

# Reading and Writing the American City: Literature, History, Urban Planning

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Above: neighbourhood next to new Pruitt-Igoe development, 1950s (Missouri Historical Society online picture archive)

# What I'm doing today

- Making sense of **diverse materials**: documentary film (2011, recalling 1955–72); memoirs appearing in the form of a modernist poem (1941 recalling the 1890s) and celebrity autobiography (1956 recalling 1918); city planning texts (example from 1928, affecting the ninety years since)
- **City personality**, neglected by academic urban theorists but central to literary views of cities, plus popular writing and marketing of cities (and talk: 'you've been to Berlin: what's it like?')
- Purpose **reconciliatory**

# 1. Water, texts, approaches and city personality

Objectives and rationale

The context section

bizarre coincidence ... <https://twitter.com/LondonRemembers/status/1044863716859301889>

‘The City of St. Louis has affected me more deeply than any other environment has ever done, I consider myself fortunate to have been born here, rather than in Boston, or New York, or London.’

-- T.S. Eliot (1888–1965; Nobel Prize in Literature, 1948)



Left: Eliot in St Louis, 1891



# Gateway to the West

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river  
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,  
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;  
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;  
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.  
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten  
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.  
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
Of what men choose to forget. (T.S. Eliot, 1941)



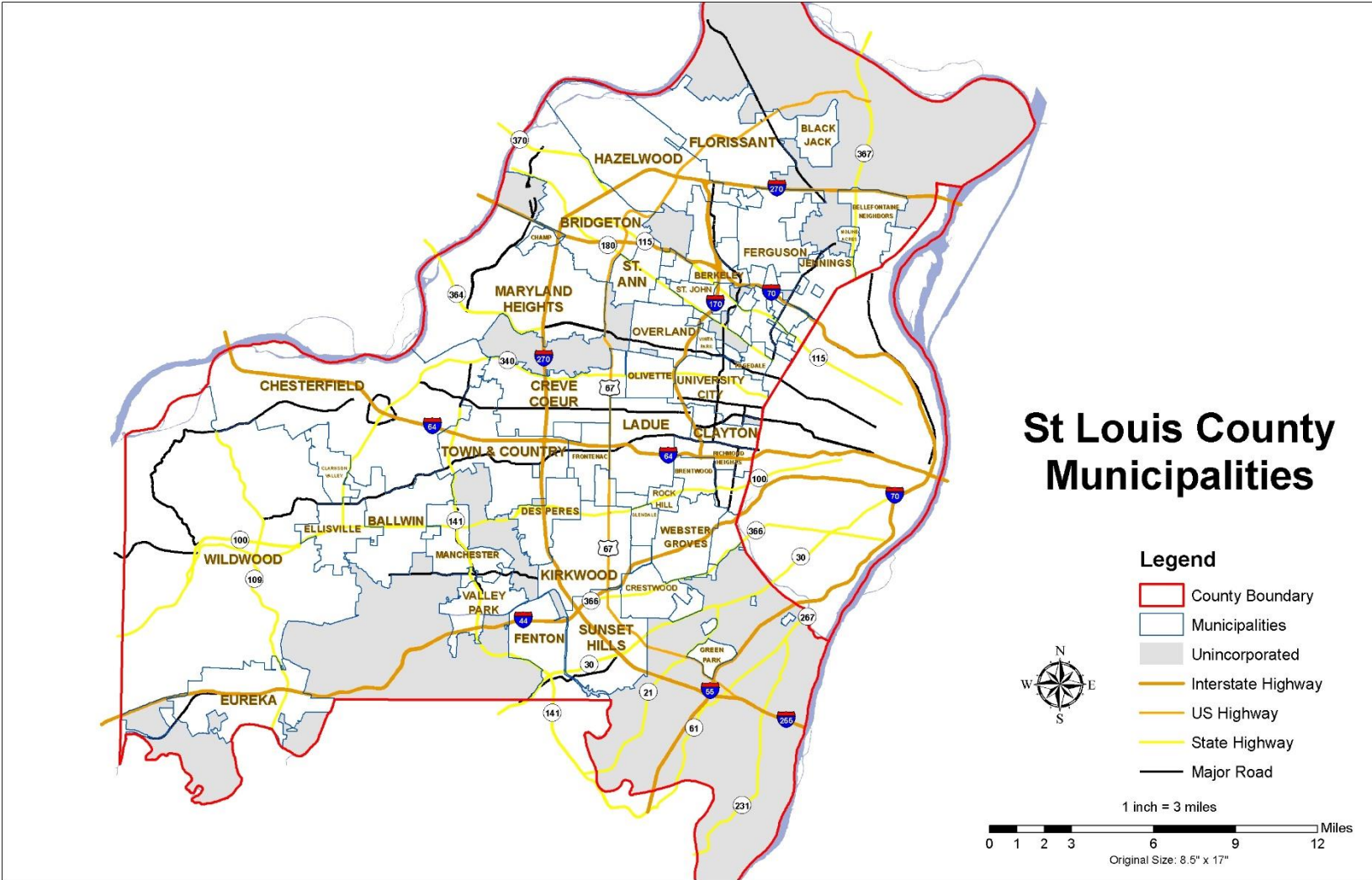
# Individuals' stories and that of *this* city

- **Literary urban studies:** more than the city novel
- Ancient settlement site (Mound City, confluence of Mississippi and Missouri, Eliot's 'bridges')
- One of several 'regional French villages' (Winn 2012); reliant on the fur trade
- Roman Catholic city?
- First [everything] west of the Mississippi
- 1949 Housing Act, public housing authorities and construction of Pruitt-Igoe
- City boundaries and collapse of tax base

Below: old Cathedral of St Louis  
and 192m-high Gateway Arch  
(Eero Saarinen, completed 1965)



St. Louis (independent city) and St. Louis County: divided since 1877 (City seceded). Today the City has 300,000 inhabitants, the County 1 million, and the St Louis Metropolitan Area nearly 3 million (about the twentieth biggest MSA in the USA)

