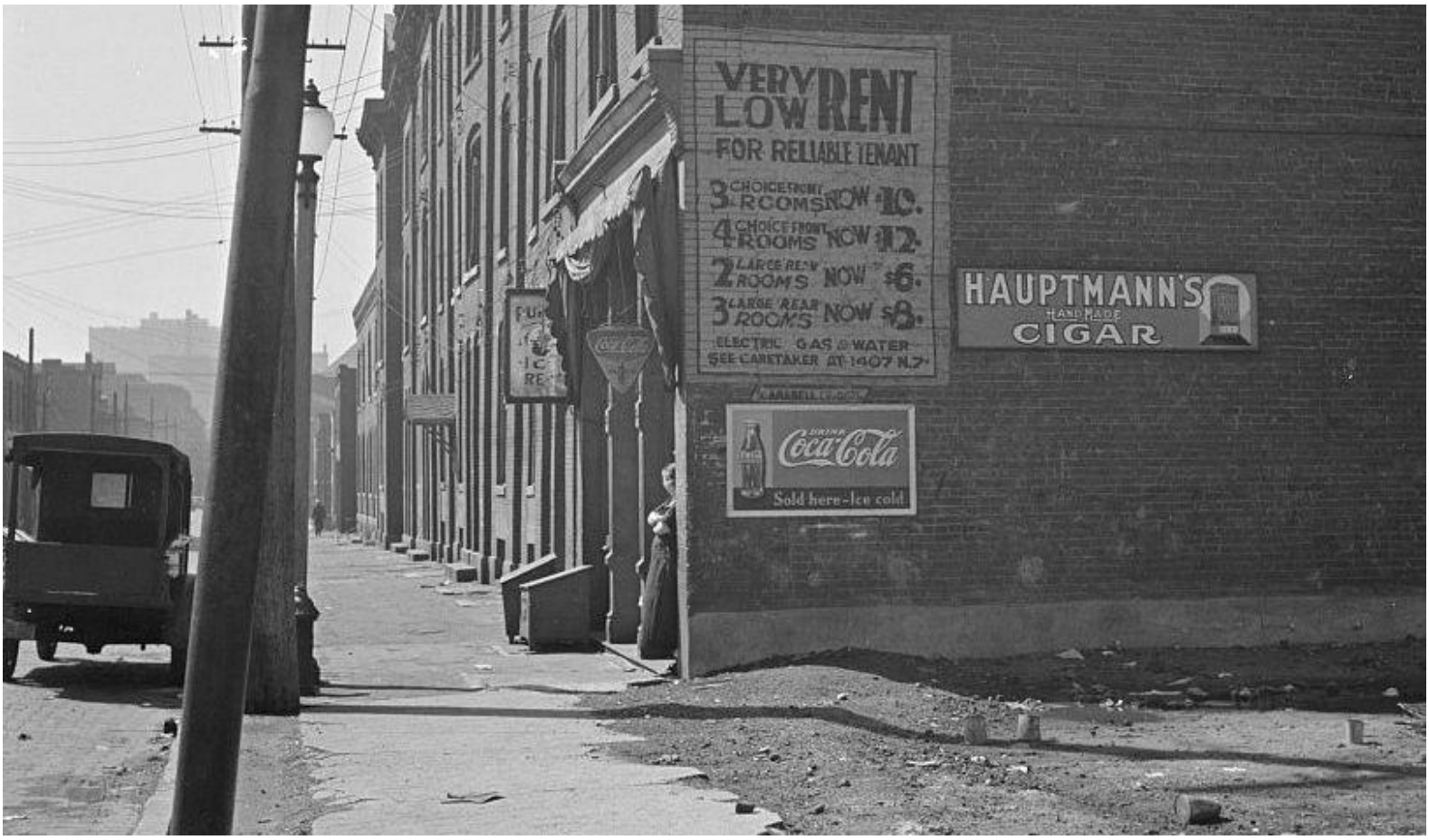
Ghost town: The city's long struggle with vacant, abandoned buildings

Roland Klose
Sep 15, 2018

St. Louis has wrestled with the consequences of property abandonment and disinvestment for a long time. Here's a quick history.

'Broken and uneven city'



Low-cost housing in St. Louis, photographed in 1936 by Arthur Rothstein (Library of Congress)

Long before interstate highways, before white flight, before redlining and before suburbs filled St. Louis County, the city had a problem with property abandonment and disinvestment.

Even when St. Louis was the nation's fourth-largest city — more than a century ago — people quit the grit and grime of decaying, older neighborhoods — if they could.

