



# OCCASIONAL PAPER 2

## THE ARCH AS SYMBOL: REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING AND VALUE OF A MONUMENT

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My role is to suggest that the Arch does have important meaning for St. Louis. Not surprisingly, as an urbanist and public policy practitioner, my comments will not focus on the Arch as an artistic or architectural object. Many – far more qualified than I – have ably done this already. Rather, I want to speak about the role the Arch has, should and will play in the life of St. Louis.

Before doing so, however, it is both necessary and fitting to say a few words about the Arch itself.

You can see the Arch from the most improbable places in the city, since at 630 feet it is the tallest structure in the region. But to fully appreciate the Arch, you must walk down to the levee, where it rises amid the trees and the wide and gracious lawns of the Park Service's Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

When you stand just below it, it seems to be almost in motion, soaring into the sky and then coming back to earth. More illusionary than solid, more like a live thing than inanimate stainless steel, it changes mood almost hourly.

In the morning, when the sun glances off the eastern face, it is a cold, silver arc of ice, but at sunset, it becomes a festive pink streamer suspended in the river breeze.

Designed to celebrate the soaring mind of Thomas Jefferson, the Arch is at its most basic a symbol of a critical event in this nation's history; an event which turned St. Louis into the "Gateway to the West."

But this story is well known. Let me now turn to the story of what the Arch has meant and can mean to St. Louis.

Monuments can and should perform at least four valuable functions in an urban setting:

1. Provide a sense of place,
2. provide a model of imaginative work,
3. engage people who use/visit/view the place, and
4. assist in urban regeneration and vitality.

How well does the Arch – and the City it symbolizes – succeed in each of these? You can keep score as I briefly discuss each of these themes.

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1. Providing a Sense of Place

**The final test is to see how well the Arch has become integrated with the City and its immediate surroundings.**

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In the past several decades, many observers of community life in North America have noted that there is a certain sameness in our communities; as one writer put it: “There’s No There There!” The Arch is very successful in this function. It performs the role of assisting residents and visitors alike to BOTH remember the man – Jefferson – and the Act – the Louisiana Purchase that has so shaped the destiny of the U.S. It also helps us celebrate this fateful event and all that it has meant for the country.

Indeed, so effective has the Arch been in this category that not only has it become THE symbol of the City – it goes beyond to the category of a symbol that itself is “famous for being famous,” not unlike the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The Arch is the official tourist attraction of the City. And, unlike the now standardized historic districts of so many cities, the Arch is anything but standard. The mold was broken here.

2. A Model of Imaginative Work

The second test – being a model of imaginative work - is also one where the Arch succeeds admirably. Here is a feature that combines:

- engineering and art
- east and west
- past and future

As well, we feel compelled to touch the Arch because the Arch touches us.

In addition, the Arch has given St. Louis what corporations pay millions for – a symbol that instantly says St. Louis. It has also become one of those symbols that make up a circuit of urban tourism, a circuit so well fixed in the popular mind that Americans and visitors from other countries has on their “check list” the Arch as a “sacred object” that they hope to see, visit and experience in their lifetime. Again, I’m sure everyone here can tell a story to support this view in terms of family, relatives, friends and colleagues.

3. Engages People to Use the Space/Place/Object

The third test is that public symbols and objects must engage people to use and experience the space/place/object. How does the Arch fare here?

People encounter a city through the senses. In particular, there is a fascination with the sense of sight. Obviously – as we have already noted – the Arch is first and foremost a visual experience; indeed for all its other attributes, it is this visual success that so captures the Arch as symbol – and the photographic display in the Center addresses this matter directly.

But there is another way to approach the concept of senses. It has been argued that senses are geographic in that each contributes to:

- one's orientation in space
- an awareness of spatial relationships, and
- the appreciation of the qualities of a particular place, including both the one being currently experienced (by residents and visitors) and those removed in time.