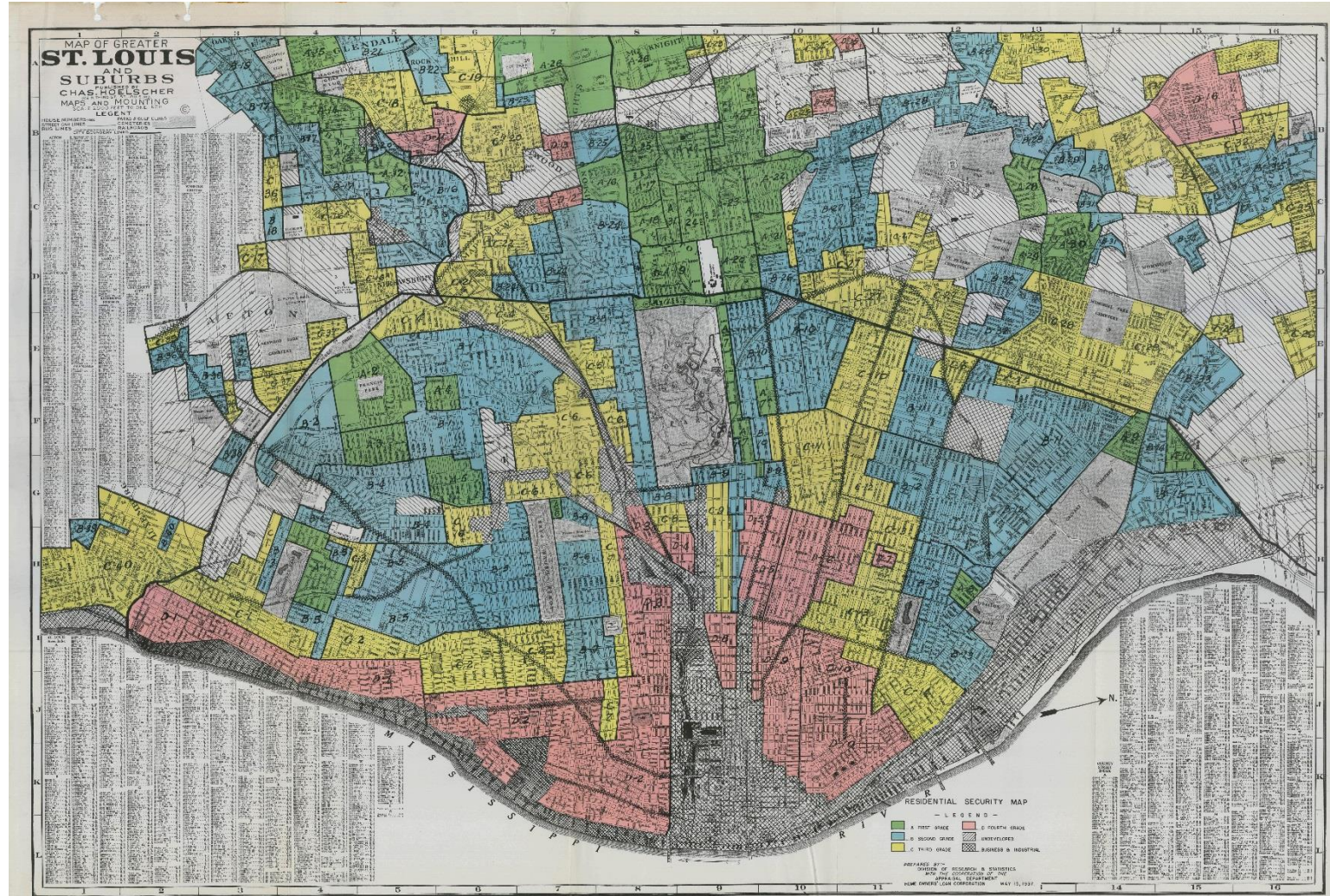


Above: central city or border city?  
St Louis as the junction of the USA.  
St Louis meets the North, South,  
West and Midwest.



1937 map indicating grades of housing:  
first (green), second (blue), third, (yellow), fourth (pink) plus  
business and industrial (grey hatched)

City viewed from the  
river; Manhattan-like  
position of  
Downtown,  
Midtown, Uptown  
(around park) but  
sprawl possible as  
not in Manhattan







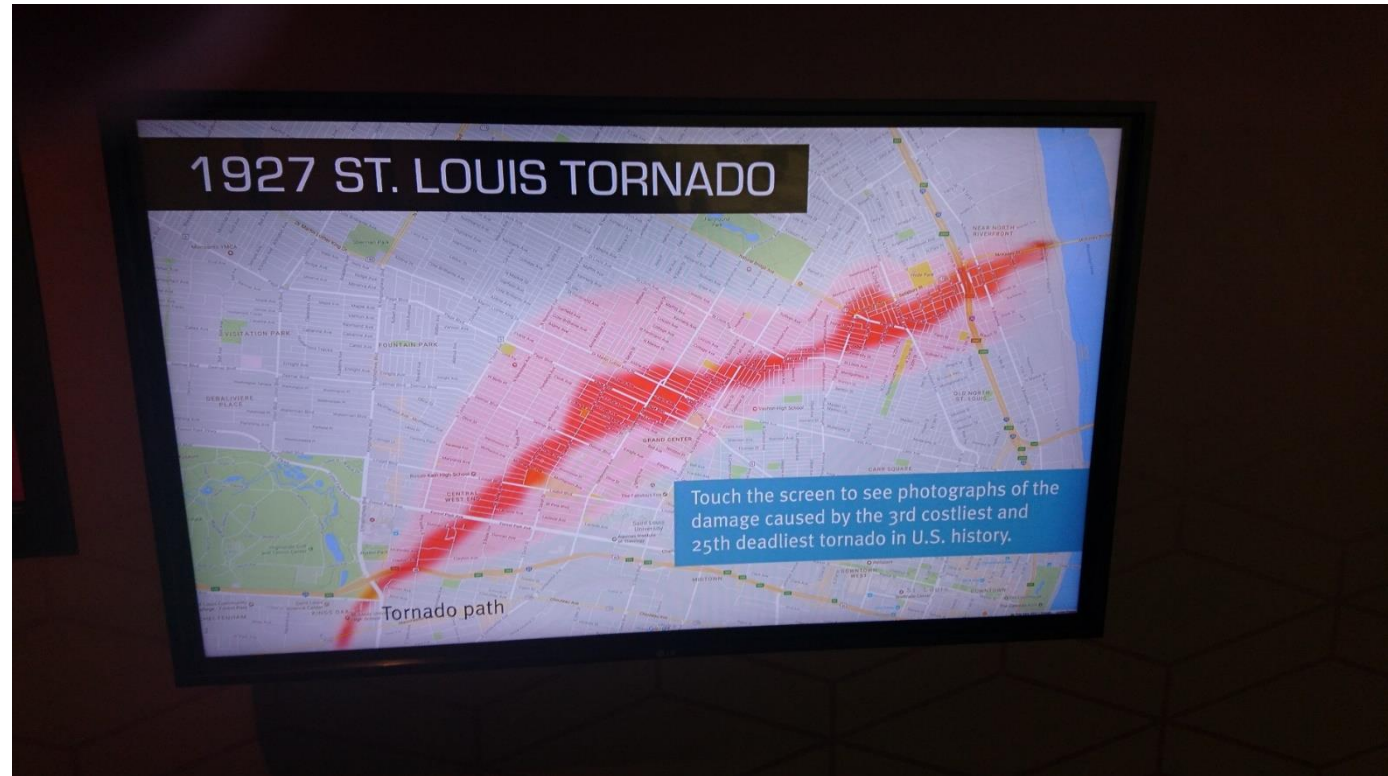
Pruitt-Igoe  
development when  
new, 1950s (Minoru  
Yamasaki)

North is left; ahead,  
at the top of the  
image, east  
(Mississippi visible)





A city of violent destruction, and  
its fatal craving: modernity?