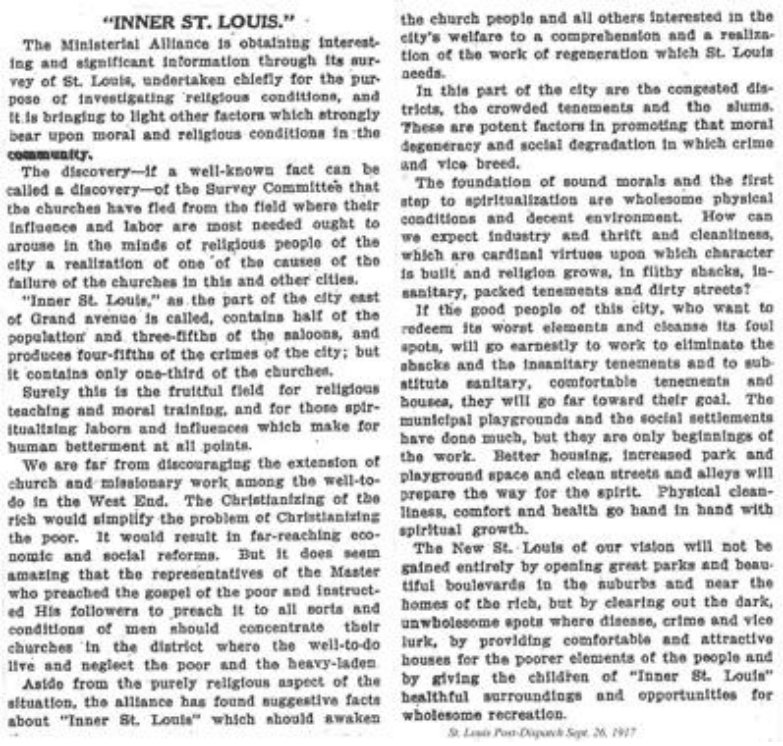
The least desirable areas of smoke-choked, industrial St. Louis were left to the poor, immigrants and the small but growing African-American population.

And while **civic reformers** bemoaned the sorry condition of St. Louis slums, signs of abandonment could be found elsewhere.

Isaac Lionberger, a civic leader who lived on a private street in the West End, complained about the city's decline in 1920.

“Whole districts are deserted, and a city full of empty buildings is ever building new ones,” **he wrote in a memoir**.

“The result of all these propensities is a broken and uneven city.”



"INNER ST. LOUIS."

The Ministerial Alliance is obtaining interesting and significant information through its survey of St. Louis, undertaken chiefly for the purpose of investigating religious conditions, and it is bringing to light other factors which strongly bear upon moral and religious conditions in the community.

The discovery—if a well-known fact can be called a discovery—of the Survey Committee that the churches have fled from the field where their influence and labor are most needed ought to arouse in the minds of religious people of the city a realization of one of the causes of the failure of the churches in this and other cities.

"Inner St. Louis," as the part of the city east of Grand avenue is called, contains half of the population and three-fifths of the saloons, and produces four-fifths of the crimes of the city; but it contains only one-third of the churches.

Surely this is the fruitful field for religious teaching and moral training, and for those spiritualizing labors and influences which make for human betterment at all points.

We are far from discouraging the extension of church and missionary work among the well-to-do in the West End. The Christianizing of the rich would simplify the problem of Christianizing the poor. It would result in far-reaching economic and social reforms. But it does seem amazing that the representatives of the Master who preached the gospel of the poor and instructed His followers to preach it to all sorts and conditions of men should concentrate their churches in the district where the well-to-do live and neglect the poor and the heavy-laden.

Aside from the purely religious aspect of the situation, the alliance has found suggestive facts about "Inner St. Louis" which should awaken the church people and all others interested in the city's welfare to a comprehension and a realization of the work of regeneration which St. Louis needs.

In this part of the city are the congested districts, the crowded tenements and the slums. These are potent factors in promoting that moral degeneracy and social degradation in which crime and vice breed.

The foundation of sound morals and the first step to spiritualization are wholesome physical conditions and decent environment. How can we expect industry and thrift and cleanliness, which are cardinal virtues upon which character is built and religion grows, in filthy shacks, insanitary, packed tenements and dirty streets?

If the good people of this city, who want to redeem its worst elements and cleanse its foul spots, will go earnestly to work to eliminate the shacks and the insanitary tenements and to substitute sanitary, comfortable tenements and houses, they will go far toward their goal. The municipal playgrounds and the social settlements have done much, but they are only beginnings of the work. Better housing, increased park and playground space and clean streets and alleys will prepare the way for the spirit. Physical cleanliness, comfort and health go hand in hand with spiritual growth.

