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## Economics, Politics and City Design

I know little about the technical aspects of urban design. I know nothing about the technical aspects of architecture, construction or other items related to development.

But I have been mayor of St. Louis for more than eight years, and I was a member of the Board of Aldermen for six years before that. So I do know something about how cities work, how people think, how politics works and the underlying economics of the city.

The Mayors' Institute for City Design helped me to organize my thoughts about how development affects the economy and how development and design work together to accelerate the economic impact of that development. It helped me to understand—and to persuade others—that what makes a city successful is the quality of the environment it offers.

I want to talk about the economics of cities, the economics of development within cities and the politics of development. I want to tell you the story of a success, the story of a failure and the story of a project whose outcome is yet to be determined. I want to share with you some of the experiences I've had as a mayor of a city that has had its share of difficulties.

### **From Basket Case to Turning-Around City**

Here is a thumbnail sketch of St. Louis: The city is the heart of a metropolitan area of more than 2.5 million people, but it has just under 405,000 residents, down from nearly one million in the mid-1950s. It experienced a period of rapid decline during the 1960s and even greater decline in the 1970s, during which, according to the 1980 Census, 27 percent of the population left.

The national news media picked up on these figures: The *New York Times* called us “the gateway out” and the *Wall Street Journal* said we were a “genuine basket case.” *Time* offered this advice: “The last man out should turn out the lights.”

*The following articles by Vincent C. Schoemebl Jr. and Tom Martinson were inspired by a Midwest regional meeting of the Mayors' Institute for City Design, held in Minneapolis in October, 1989.*

*Schoemebl's article is an edited version of a talk he gave at the meeting. Martinson's article is an expanded version of comments he made at the meeting.*

Old Courthouse, St. Louis.  
Photo courtesy St. Louis  
Convention and Visitor  
Commission.



During the 1980s we reached a period of equilibrium and approached stability; the population reductions we saw were the result of the shrinking size of households. We turned the exodus of jobs and businesses around in 1985 when we opened two major urban shopping districts downtown — St. Louis Centre and Union Station. We have doubled the amount of commercial and office space in the downtown core and have gradually added employment.

The media are talking differently now: *Architecture* proclaimed us “the turn-around city of the 1980s.” I would like to tell you that pronouncement is true. But I think we are “the turning-around city of the '80s.”

We haven't made it yet, but St. Louis has made substantial progress and laid the groundwork for growth during the 1990s that I feel will be superior to any period of growth and recovery since the city hosted the World's Fair in 1904.

#### **Fiscal Pressure and Development**

American cities face pressures that do not exist in the cities of western Europe. For example, Bologna, Italy, receives 99.5 percent of its budget from the central government. That is true throughout most of Europe. This places local political jurisdictions in a strong position to argue for good design and preservation, a luxury American mayors don't have.

There is an incredible amount of economic and political pressure placed on a mayor to produce revenue to run the city and to produce jobs for its residents. The per capita income of St. Louis residents is about 40 percent that of people living in the surrounding suburban ring. Out of the city's \$328 million annual budget, \$45 million is spent on indigent health care. With the remaining funds, we must run the government, provide police and fire protection, collect trash, pave streets and inspect buildings.

Another pressure is that St. Louis, like most older American cities, is landlocked. The city has not been able to expand its boundaries since 1876 due to a provision in the Missouri Constitution. Therefore we must provide economic and community resources for our residents within a limited geographical area. Since all that area is heavily developed, we have no new sites for expansion of industry or large-scale residential developments.

These imperatives have their consequences. They lead to decisions that have long-term implications for what the city looks like, how it works and how it feels. Yet those decisions are made because of very short-term economic pressures.