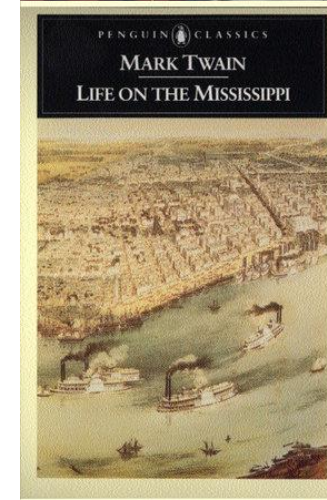


See also: the 1904 World's Fair (and Olympic Games)



# Focus on the water

- Mark Twain to the great Mississippi flood; transport and destruction
- What did the rivers really mean to St Louis 1874-1972?
  - Eliot's 'brown god' forgotten after bridges
  - Eads Bridge, opened 1874
- City of vice? brewing, Stagger Lee and Scott Joplin
- 'During the last quarter of the nineteenth century many significant changes took place. **River traffic declined because of the advent of the railroads; mechanical transportation was introduced and improved forms of street surfacing were experimented with. The river was losing its influence upon the life of the City.** Broadway began to develop as the City's main thoroughfare because it paralleled the river for twenty miles, was located upon the higher level uplands, was generally of commodious width and possessed through street car service.' (city planner Harland Bartholomew, 1928)



Above: Scott Joplin House museum; Annheuser-Busch brewery (St Louis)

# Methods, materials

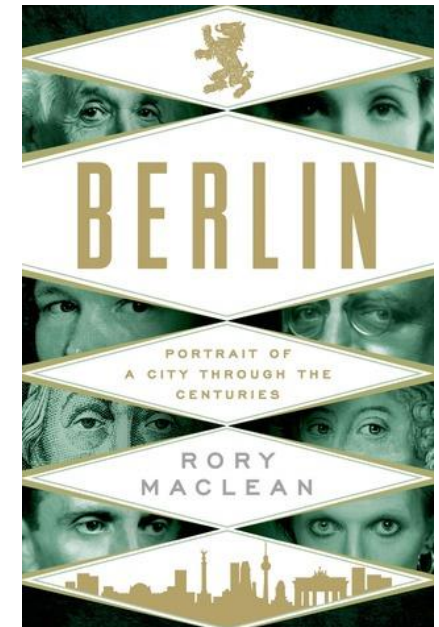
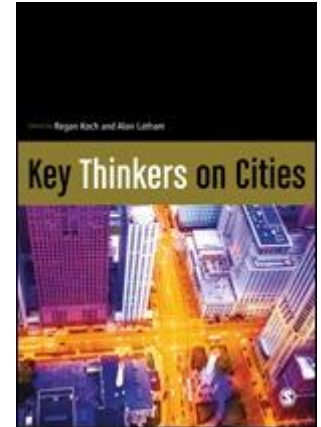
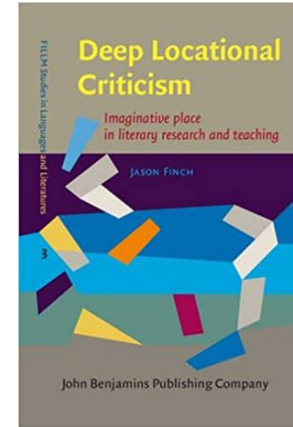
- Fieldwork in St Louis (two visits, May 2017, one night, and April 2018, one week)
- Missouri Historical Society
  - Visits and online picture archive
- Literary research (Deep Locational Criticism) into memoir and planning texts: Narva symposium
  - T.S. Eliot, Henry Armstrong, Harland Bartholomew
- Citiness (May 2018 presentation): a distinct sort of urbanity?
- Analysis of film and visual materials using spatial, literary-urban techniques
  - Stockholm presentation on The Pruitt-Igoe Myth

Bissell Street water tower,  
College Hill, St Louis, April 2018  
(Jason Finch)



# The personality of a city

- The place-first approach of Deep Locational Criticism
  - bringing different materials together around one city or other imaginative site
- In its uniqueness as well as in its connections
  - Johnson 2018 on Jonson 1598/1616
- Marketing assertions of personality of a city
  - Finch (2016 83-84) on St Giles and London's 'Midtown'
- Scholarly denial or scepticism. Can a city have a personality?
  - Academic research: urban studies versus literary urban studies (Tambling 2016; Finch, Ameen and Salmela 2017)
  - City personalities reach an audience in trade non-fiction: Peter Ackroyd on London (2000), Rory MacLean on Berlin (2014), Kneale on Rome (2017)