The Arch succeeds in each of these areas. Seeing or being at the Arch does orient one in terms of North American geography; it does create awareness of spatial relationships; and it focuses us on the qualities of a particular place, both past and present.

Notably – and here the Arch as symbol is especially valuable – the Arch overcomes (as few symbols or pieces of public art do) the view that there is a tourist culture in sharp contrast to the residents of society. The Arch “speaks” to both groups – it is an extraordinary experience for all.

#### 4. Assist in Urban Regeneration and Vitality

The final test is to see how well the Arch has become integrated with the City and its immediate surroundings. In this regard – alas – the Arch has not succeeded.

Of course, the Arch was responsible for the complete remaking of a significant section of the St. Louis waterfront, and was – finally – the first time something significant was done since talk about the riverfront began to surface in the late nineteenth century. Some would argue that it was fortunate that many of the pre-Arch proposals did fail, thus keeping the space on reserve for the waterfront.

Notably, the Arch project avoided the approach taken in many other places where themed environments have emerged that owe more to Disneyland than to history or culture. Port and industrial cities – like St. Louis – have in many instances created spaces that trade on images of a prosperous past. Portions of the history and architecture left over from the glory days have become converted into vehicles for nostalgic versions of a bygone era. This approach typically superimposes onto the template of old streets and buildings various combinations of festive markets and shopping districts, arcades and atriums, sports venues, pedestrian malls and in some cases gaming casinos.

Successful versions of this general approach do exist – such as in Baltimore's Inner Harbor or Vancouver's Granville Island. These, I would argue, are successful because they take the waterfront element and integrate this fundamental feature into a place where residents  

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come, explore and stay.

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Alas, the Arch has not been able to spur St. Louis to reconnect to the river. Perhaps this is too much to expect – but I don't think so. The point is that the spirit and identity of St. Louis as a river city has been lost, and the Arch should and must become a way to rediscover this element.

After all, the Arch is not just about westward expansion but also about the river. It is a magnet – visiting the Arch also means you experience the Mississippi. But we have not made the space surrounding the Arch reflective of this heritage and we have not utilized the Arch as a way to redirect our current unimaginative approach to city building. Part of the fault lies with ourselves as residents, but it is also a function of the Park Service's view that monuments need to be surrounded by grass and trees and open space, rather than the more appealing image of urbanity – restaurants, shops, bars, even residences.

In short, the realization of the Arch project indicated in no uncertain terms that this city and the region could measure up to great challenges. When we are good, we are very good. But when we are bad, we are horrible. We violated the principle that in removing something to build the Arch, we did not put back the essential element that would connect the Arch both to the river and the urban site surrounding it.

In other words, to complete the role of the Arch as Symbol, we must complete all elements. It is, to be sure, already far more than a cosmetic attempt to camouflage the results of long-term decay. But it can be even more if we can rediscover the energy that led to this wonderful monument by giving the Arch the surroundings it deserves.

The fact is that we have become comfortable with the Arch. But watch – and listen – to first time visitors and you will note a sense of awe, of wonder, of pride (as Americans), but you will also note, when they exit the Arch and its immediate surrounding, a sense of disorientation. What do we do now, they seem to be saying? To complete the role of the Arch as St. Louis' symbol, we need to answer the question by saying, “come experience our city, our lifestyles and our visions.”

Unfortunately, too many in our region have become inured to the Arch, much as we have become to the steel slab in the plaza or to Henry Moore's organic work outside so many buildings. Such works are often the product of gallery art, taken for an outing.

Our Arch, however, is not in this genre. It speaks to us as residents, as Americans. But its enduring role as Symbol is not yet complete.

**Dr. Artibise's paper was presented at the opening of the PPRC Gallery exhibit “The Arch as Symbol,” celebrating the 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Gateway Arch, October 13, 2000.**

**LIVABLE communities don't just HAPPEN.  
They are CREATED by the PEOPLE who LIVE in them.**