The strategy that St. Louis follows is similar to that of many major cities. We want to bring people into the city core for entertainment, leisure and employment. Bluntly stated, we



**St. Louis Centre, a downtown shopping mall opened in 1985.**

**Photo courtesy St. Louis Convention and Visitor Commission.**

**Facing page:**

**The Gateway Mall runs west from the Gateway Arch through Memorial Plaza and the Civic Center.**

want them to empty their pockets in the city so we can take our share. Property taxes provide only eight percent of our income. About 75 percent of the budget comes from taxes collected from business activity, such as sales and earnings taxes.

I sympathized with former New York Mayor Edward Koch when he got kicked around by the design community because he permitted intense high-rise development. I don't think there was any understanding of the political pressures under which a city operates. If someone had told Koch, "I want to build an 80-story building," he would have said, "Why not make it 180 stories?" He would have said that because he was dependent on buildings like that to run drug rehab centers and homeless programs and to provide housing and other services that were never the intended purpose of municipal government. We have made our American cities informal mechanisms for the redistribution of wealth.

As long as we pursue a national policy of placing extraordinary pressure on cities, cities will inevitably end up taking aberrant forms because we are forcing cities to find methods to finance services they are not equipped to provide. Cities

were not created to serve as mechanisms for the redistribution of wealth. Central governments are established for that purpose. In our nation, state governments are supposed to help.

It was my great misfortune to become mayor 90 days after President Ronald Reagan was sworn in. I inherited a \$50 million budget deficit and then faced a 50-percent cut in federal funds. As an unreconstructed Democrat, I believe that the Reagan legacy will not live forever and that one day we will re-think the role of cities and how we are going to fund services. We have to recognize there are consequences to public policy and that cities cannot be what they cannot afford to be.

### **Blinking at the Gateway Mall**

The first urban design issue I confronted as mayor, the Gateway Mall project, turned into a debacle. In 1927, the concept of building a mall eight blocks long and one block wide from a new courthouse in the civic center to the Old Courthouse, closer to the river, was proposed. The Gateway Arch, proposed in 1947, sits on axis with the Mall, which



was then envisioned to extend to the Arch and was renamed the Gateway Mall.

The city had acquired about half of the land for the Mall by the time I became mayor, but the conventional wisdom then was that cities could no longer afford to invest that amount of land in open space. A developer who had purchased some of the buildings that remained in the center of the proposed Mall asked me to look to the private sector to see what could be done to provide the remaining open space. We did, and allowed the developer to tear down three buildings, arguably of very significant historic and architectural value, and to put up, on half a block, a rather undistinguished building. The other half-block remains open as part of the Mall.

The mistake was not tearing down the older buildings or putting up the new building. The mistake was blinking.

I did not realize in 1981 that I was the custodian of a community vision that went back to 1927 and I had no right to abandon that vision without a lot of thought and community consensus. And, in fact, the consensus for change would never have arisen. We were trying to “jump start” the city’s economy and made a decision based on the political milieu that existed at the time.

Mayors have a sacred trust to maintain the continuity of vision and thought that has gone before them. We can try to add to that vision and give momentum to it, but we cannot change it lightly. Trying to change that vision was a big mistake, probably the biggest I have made as mayor.

### Keeping Sports Downtown

St. Louis is building a new convention center and stadium downtown. But to get the project this far, I went through a long battle that cost us the St. Louis Cardinals football team, which moved to Phoenix.

When the Cardinals’ owner first asked for a new stadium, the former county executive of St. Louis County said he would build it 19 miles from downtown.

I was absolutely convinced the city has to be the custodian of the community’s culture. You cannot take the major assembly buildings of the community and spread them over the metropolitan area, send people in every direction and still expect them somehow to identify with the city as a whole.

An example is our baseball team (also called the Cardinals). We are fortunate that 30 years ago one of my predecessors enforced the decision to build a new baseball stadium downtown. It has fit into the fabric and made an incredible difference in the way the city works and the way it attracts visitors: It has given us a focal point and is a reason for suburbanites and people from throughout the Midwest to see downtown St.