## 2. Case study texts:

documentary film, memoir and autobiography,  
visionary planning proposal



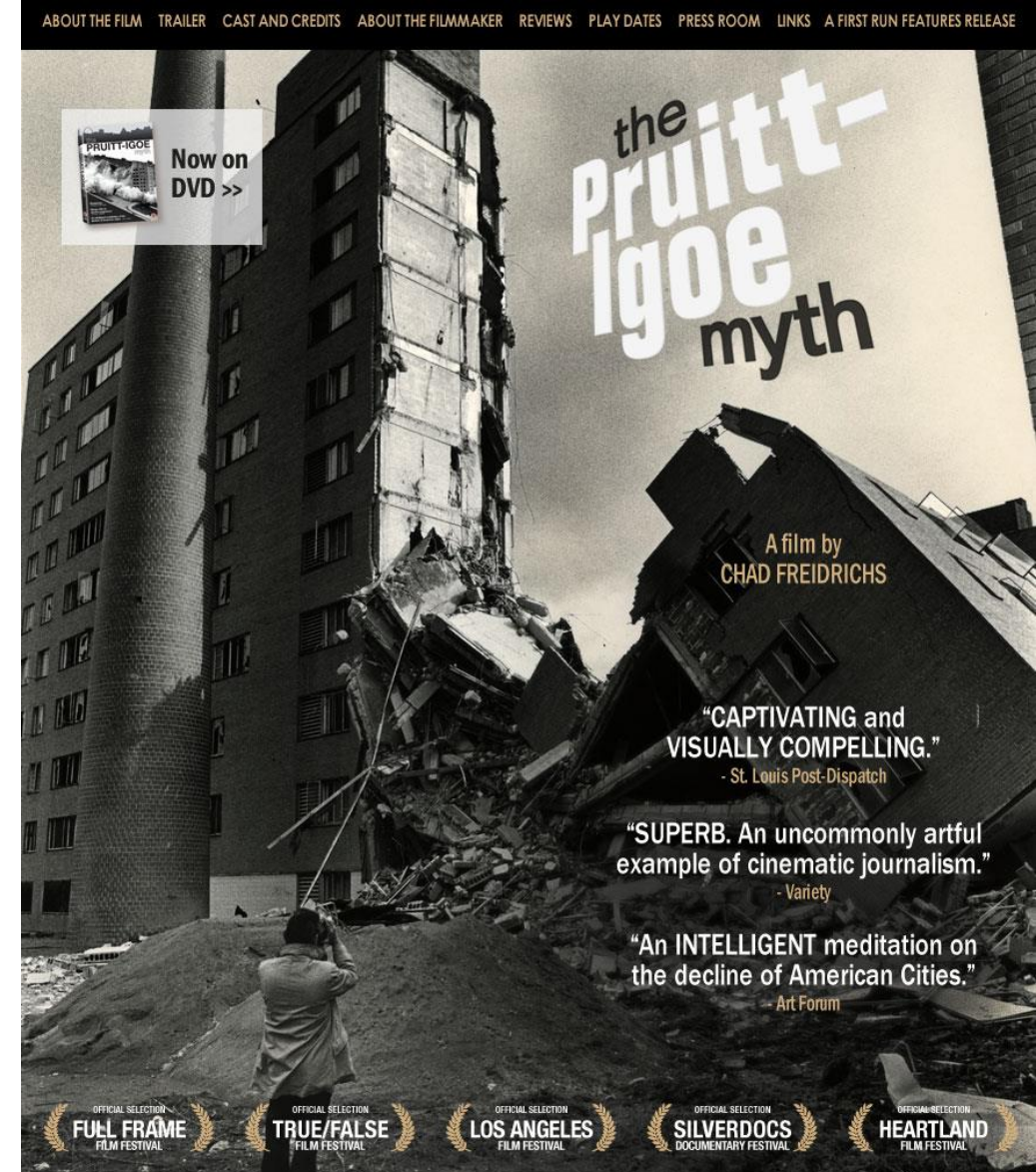
# Primary text (1): a documentary film

- Documentary versus the novel?
- A contrast, on London: *The Secret Lives of Our Streets* (Joseph Bullman, 2012); Finch, 'Grotland Explored', *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* (2015)
- Brian King and escape to 'a world of my own': 'why do I live here?'; 'vandalism came from that environment' (50:00-50:59)
- What we infer about the speakers
  - They survived, in some sense



# *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (Chad Freidrichs, 2011)

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKgZM8y3hso](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKgZM8y3hso)
- The view of myth
  - Composite: architects, Federal government, residents, idea of public housing all blamed; sense of doom
- Archive-led (MHS and other archives' pictures: <http://mohistory.org/search>)
  - Trust in academic research (of a sort aligned with DLC and LUS)
- Speakers' heads on screen
  - Former residents (five of them)
  - Three disparate 'experts'



# In medias res: the buildings of Pruitt-Igoe, residents, destruction, memory, trauma

- Broader project: locational study of black/white intersections in St Louis via an examination of city personality: *Mediating Criticism?*
- Individual stories and city conceptions
  - Henry Armstrong and family in Union Station and South of the tracks (autobiography)
  - T.S. Eliot in Locust Street and later Westminster Place (memoir)
  - Harland Bartholomew's visions for the city (planning text)
- The Pruitt-Igoe site, then and now (next slide, the site in April 2018)
- Demolition footage and its fame (*The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* 05:35-05:57)





# The speakers as individuals

- **Sylvester Brown**
- **Ruby Russell**
- **Jacquelyn Williams**
- **Brian King**
- **Valerie Lewis**



former resident  
**Jacquelyn Williams**

Robert **Fishman** (architecture scholar; *Bourgeois Utopias*, 1987)

Joseph **Heathcott** (urban historian and urbanist; *Capturing the City: Photographs from the Streets of St. Louis, 1900-1930*, co-authored with Angela Dietz, 2016)

Joyce **Ladner** (employed in St Louis Public Housing Authority (STLPHA), 1960s-70s)

Reporters, spokespeople, residents and others in footage from 1950s – 70s: they also speak, but more mediated by the film-maker?

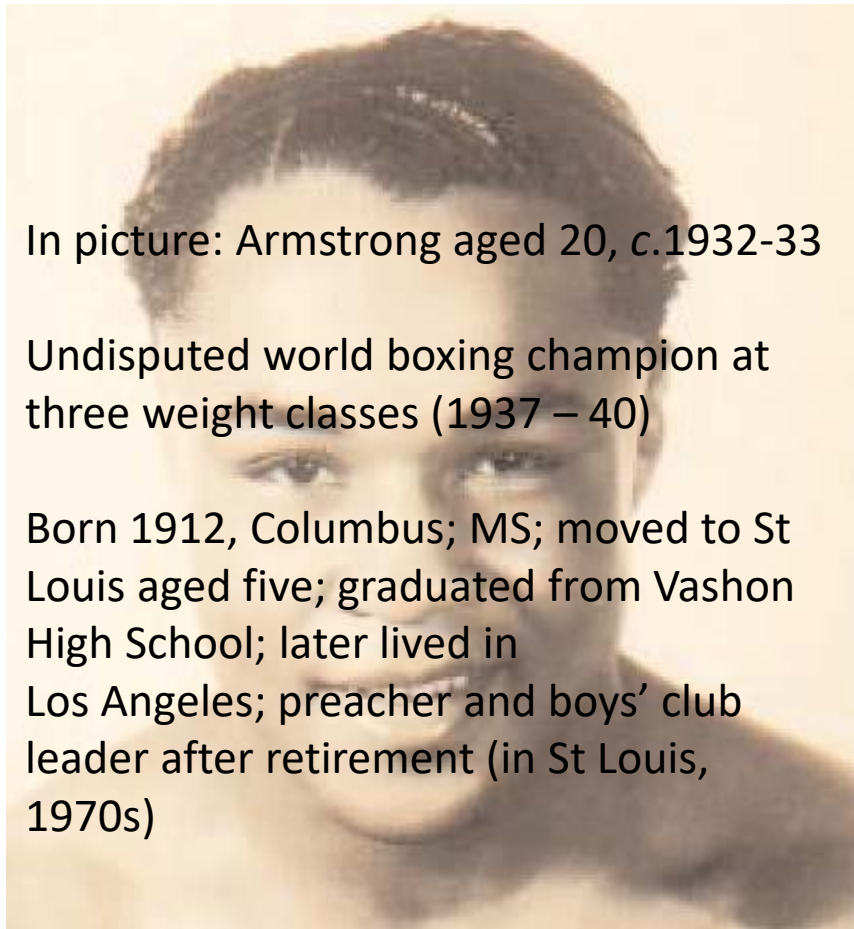


# Residents, scholars and officials: individual tales in the narrative of documentary film

- Who is the author of their words?
  - Director Freidrichs and others chop together sources
- For example interview with **Irving Dagen**, STLPH (c. 1967): 19:30-20:00
- **Joyce Ladner** on studying girls and their families' social problems: 31:46-32:15
- **Valerie Lewis** on returning to the projects having become a police officer (52:39-53:37)
- **Brian King** on the trauma that followed his brother's murder (1:08:43-1:10:02)