The New St. Louis of our vision will not be gained entirely by opening great parks and beautiful boulevards in the suburbs and near the homes of the rich, but by clearing out the dark, unwholesome spots where disease, crime and vice lurk, by providing comfortable and attractive houses for the poorer elements of the people and by giving the children of "Inner St. Louis" healthful surroundings and opportunities for wholesome recreation.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sept. 26, 1917

"The foundation of sound morals and the first step to spiritualization are wholesome physical conditions and decent environment. How can we expect industry and thrift and cleanliness, which are cardinal virtues upon which character is built and religion grows, in filthy shacks, insanitary, packed tenements and dirty streets?" (**Post-Dispatch editorial, Sept. 26, 1917**)

‘Economic and social collapse’

Blighted Areas Growing Threat To City, Mayor's Commission Says

Strong Measures Needed to Avoid Economic and Social Collapse, Report Asserts— New Urban Land Policy Urged.

A report on an urban land policy for St. Louis, approved by the City Plan Commission Thursday for transmittal to Mayor Dickmann, limits," said the report. "Population is moving out of the city. Land values have declined markedly in the central areas of the old city. Buildings are being demolished to

The City Plan Commission, in a report to Mayor Bernard F. Dickmann, warned spreading blight threatened the city with "gradual economic and social collapse." (**Post-Dispatch, Oct. 23, 1936**)

The dangers of property abandonment were much on the mind of St. Louis city planner Harland Bartholomew in the 1930s. He worried about how it was draining the city's resources and threatening to engulf its “better residential districts.”

In a 1936 speech, he noted that the number of people living east of Jefferson Avenue had dropped by 100,000 in 30 years — and that this population shift was continuing.

Later that year, the City Plan Commission, where Bartholomew served as engineer, submitted a report on land-use policy to Mayor Bernard F. Dickmann (1933-1941), the reform-minded Democrat behind major public works projects, including the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

In language that could have been written in 2018, the report noted that “new growth now finds accommodation mostly outside city

limits."

And it warned that "if adequate measures are not taken" to check property abandonment, loss of population and decline of land values, "the city is faced with gradual economic and social collapse."

Harland Bartholomew (left), engineer, City Plan Commission of St. Louis, in 1938. Bernard F. Dickmann, St. Louis mayor from 1933 to 1941. (Post-Dispatch file photos)

'Good housekeeping'

Demolition as of May 24, 1940, as seen from the east door of the Old Courthouse. The headline over the photograph says "Blitzkrieg on the Riverfront," a reference to the widening war in Europe. Blitzkrieg, or "lightning war," was the term for the hard-hitting German military offenses that were rolling up victories in 1940. (Post-Dispatch file photo)

post-dispatch file photo

Bartholomew, the city planner, called for a “good housekeeping” approach to handle hard-hit areas: repairing and rehabilitating better residences, demolishing the worst structures, and revising zoning laws to stabilize communities.

In areas still untouched by abandonment, he urged the formation of property owner associations, barring “multiple dwellings” and dividing the city into defined “neighborhoods,” where there'd be more local control.

Bartholomew’s recommendations conformed with the discriminatory practices of the time, some later critics would note. Local control and neighborhood associations emerged as potent tools used by whites to enforce segregated housing.

In 1939, the city began razing 37 blocks along the riverfront for the proposed Jefferson National Expansion Memorial — today's Gateway Arch National Park — removing a large swath of deteriorated properties.

But the heavy lifting of urban renewal would have to wait until World War II ended, and the federal government began pouring money into cities to pay for public housing, highways and other improvements.

Taking action

Mayor Raymond Tucker (at left of group) and city officials observe the first demolition for the Mill Creek Valley redevelopment project in February 1959. The location is the rear of 3518 Laclede Avenue. The project cleared 5,600 old dwelling units, some without running water, and was the nation's largest urban-renewal project at the time. (Post-Dispatch file photo)

There was a lot of work to do. A Post-Dispatch series of special reports, titled “Progress or Decay? — St. Louis Must Choose,” published in 1950, highlighted the “**sordid housing story**” of St. Louis.

More than one-third of the city could be described as either "slum districts" or "blighted areas," the newspaper reported, echoing the findings of a 1947 report by the City Plan Commission. Thousands of people suffered in overcrowded housing, were forced to use outside toilets and had to contend with rats and filth.

“A peculiar thing about slums and blight is that they are not always readily apparent to the unpracticed eye,” the Post-Dispatch said.

Mobilized, St. Louis civic and business leaders snapped into action.