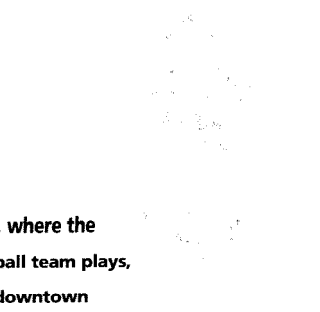
*Q: Is there anything you could identify as an architectural element that is special to St. Louis? Is there something unique about the city that should be expressed in its architecture?*

*A: I am going to hide behind ignorance because conversation in which I become an architectural critic is very dangerous. The important thing to recognize is that cities are not going to be fortunate enough to elect mayors who are architects or design experts. But what we, as political animals, can be adept at is picking up ideas from other people.*

*I have found that the most successful way to determine whether or not architecture is appropriate or successful for a city is public discussion. The biggest mistakes are made when there is no public discussion, no public debate and when you’re in an incentive-driven environment in which a developer is controlling all the decisions.*

*If I could leave two words carved in stone to my successors, they would be “patience” and public “discussion.” Mistakes are made when you don’t adhere to these two things.*

—Comments by Mayor Vincent C. Schoemehl Jr. at the Mayors’ Institute for City Design, Minneapolis, October 1989.



**Busch Stadium, where the Cardinals baseball team plays, brings people downtown after business hours.**

**Photo courtesy St. Louis Convention and Visitor Commission.**

Louis. Last year the team drew more than three million fans to the heart of the city, where they used our hotels and restaurants. They make use of our downtown, and that has helped our economy.

Looking at the situation for baseball made me determined not to allow the construction of a competing facility in the far reaches of west St. Louis County.

So I made a very unpopular decision—I filed a lawsuit to block the building of its football stadium. That lawsuit triggered the owner's decision to move his team. I was widely construed to be the village idiot, the guy who had run the football team out of town. That was laid squarely on my plate by the media, the owner and the county executive.

Time heals all wounds. Once we survived the departure of the football team, we found a person (already 49-percent owner of the New England Patriots football team) willing to form a partnership and apply to the National Football League for an expansion team for St. Louis.

Then we proposed that a new enclosed stadium be built downtown and attached to our convention center. I could not

allow the underlying economic pinnings of downtown to be stolen away by a suburban community. Yet, at the same time, we needed support from that suburban community to build the stadium because the city could not afford to spend \$225 million on a stadium itself.

It was only in the crisis of the moment that we were able to create a political atmosphere in which a Republican governor, a Republican county executive and the business leadership would help the Democratic village idiot who had just run the football team out of town. We persuaded St. Louis County (under a new county executive) and the state government (under the governor's direction) to pay 75 percent of the cost. (Meanwhile, we are expanding our convention center, doubling its size.)

So we will end up with the fifth largest convention center in the country and a 70,000-seat stadium paid for mostly by the state and county. No one would have predicted this outcome, and no one would have believed it.

Not only will the stadium and convention center be built, they will also be well designed. We are putting them through



a series of community design reviews. We are bringing in architects and urban planners from around the country to give us their opinions. I would recommend this series of design reviews to other cities because by bringing in people from outside you get honest opinions without fear of retribution.

### Driving a Hard Bargain

As part of his idea to build the football stadium in the suburbs, the former St. Louis County Executive tried to lure the St. Louis Blues hockey team out of its facility in the city to the new county stadium. In response, the City bought the arena in which the team plays and assembled a group of business leaders to buy the team.

The arena is on the western edge of the City and adds nothing to the fabric of the City. It sits in a sea of surface parking. People drive there, pay to park, watch the game and then get back into their cars and head out on one of the highways to go home. So we are going to tear it down and build a new arena downtown.

In February, 1989, a representative of the Anheuser-Busch brewing company (which is based in St. Louis) told me the company was willing build the new arena. No public money would be required because the company would fund it privately. All I had to do was agree to the demolition of nine turn-of-the-century warehouses, all of them listed on the National Register of Historic Places, so the company could build a 16-acre parking lot next to the arena.