# Primary texts (2 and 3): Henry Armstrong, *Gloves, Glory and God* (1956); T.S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages* (1941)



In picture: Armstrong aged 20, c.1932-33

Undisputed world boxing champion at three weight classes (1937 – 40)

Born 1912, Columbus; MS; moved to St Louis aged five; graduated from Vashon High School; later lived in Los Angeles; preacher and boys' club leader after retirement (in St Louis, 1970s)



Born in St Louis, 1888, and lived there until 1904; attended 1904 World's Fair before leaving for Harvard (Holt 2011: 13).

Afterwards lived in Boston, Paris and London; returned to St Louis in 1930 and 1959 for short visits

Eliot (converted to Anglicanism officially from Unitarianism 1927, actually from anti-religion stance), Armstrong (ordained a Baptist minister in 1951 after giving up alcohol): spiritual autobiography mode

# William Greenleaf Eliot (1811–87) and (French, Catholic) St Louis

- Unitarian minister who 'left Harvard divinity school in order to establish that faith in the frontier wilderness' (Ackroyd 1984: 18).



Left, the Old Cathedral of St Louis, first cathedral west of the Mississippi (1831, replacing a 1770 building; until 1845 the only church in the town)



Author of *The Story of Archer Alexander from Slavery to Freedom*



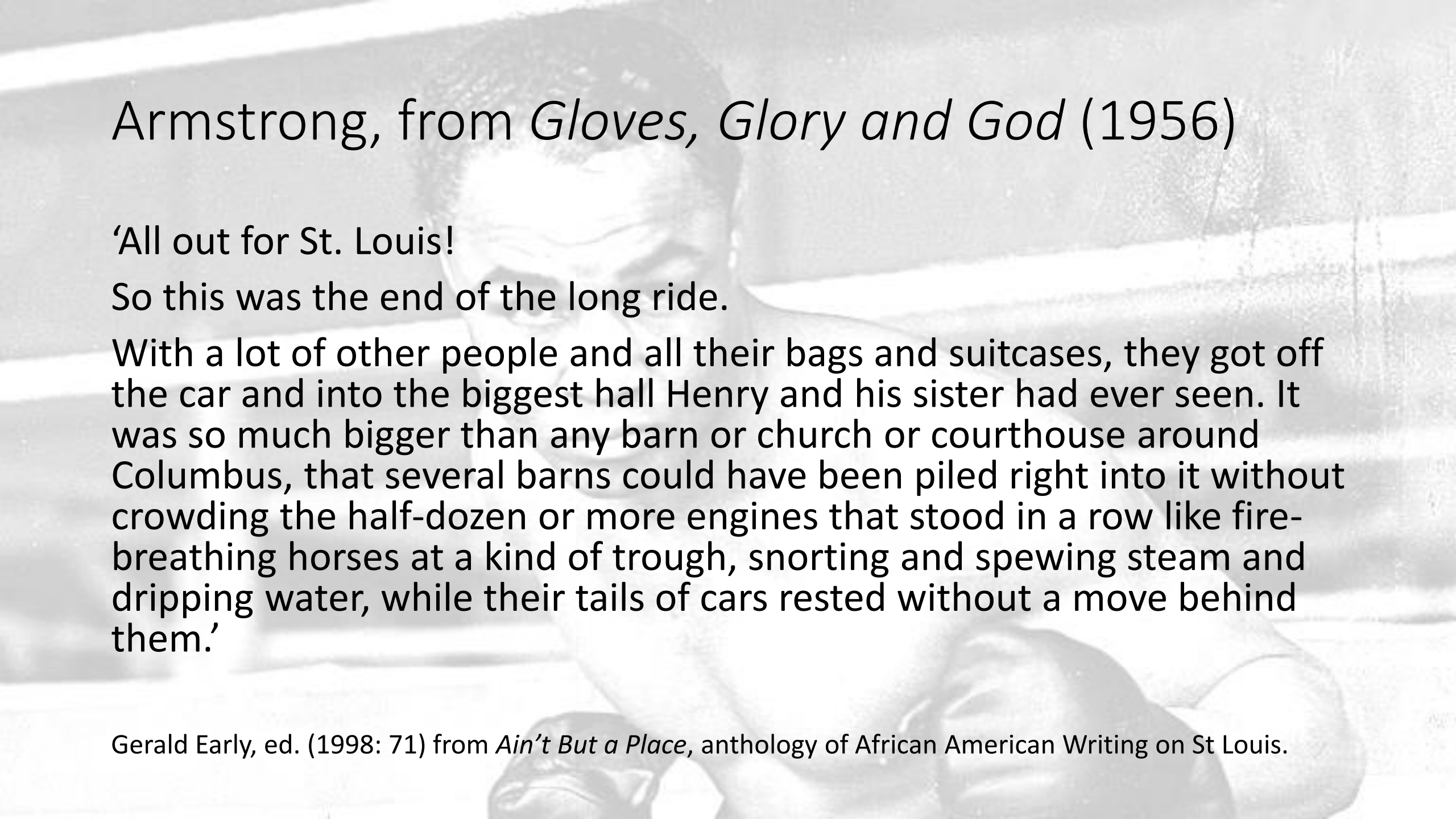
# The great Henry Armstrong

- 'Armstrong was one of the few fighters to win in three or more different divisions: featherweight, lightweight, and welterweight. He defended his welterweight title a total of nineteen times.'
- *The Ring* magazine named him Fighter of the Year in 1937, while the Boxing Writers Association of America (BWAA) named him Fighter of the Year in 1940. In 2007, *The Ring* ranked Armstrong as the second-greatest fighter of the last 80 years. [Boxing writer] Bert Sugar also ranked Armstrong as the second-greatest fighter of all time. [TV network] ESPN ranked Armstrong as number 3 on their list of the 50 greatest boxers of all time.' (Wikipedia)
- Nickname: Homicide Hank



Above: Armstrong knocks out Al 'Bummy' Davis, Madison Square Garden, New York City, June 1944 (BoxRec)