The Mill Creek Valley neighborhood west of Union Station was bulldozed, displacing thousands of black families. A new Busch Stadium was built downtown and the Gateway Arch was completed, giving the city a new symbol in the 1960s. (Watch a KTVI documentary from that era here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=quKGgzdVLRo&feature=youtu.be**)

The St. Louis region — the home to major international corporations — still exuded wealth and prosperity, but in large parts of the city, especially outside of downtown, decay was spreading.

Quiet riot

Buildings in the 2800 block of Stoddard Street, photographed in 1973. One was occupied; the other was not. (Photo by Wayne Crosslin/Post-Dispatch)

Local leaders were proud they had avoided the riots that engulfed other urban centers during the 1960s. But while other cities burned, St. Louis faced its own disaster, albeit in slow motion.

Call it a quiet riot as more than 125,000 people — 17 percent of the population — quit the city during that tumultuous decade.

It was a massive loss of human capital — and it wasn't just white flight. **A research report by Rand Corp.**, published in 1973, found, for the most part, “blacks and whites were leaving the city at the same rate during the 1960s.”

The exodus turned into a rout in the next decade — the population dropped by nearly 170,000, or 27 percent, in the 1970s.

Census records show the city lost people faster than housing units.

That meant hundreds of vacant buildings in some neighborhoods, especially on the city's predominantly African-American North Side.

‘Growing phenomenon’

SUNDAY, APRIL 25, 1971

Decay Making A Ghost Town Of Inner City

WEST END CONTRAST: These two mansions in the 5700 block of Cabanne Avenue illustrate the conditions that have driven many persons elsewhere. The owner of the impeccably maintained home on the left can hardly ignore the derelict immediately to his east. West End renewal has lagged behind. (By a Post-Dispatch Photographer)

By SALLY BIXBY DEFTY
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

FIRST OF TWO ARTICLES

THE PHRASE “ghost town” usually evokes the image of a deserted mining village in the West, complete with dusty main street, false-front saloons and a name like Crazy Dog.

However, the ghost town label has been pinned on two sections of St. Louis in a report issued this week on abandoned housing in seven major American cities.

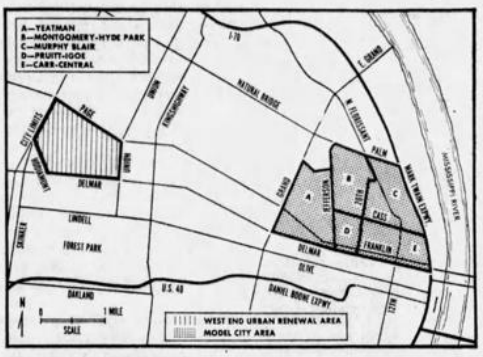
A drive through the West End urban renewal area and the Model Cities section of the city tends to confirm the verdict of the National Urban League and the Center for Community Change, authors of the survey.

Lawns that are a rich spring green front some of the well-proportioned red brick houses on Hebert and Dodier Streets. Those houses have immaculate white steps and aluminum window sashes and storm doors.

But near almost every one of these examples of the homeowner doing his best is either a weed-filled lot where a dwelling has been razed or an abandoned building. Some of the latter have boarded-up windows and doors. The facades of many are marked by black holes—windows in which the glass or boarding long since has been broken by vandals.

Other buildings are occupied, but nevertheless “abandoned,” according to the study's definition.

“**WHEN** a landlord no longer provides services to an occupied building and allows taxes and mortgages to go unpaid, it is clear that the building is uninhabited by all but desperation standards. We consider such buildings to be finally abandoned,” the report said.



“AN URBAN GHOST TOWN” is the description of the Model City and West End urban renewal areas in a report issued this week by the National Urban League and the Center for Community Change. The survey found more abandoned housing in these two areas than in comparable sections of six other American cities. (Map by Post-Dispatch artist Albert Schweitzer Jr.)

collapse when the whites moved out, but the blacks got the blame for the decay,” said former Fourth Ward Alderman Joseph W. B. Clark, who until last week, headed the Aldermanic Housing and Urban Development Committee.

APARTMENTS that were strained by the overcrowding in the wartime years snapped under the strain of the large black influx in the 1950s. As the results became increasingly visible in the years that followed, accelerated by the addition of 11,000 families made homeless by the Mill Creek urban renewal project, the city moved to strengthen building code enforcement.

Mrs. Todaro and her husband had both lived in the area all their lives and loved it.

“We know there are lots of problems, but this is where we want to live,” she told the Post-Dispatch last summer in a tour of derelict buildings in the area. Most of them had been sold to realty companies as rental property by owners financing a move to the suburbs.