Having recovered once from the claim of being the village idiot, I figured I could do it again. I said no.

It was the most unpopular decision I have ever made, and I've made some unpopular decisions. I had to lay off city employees — when I became mayor there were 10,400 and today there are 4,600. I had to close a city hospital. All of those decisions paled by comparison: You have never experienced the wrath of the constituency until you've experienced the wrath of an outraged hockey fan. Wisely, I had waited until after the election.

This issue is not resolved and I don't know how it is going to come out. Anheuser-Busch refused to proceed unless it



City workers plant flowers in the median of a St. Louis street.  
Photo courtesy City of St. Louis.

### Daffodils, Petunias, Marigolds and Roses

*Driving to City Hall one day along Gravois Avenue, one of St. Louis' main streets, Mayor Vincent C. Schoemebl Jr. decided something had to be done. "City streets do not have to look like runways at the airport," he said. So he launched an effort to plant trees along the street from downtown to the city limits.*

*The Gravois Avenue story has been repeated throughout St. Louis, once known as the "city of trees." By the 1960s, coal-smoke pollution had killed all but 93,000 of the city's trees. But in the past few years the city has added 183,000 trees to its inventory, planting them along major streets, in public areas and in residential neighborhoods.*

*Beautification efforts did not stop there. Starting in 1985, the city began planting daffodils along the four freeways that converge downtown. The daffodils created such an impression (they reportedly can be seen from jets landing at the city's airport), they were planted in street medians, public areas and vacant lots, as well.*



could tear the buildings down. We advertised for other developers for the arena, received five proposals and have narrowed those down to two.

Nor is the fate of those nine turn-of-the-century historic warehouses clear. Because rehabilitating them is a big project, it will require a lot of money. And now they are viewed as my problem. The day before my first conversation with Anheuser-Busch those warehouses were not my problem. They were there, occupied and just part of the city. Now all of a sudden, there are 1.2 million square feet of space emptied of tenants in anticipation that the city would raze the buildings.

In another way these buildings have been a problem since 1917, when they were purchased by Washington University. Under the Missouri Constitution, the University pays no taxes on the buildings. I had hoped the University, with its renowned school of architecture, might try to help solve the problem we face now, but to date it has not been much help.

This issue gives testimony to the fact that a mayor is custodian of a city only for a very short period in its life. Although I am the third mayor in the history of St. Louis to be

elected to a third term, I do not believe for a minute that I can do anything that will change the course of the city's history more emphatically than institutionalizing a respect within the city government for the city's heritage. No one development project, not even a spurt of economic development, will be as effective in shaping the long-term course of the city.

Cities are like rivers, they are here forever. Mayors, even of relatively new cities, must recognize that they are temporary custodians of something that is going to be here for a long time. We have to protect what came before us and prepare for what is going to come after we are gone.

*All new streets in St. Louis, and streets that are rebuilt, have medians installed and are planted with flowers. Since 1988, the city has installed 120 specially designed terra-cotta planters on street medians. Red petunias are planted on streets running east-west, and yellow marigolds are planted on streets running north-south.*

*This spring, Operation Brightside, a non-profit, privately funded group Schoemebl started to spearhead the city's beautification efforts, planted 13,500 rose bushes along one of the interstates. The roses will bloom from May through August, just after the daffodils are finished.*

*Some people are questioning the city's efforts. "It is controversial because many residents don't know why we plant flowers and shrubs in a time of fiscal crisis," Evelyn O. Rice, the city's parks director, told the St. Louis Sun.*

*But, she said, "The philosophy for the whole thing is that everyone deserves beauty in their lives."*

—Todd W. Bressi

**Daffodils greet motorists approaching downtown St. Louis on an interstate highway. Photo courtesy City of St. Louis.**