Armstrong's career record was 151 wins, 21 defeats and 9 draws, with 101 KOs



## Armstrong, from *Gloves, Glory and God* (1956)

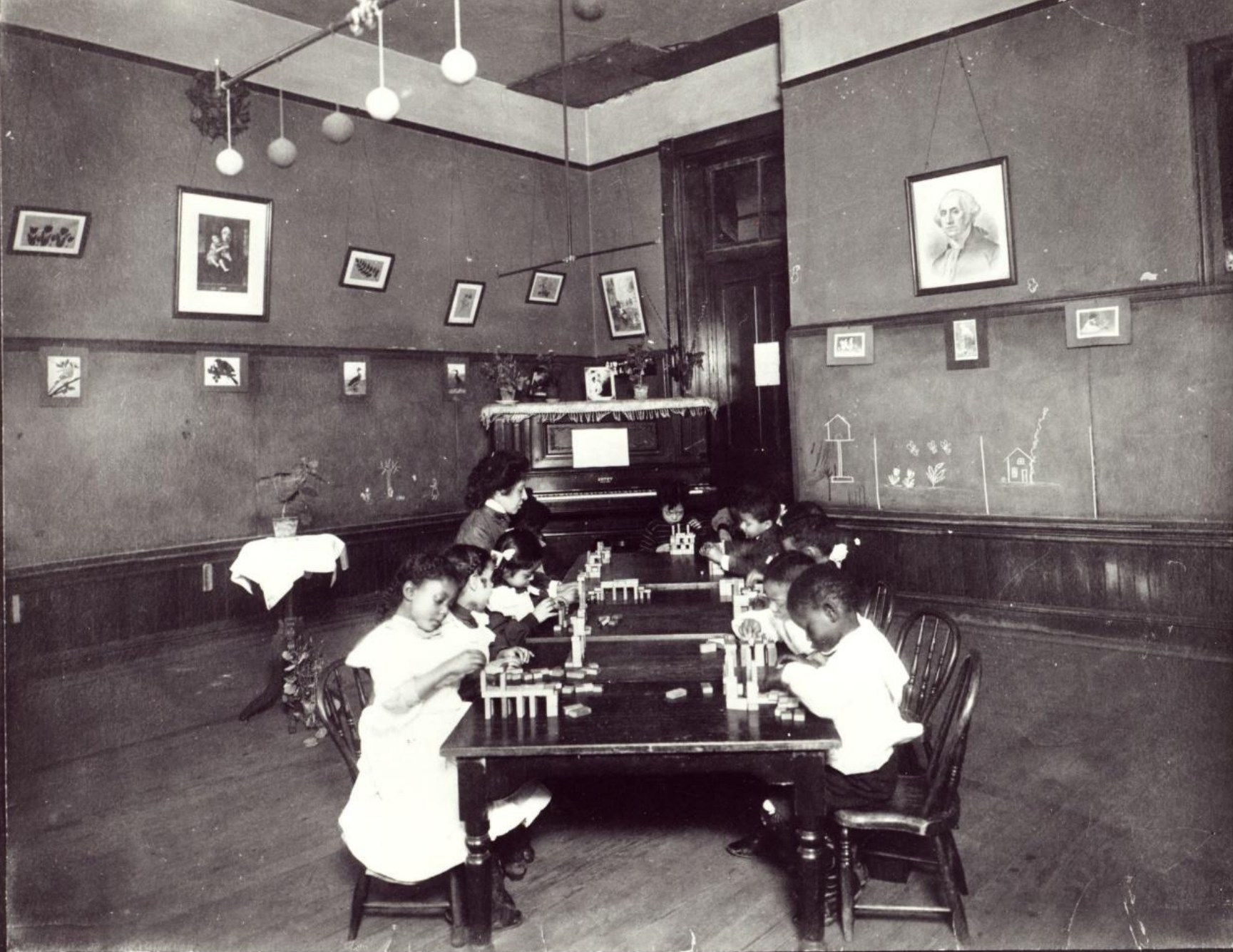
‘All out for St. Louis!

So this was the end of the long ride.

With a lot of other people and all their bags and suitcases, they got off the car and into the biggest hall Henry and his sister had ever seen. It was so much bigger than any barn or church or courthouse around Columbus, that several barns could have been piled right into it without crowding the half-dozen or more engines that stood in a row like fire-breathing horses at a kind of trough, snorting and spewing steam and dripping water, while their tails of cars rested without a move behind them.’

Gerald Early, ed. (1998: 71) from *Ain't But a Place*, anthology of African American Writing on St Louis.





L'Ouverture  
Kindergarten classroom  
and students. 2612  
Papin Street. (also  
called Colored School  
No. 4).  
Identifier: N33245

Missouri Historical  
Society

<http://mohistory.org/collections/item/resource:149966>

Attended by Henry  
Melody Jackson, later  
Henry Armstrong, after  
1918 (picture c. 1895)

Building with Blocks.

L'Ouverture Kindergarten.

Home for the Jacksons was a big square brick house on Papin Street, in the heart of St. Louis' south side—if St. Louis had a heart. Most of the time it didn't seem to, it was that tough.

The south side was famous for its bloodied noses and blackened eyes and cut lips and bruised knuckles.

Henry, five, and Henrietta, eight, were both in school now--Toussaint L'O[u]verture Grammar School, named after the great Negro leader and liberator of Haiti.

[...]

The Papin Street kids had to fight their way to school through enemy lines and then fight their way back again.

The Papin Street gang drew no racial or religious lines.

**Anybody who lived there and could fight like a man--and that included many a girl—could and would become recognized as one of the gang. So the gang was made up of Negro, Polish, Jewish, and other kids.**

[...]

Into the shouting, chasing, stalking, scrapping, surging life of Papin Street came Henry Jackson, Junior. He was only five, and known to the neighborhood kids [...] as Red because his curly hair had a sandy, reddish glint.

Red was still too little to be fair game for the older Papin Street fighters, but he was plenty big enough to get around and more than observing enough to catch big eyefuls of the most memorable fights on the streets. There he spent most of the daytime away from school.



# T.S. Eliot, opening of 'The Dry Salvages' (1941)

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river  
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,  
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;  
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;  
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.  
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten  
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.  
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated  
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.  
His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,  
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,  
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,

And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.  
  
The river is within us, the sea is all about us;  
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite  
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses  
Its hints of earlier and other creation:  
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;  
The pools where it offers to our curiosity  
The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.

# Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', I-II

[...]