“We've found just the house, one that would be perfect for us, but no bank will give us a loan. I don't know what to do,” she said.

Around the first of this year, the Todaros gave up and moved out of the city.

Urban renewal here has been “a re-

Reporter Sally Bixby Defty looked into housing abandonment in a series of stories in 1971. (**Post-Dispatch, April 25, 1971**)

In 1971, a report jointly produced by the National Urban League and Center for Community Change, found parts of St. Louis had become “an urban ghost town which stretches for blocks at a time.”

St. Louis, based on surveys of the city's West End and the “Model City” area of north St. Louis east of Grand, had the highest rate of housing abandonment of seven major cities examined. The city had about 2,000 vacant buildings that needed to be torn down, the report found — a large number at the time, but just a fraction of the ones that would be demolished in the following decades.

The association of crime with vacant buildings only heightened the concern.

In 1970, for example, two boys were lured into a building in the 2200 block of Montgomery Street and beaten. One of them, a 6-year-old, died. Frustrated, nearby residents demanded that City Hall move quickly to raze derelict buildings. The administration of Mayor Alfonso J. Cervantes (1965-1973) said it didn’t have enough money — and even if it did, it couldn’t take down more than 800 buildings a year because there weren’t enough wrecking contractors.

The city turned to Washington, and with federal money, it picked up the pace of demolition — knocking down an average of 4,000 units each year between 1970 and 1976, **the Post-Dispatch reported**. Even then, it couldn't get ahead of the problem — and there was increasing resistance from preservationists.

New approaches were needed, and in 1977 the city adopted a “**board and secure**” policy to protect abandoned buildings that still could be salvaged.

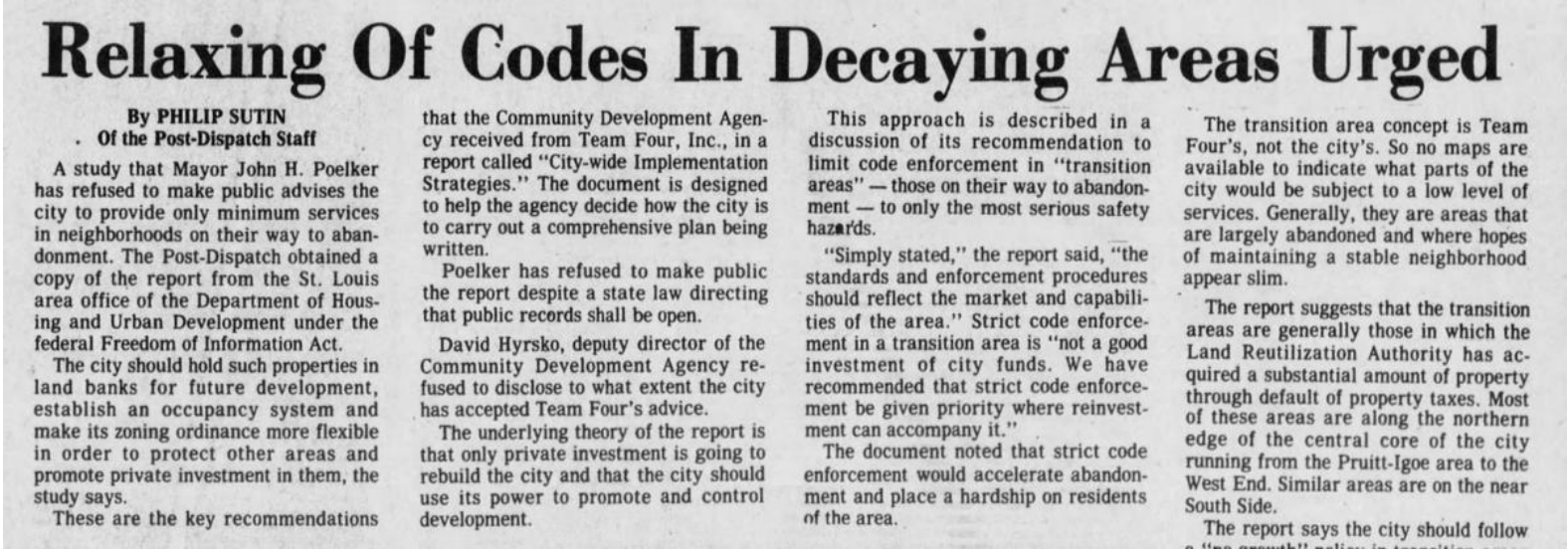
Policy shift

At a news conference on Aug. 4, 1978, Mayor James F. Conway announces the award of two homes for $1 under the city's new homestead law. Conway is seated between Beatrice Burt (left) and Mr. and Mrs. Sam Petty. (Photo by Lloyd Spainhower/Post-Dispatch)

Post-Dispatch

Strategies to combat urban disinvestment were evolving in the 1970s, and though it was never acknowledged, policy decisions were made that prioritized some neighborhoods over others.

