distinction, a signature piece of architecture anchoring a district on the upswing.

There is ample precedent for reactivating these oddly shaped industrial structures. In the 1990s, the city of Amsterdam and the Dutch national government collaborated to



"Gasometer City" in Vienna, Austria.

rehabilitate the *Westergasfabriek*, a large complex of 19th- and early 20th-century coal-gas conversion facilities, including a giant gasometer. Today, that complex boasts a thriving array of live-work spaces, artist galleries, cultural organizations and a giant performance venue within the gasometer. In Vienna, developers created "Gasometer City" by converting four huge brick gas tanks into restaurants, offices, apartments and a 70-store shopping mall.

St. Louis gasometers are no less suited for retrofitting. With proper environmental remediation, the structures could serve as a large grocery store, a museum annex, an art and architecture magnet school, a neighborhood recreation center, a combination of these or more. They also would provide dramatic

symbols — visible from other parts of the city — of reborn communities.

Where political will, financial support and imagination have come together, St. Louis has demonstrated an ability to resurrect and reclaim bits and pieces of our industrial heritage: from the lofts of Washington Avenue and the Falstaff Brewery to the recently completed Aquinas Institute.

But these efforts have been limited to buildings that prove relatively easy to convert to new uses. What we need now is a vision that is broad-shouldered enough to encompass quirky, non-standard structures like the gasometer.

Trailnet led the way with its revamping of

the original Chain of Rocks Bridge — notwithstanding the recent parking lot security glitch. Bob Cassilly of City Museum fame is transforming the old Missouri Portland Cement plant site on Riverview Drive in North St. Louis into an urban amusement park.

But these efforts are piecemeal; they do not reflect a broad regional commitment to reinvigorating our industrial heritage. Will we find new uses for the sublime grain elevators on Sarah Street and across the river in East St. Louis? What of the unloader at Carondelet Coke or, for that matter, the gasometer near Natural Bridge Road? Can we transform the River Des Peres from a vast ditch into a great recreational canal?

This city's portfolio of vacant factories, warehouses, and facilities is nothing short of astounding. St. Louisans deserve an official commitment to steward this industrial heritage; rather than acting out of desperation and doling out land on a case-by-case basis, we need an integrated strategy for identifying and preserving artifacts of our industrial past and for creating incentives for their rehabilitation.

It probably is too late for the old gasometer at Chouteau and Newstead. But it is not too late to take a fresh look at our collective inheritance and to start thinking like planners.

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