[The river and the sea]

'The sea has many voices / many gods and many voices'

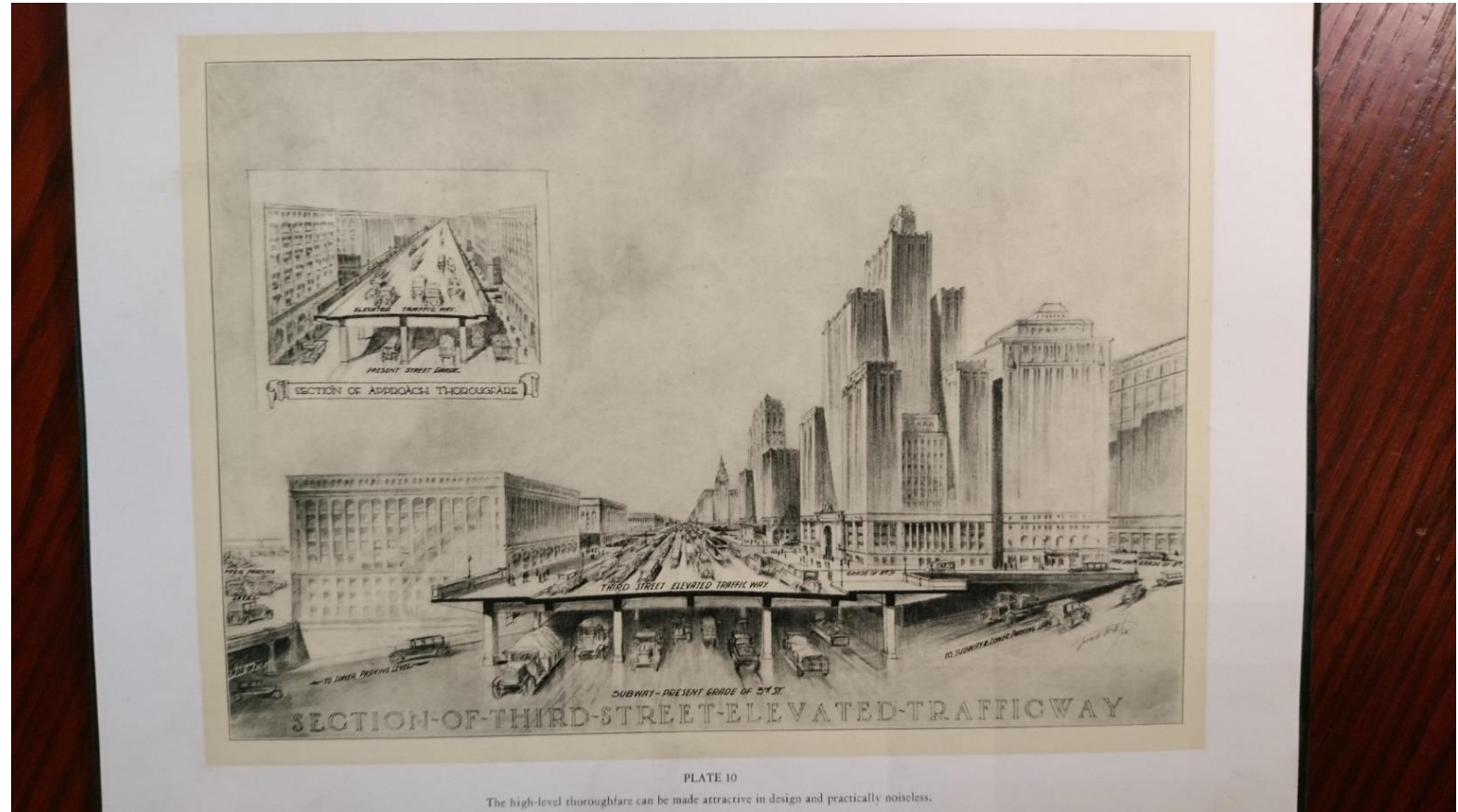
'Time the destroyer is time the preserver,  
Like the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops,  
The bitter apple and the bite in the apple.  
And the ragged rock in the restless waters,'



# Planning impacts: Harland Bartholomew, 1889–1989 (highways, zoning, demolition in a city of visions)



Above: Washington D.C., 1959.  
Bartholomew unveils a plan for  
freeways through the nation's  
capital.



Above, from Bartholomew (1928). *A Plan for the Central River Front, Saint Louis Missouri*. St. Louis: City Plan Commission. (Primary text 4)