In 1975, the Post-Dispatch broke a story outlining the recommendations of a study by a planning group named Team Four Inc. that seemed to signal a shift in development policy — one that basically said the city needed to focus its limited resources on protecting viable neighborhoods, not shoring up “transition areas” — neighborhoods on their way to abandonment.



Relaxing Of Codes In Decaying Areas Urged

By PHILIP SUTIN
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

A study that Mayor John H. Poelker has refused to make public advises the city to provide only minimum services in neighborhoods on their way to abandonment. The Post-Dispatch obtained a copy of the report from the St. Louis area office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development under the federal Freedom of Information Act.

The city should hold such properties in land banks for future development, establish an occupancy system and make its zoning ordinance more flexible in order to protect other areas and promote private investment in them, the study says.

These are the key recommendations that the Community Development Agency received from Team Four, Inc., in a report called "City-wide Implementation Strategies." The document is designed to help the agency decide how the city is to carry out a comprehensive plan being written.

Poelker has refused to make public the report despite a state law directing that public records shall be open.

David Hyrsko, deputy director of the Community Development Agency refused to disclose to what extent the city has accepted Team Four's advice.

The underlying theory of the report is that only private investment is going to rebuild the city and that the city should use its power to promote and control development.

This approach is described in a discussion of its recommendation to limit code enforcement in "transition areas" — those on their way to abandonment — to only the most serious safety hazards.

"Simply stated," the report said, "the standards and enforcement procedures should reflect the market and capabilities of the area." Strict code enforcement in a transition area is "not a good investment of city funds. We have recommended that strict code enforcement be given priority where reinvestment can accompany it."

The document noted that strict code enforcement would accelerate abandonment and place a hardship on residents of the area.

The transition area concept is Team Four's, not the city's. So no maps are available to indicate what parts of the city would be subject to a low level of services. Generally, they are areas that are largely abandoned and where hopes of maintaining a stable neighborhood appear slim.

The report suggests that the transition areas are generally those in which the Land Reutilization Authority has acquired a substantial amount of property through default of property taxes. Most of these areas are along the northern edge of the central core of the city running from the Pruitt-Igoe area to the West End. Similar areas are on the near South Side.

The report says the city should follow

In 1975, the Post-Dispatch reported on the recommendations of Team Four Inc., a consulting firm used by the city. (**Post-Dispatch, May 13, 1975**)

Mayor John Poelker (1973-1977) refused to release the taxpayer-funded report to the newspaper — and it wasn't clear to what extent its recommendations were actually adopted.

But some critics saw the report as evidence that city development policies favored some neighborhoods over others. Some residents could count on rigorous code enforcement to contain blight. Others could not. It all depended on where they lived.

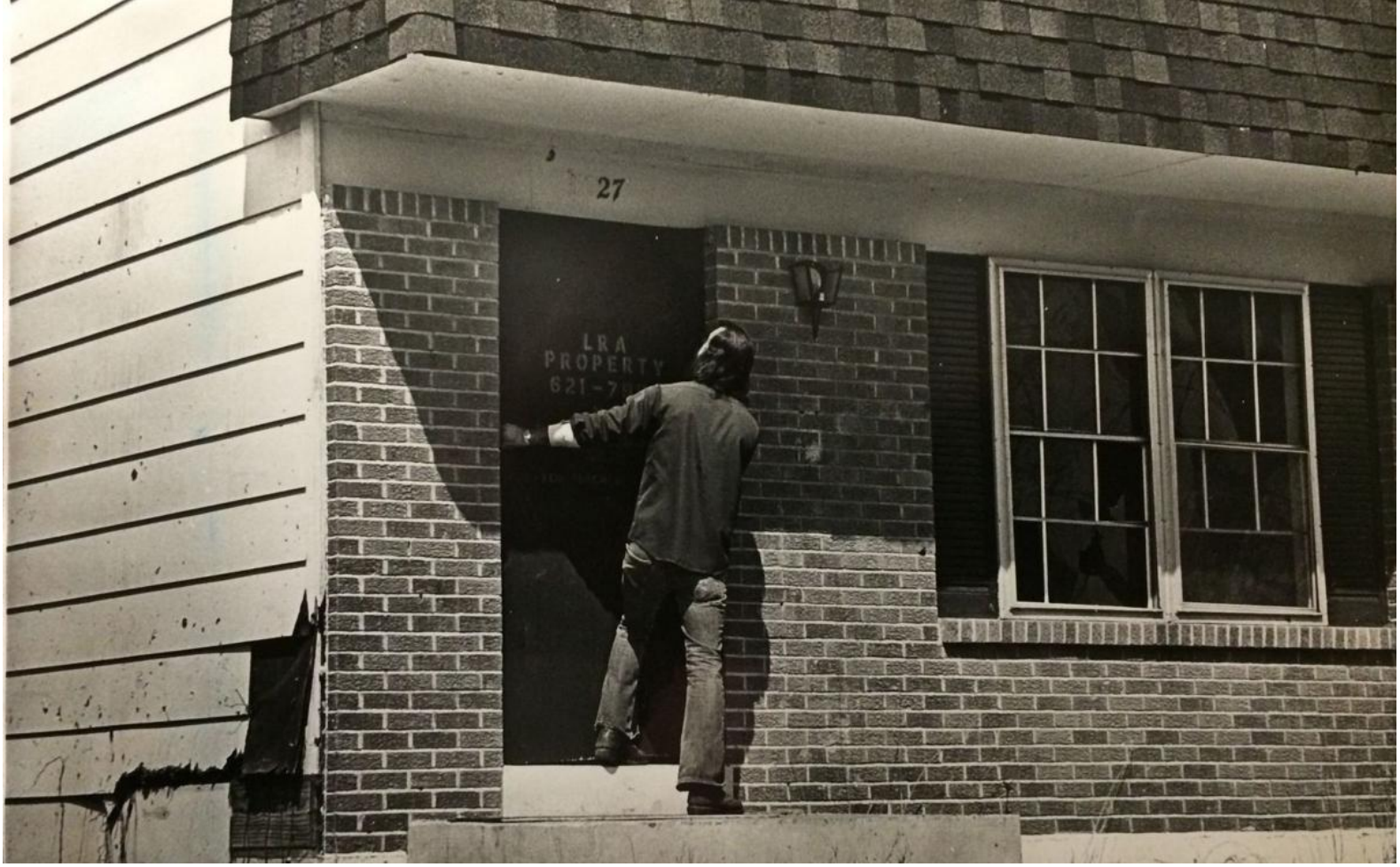
The Land Reutilization Authority (LRA), created in 1971 as a land bank to take control of abandoned property, came under withering criticism for failing to maintain properties or get them back into productive use.

City administrations struggled to find answers, often in response to community pressure.

One hardy perennial, proposed by politicians like then-Alderman Vincent C. Schoemehl Jr. and housing activists, urged the city to launch a homestead program, selling LRA properties for $1 to would-be homeowners who agreed to make improvements.

Mayor James F. Conway (1977-1981) attempted such a program in 1978. Then, when Schoemehl became mayor (1981-1993), ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) pushed for a similar $1 homesteading program — and Schoemehl complied in 1983.

Dystopia



An employee of the Land Reutilization Authority boards up 5027 Arlington Avenue in 1982. (Photo by Renyold Ferguson/Post-Dispatch)

Too little, too late.

By 1978, St. Louis had the highest vacancy rate of all central cities, as historian Colin Gordon noted in his 2009 book "**Mapping Decline**."

The "ghost town" warning was becoming reality in more St. Louis neighborhoods. The New York Times weighed in, in 1981, saying the city faced a bleak future unless it could stem the loss of people and businesses.


A12 THE NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, JANUARY 5, 1981

A vacant lot and litter where housing once stood on the north side of St. Louis. In background is the city skyline with the Gateway Arch.

St. Louis Struggles With Ebb of People and Business

By NATHANIEL SHEPPARD Jr.

Typically, some St. Louis leaders argued the narrative was too negative. Heavily subsidized downtown projects — including **St. Louis Centre** and the Union

Station "Festival Marketplace," both opened in 1985 — suggested a new vibrancy in the Central Business District. And some neighborhoods — principally the Central West End — were seeing new life.

This 1981 story in the New York Times painted a bleak picture for St. Louis, highlighting the rapid loss of population and business. (**New York Times, Jan. 5, 1981**)

Using state laws that gave redevelopment corporations tax incentives and eminent domain power, Washington University Medical Center, St. Louis University and Ralston Purina shored up neighborhoods near their city property holdings.

North of Delmar Boulevard, it was a very different story.

City's biggest slumlord

Slum Landlord

Most Vacant, Abandoned Property Is Owned By City

By Phil Linsalata and Tim Novak
Computer Analysis
By George Landau
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff
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FIRST OF THREE ARTICLES

Who owns the most land in St. Louis?