# St Louis waterfront, 1920s

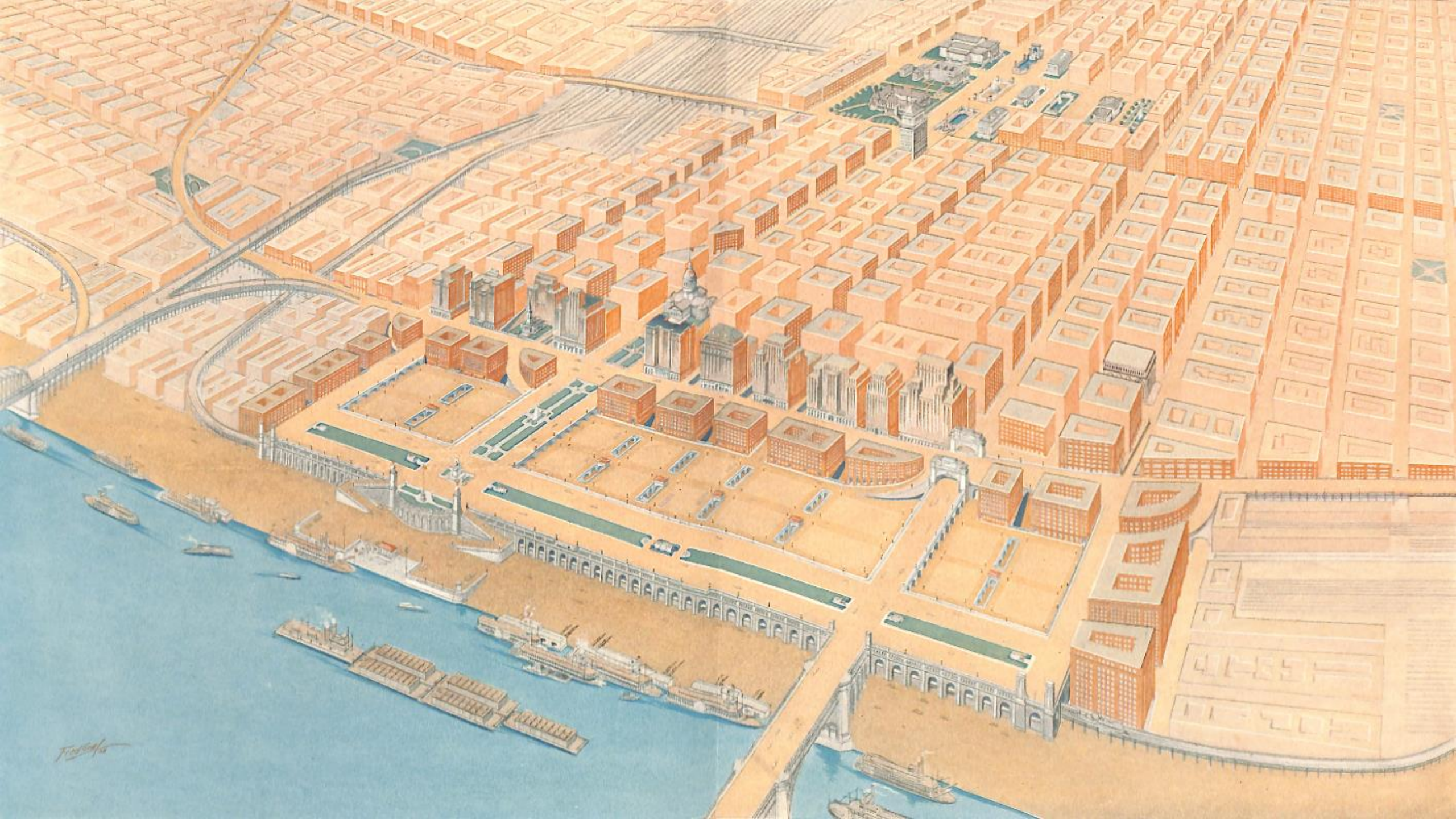




# The 1928 Plan for the Central River Front

- Proposed massive demolition of the riverside 19th-century core of the city's downtown, which had become grimy and unfashionable as wealthier people and prominent buildings moved west in stages.
- 'In this drawing no private use of property east of Third Street is contemplated. The Old Cathedral is moved diagonally across Walnut Street to the south-west corner of Third Street.' (frontispiece)
- Resembles town planning associated with Stalin and Hitler, not post-war Modern Movement





Friedberg



Bartholomew, Harland. 1947. *Comprehensive City Plan: Saint Louis, Missouri*. St. Louis: City Plan Commission.

- ‘No other event in the last one hundred years has had as large an impact on St. Louis—good or bad—as the release of Bartholomew’s 1947 plan. In its pages, the plan foreshadowed how the city would unfold for the next half century. **The plan would drive freeway placement, housing policy, urban renewal projects, and virtually every land use issue in St. Louis far longer than its expected life span of twenty-five years.**’ (Mark Abbott, 2007)

3. Conclusion. 'Time present, [...] time past [...] and] time future'



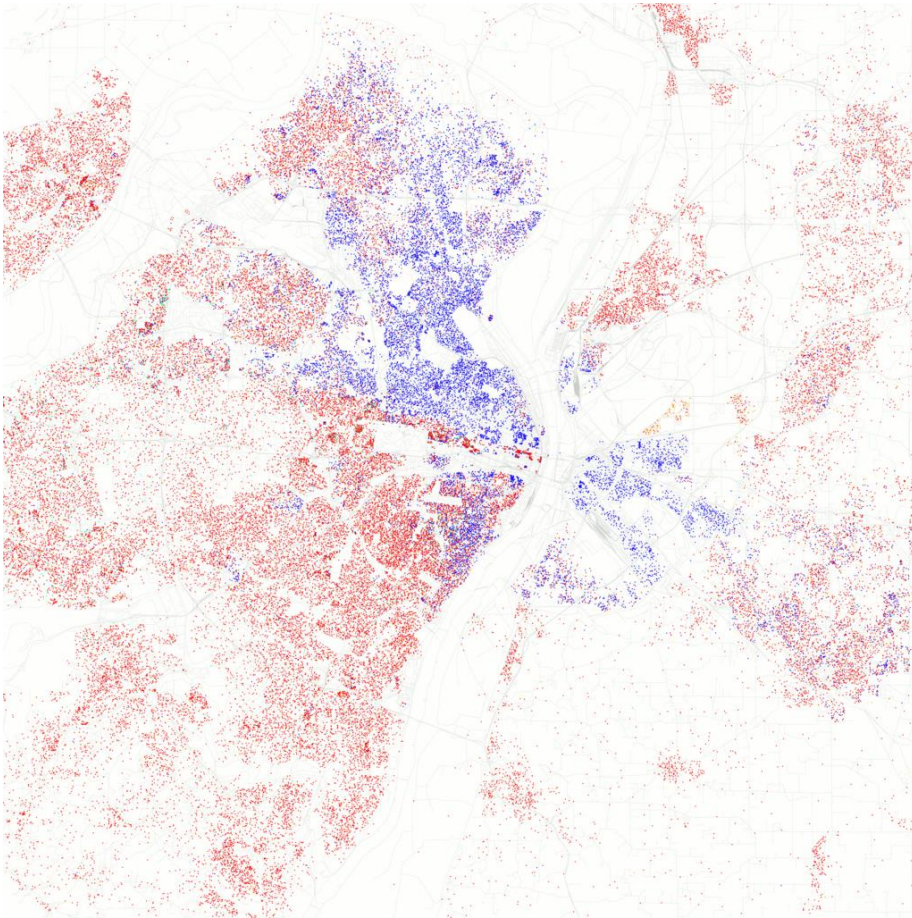
# Comparative analysis of film, memoirs, plans



Above: sign based on the 1950 Census. By 1970 the independent city's population would be 620,000; today it's half of that.

- Close reading of text
- Exploration of the conditions of production
- Exploration of moments and periods within the era described
- Paradox: dystopian symbols / quotidian life / such extreme stories dystopia seems justified
  - 1969 rent strike and condemnation of the buildings (59:08-1:04:55)
  - Eliot on the flood
  - Bartholomew's appetite for destruction

# After Ferguson (2014) and Black Lives Matter



Left: extraordinary ethnic segregation even for US cities.

A blue dot indicates 25 black people; a red dot 25 white. Orange for Hispanic and green for Asian (neither very apparent here).

The so-called **Delmar divide**, along Delmar Boulevard separating the city's Midtown and Central West End from the North Side, remains a remarkable cultural, ethnic and architectural barrier.

# Provisional conclusion: shallowness of US urbanity? National history and architectural

- Analysis of St Louis fictions: Jonathan Frantzen, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, 1988); William S. Burroughs?
- Are they few? Under-representation problem (left: 'The Emotions of London' from the Stanford Literary Lab: slide of boroughs' representation)
- Deep Locational Criticism: multiple sources, multiple methods; single imaginative place / personality
- Problem of coherence; problem of knowing this city (it's not mine)





ever, however, implacable



# Thanks for listening!

- [jfinch@abo.fi](mailto:jfinch@abo.fi)
- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jasonfinch1970/albums/72157674185076208>
- <http://blogs2.abo.fi/urbanlit/>
- Association for Literary Urban Studies (ALUS):  
<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/hlc-n/>