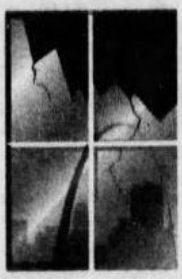
Whose holdings are the frequent sites of violent crimes, drug deals and dangerous fires?

What property owner has more abandoned homes and vacant lots than any other in the city?

The answer is not some stereotypical slumlord.

The answer is the city itself.

Through direct ownership and through several agencies, the city owns 7,743 separate parcels ranging in style and quality from the landmark City Hall to hundreds of derelict homes. Most are vacant lots; most are in the city's poorest neighborhoods.



Of those parcels, 6,007 are owned by the Land Reutilization Authority, the city agency that takes title to property after owners have failed to pay taxes for years.

Although charged with reselling such property, the LRA's holdings are now at a record high, 25 million square feet of land, mostly in the 12 wards north of Delmar Boulevard.

The LRA's holdings are larger than the entirety of Breckenridge Hills, a suburb with 5,404 people.

Unlike Breckenridge Hills, the 25 million square feet owned by the LRA generates no real estate taxes.

This is one of many discoveries of a Post-Dispatch analysis of property and taxes in St. Louis.

The findings, based on a computer study and dozens of interviews, relate to the wealth of city neighborhoods, the tax bills paid by homeowners and the challenges confronting the city's residents and their leaders in the decade to come.

The analysis reveals:

■ Property values in the 12 wards north of Delmar Boulevard have been driven down — and residents driven out — because of the thousands of vacant lots and abandoned buildings that serve as havens for drug abuse and violent crime. The city owns many of those vacant lots and abandoned buildings. The structures are almost all in need of repair, and they remain a constant irritant to nearby residents who hold the city responsible for handling

See PROPERTY, Page 4

In 1991, the Post-Dispatch looked at the record inventory held by the Land Reutilization Authority, finding the LRA was the city's biggest owner of abandoned property. (**Post-Dispatch, June 23, 1991**)

In a series of reports in 1991, the Post-Dispatch reported what many in St. Louis already knew: the biggest owner of abandoned land in the city was LRA, and most of that land was in north St. Louis. At the time, the newspaper reported, LRA's holdings had swollen to a record 6,007 parcels.

“The largest slum landlord in the city is the city,” Martin Walsh, then city building commissioner, told the newspaper.

“The North Side of the city is becoming increasingly desolate, and there’s just going to be half a city left,” warned **Richard D. Baron**, co-founder of McCormack Baron Salazar, a leading urban real-estate development company.

The downward spiral would continue, Baron added, “unless civic leaders come to grips with this issue, which they haven't done for 30 years.”

Today, nearly 30 years later, LRA’s inventory exceeds 12,000 parcels.

Baron’s prediction had come true.

In 1991, the body of Jevon Bonner, 12, was found in this vacant house at 4339 Prairie Avenue. Police searched more than 80 vacant buildings before finding the boy, who had been missing two months. The death was ruled a homicide; the building was eventually torn down. (Photo by Ted Dargan/Post-Dispatch)

‘Marshall Plan’

Last year, the candidates who competed to replace Mayor Francis Slay (2001-2017) **promised to do something to stop the continuing decline of north St. Louis**.

Treasurer Tishaura Jones, who lost the primary by less than 900 votes, called for a citywide plan developed with community input.

“Let’s plot it all out as if money is no object and figure out what we want to see," Jones told the Post-Dispatch. "From there, we can identify what resources we have and then find money to do the things we want to do.”

28th Ward Alderman Lyda Krewson, **who ended up winning the Democratic primary and general election**, called for offering LRA property to small developers at “extremely low prices” and packaged with city-funded amenities, such as a new sidewalk or a small tax abatement.

Other candidates said the city should focus its efforts on a handful of blighted neighborhoods. More money for demolitions. More targeted tax incentives. More city workers to help at LRA.

"The Way Back," by award-winning cartoonist Daniel R. Fitzpatrick, was published by the Post-Dispatch on July 20, 1947. The newspaper strongly supported the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe.

It may have been Jimmie Matthews, a perennial candidate, whose rhetoric best reflected the scope of the problem.

Given the extent of devastation north of Delmar, Matthews said St. Louis needed a "Marshall Plan" — the kind of help the United States gave postwar Europe, when we helped former enemies and allies rebuild.

Matthews came in seventh in a field of seven Democrats. *— Roland Klose, St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Roland Klose
Roland Klose is an editor at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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