

The Riverfront Times

FREE (BY THE RIVERFRONT TIMES)

THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF ST. LOUIS

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State of the Arts

SEEING THINGS

BY EDDIE SILVA

Is St. Louis becoming an invisible city?

In Italo Calvino's slender masterpiece *Invisible Cities*, adventurer/explorer Marco Polo entertains the great Kublai Khan in the emperor's garden with detailed descriptions of the cities he has seen on his long journey: thin cities, trading cities, continuous cities, hidden cities, cities such as Melania, where travelers would hear the same dialogue in the streets even if their visits came years apart.

After a while Khan grows suspicious of Polo's travelogue and questions why the foreigner never speaks of his native city, Venice. "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice," Polo says. His beloved Serenissima, now far at the other end of the world from him, has become a city, and cities, of his imagination.

Even with St. Louis' omnipresence to those living within it — with its diminishing population, its decay, its brick buildings and its brick mentality — it has been moving forward invisibly status over recent months, a city more imagined than real.

St. Louis 2004 has been running the longest invisibility project. Not nearly so profoundly as the poet Wallace Stevens (whose life's work explored this theme), 2004 acknowledges a delicate bridge between the imagination and reality. The convivial band of wise consultants haven't been quite so absurd as the blind men and the elephant. Compare them instead to Calvino's Marco Polo, their heads filled with places they've been, to the extent that there is little room for the place they've come to see.

They came, they saw, they conferred, and noted the realities (things are bad), and then imagined how things could be better — better like Minneapolis or Seattle or Denver, those other cities that they came from that serve as imaginal blueprints to impose over the real city of St. Louis.

St. Louis 2004 began "Imagine St. Louis," the weekly fairy dust provided by the staff of the *Post-Dispatch*. "Imagine a St. Louis that isn't like St. Louis," each installment could read, "a St. Louis without St. Louis history and the St. Louis character formed by that history. Imagine a St. Louis more like Minneapolis or Seattle or Denver." Each week in the *Post-Dispatch* the St. Louis that is dissolves and the St. Louis that isn't becomes the substance of news. Maybe Cole Campbell deserves to be discussed alongside Wallace Stevens. Stevens kept his musings on the relationship between reality and the imagination within the province of poetry; Campbell has moved the dialogue into journalism. The *Post-Dispatch* resists the pressures of reality (to borrow a phrase of Stevens) to give readers invisible St. Louis.

When journalists and former congressmen (such as Jack Danforth of 2004, the wonderful man who gave you Clarence Thomas) take on the role of the dream weavers, artists shift to the relinquished territory of reality. (Stevens straddled both worlds, being both one of America's greatest poets and vice president of a major insurance company.) Artists such as Vito Acconci, Jenny Holzer and Mary Miss sit among bankers, developers, judges and city

managers and make proposals, compromise and actualize artistic works in the public sphere that approximate their original visions. Is the purity of vision corrupted by the pressures of the boardroom? Always. Anyone who's chosen to leave adolescence behind understands this.

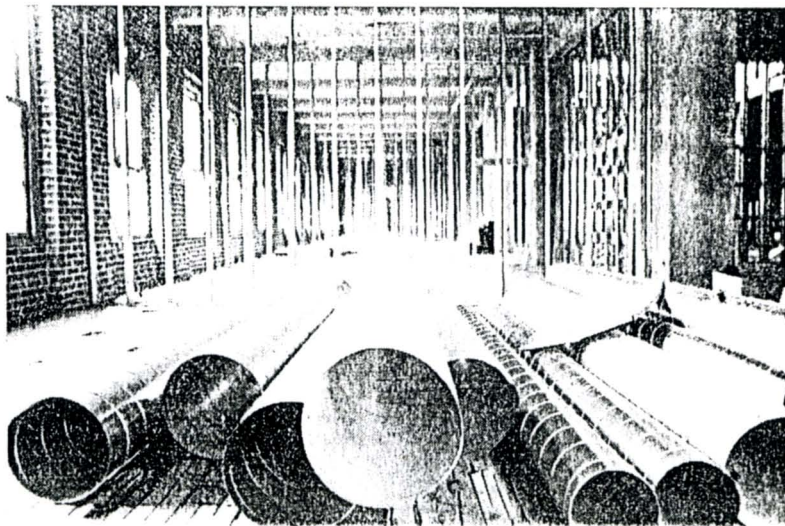
Local artist and teacher Pat Schuchard, even in his late 40s, still looks like a kid and, like most middle-aged American men, is a work-in-progress in regard to the shirking of childish things. But his proposals for life and art in the city carry the weight of possibility. As an artist, he traverses various realms: He heads the painting program at Washington University; he works in the field of public art; he makes art that fits into the museum and gallery systems — representations of old album covers made of felt and wax, screaming wax heads, familiar objects (such as the felt piano he has in his living room) made disquieting by their unfunctional presence; and he makes portraits by commission, realist paintings that honor and commemorate their subjects. He's been successful in all of these worlds and does not set for himself a personal hierarchy of one being more valid than the other. It all fits within what Gary Snyder, another artist whose work within his community is as much his art as the poetry he writes, memorably calls "the real work ... what is to be done." (Note: Schuchard and I are friends and have been in an ongoing discussion of the relationship between life and art, and the artist in the world, for a number of years.)

In 1997, Schuchard was awarded the post of E. Desmond Lee Professor of Community Collaboration at Washington University. Lee, a Missouri gentleman who disparages the fortune he made out of manufacturing wire coat hangers, is this city's, and one of the country's, most prominent philanthropists. An article in *Worth* magazine listed him as one of the top 100 givers in America — higher than Warren Buffett, whose fortune makes Lee's a pittance in comparison. Anyone who would care to take note of the visible rather than the invisible St. Louis would observe that Lee was the only member of the city's wealthy class to make the list.

Lee has developed a novel approach to giving money. He seeks ways to construct bridges between academic institutions and the communities they have historically failed to serve — or have ill served in many cases. Schuchard's endowed professorship came with the stipulation that his activities would venture beyond Skinker and find ways to utilize Wash. U.'s significant resources in the community.

Schuchard began looking into a downtown property that he knew the university owned at 1627 Washington Ave. and began thinking of it as a home for graduates of the school's art department where they could remain in St. Louis to work and live rather than making the exit for those aforementioned visible cities.

Schuchard sent a letter to Wash. U. executive vice chancellor Dick Roloff, and, says Schuchard, with the "Des" Lee title attached to his name, "every door opened." Schuchard says two major factors got the project moving: "There was enough profit motive for



The renovation of 1627 Washington Ave. is progressing visibly.

development and enough motive for Washington University to get rid of the property."

Enter the Regional Housing Community Development Alliance (RHCD) and deputy director Barbara Geisman. RHCD is a nonprofit organization that provides assistance to other nonprofits doing physical revitalization in urban neighborhoods. "Pat Schuchard became excited about loft buildings on Washington Avenue," says Geisman, "and he knew the university had owned a lot of them and only had one left. He was interested that the last one had a university role related to it. He talked to one of our board of directors, who talked to Roloff. That's how we got involved. We worked with the university and brought NationsBank in as a co-developer for a lot of reasons — not the least of which has to do with money," she laughs.

Washington University donated the building (which has an appraised cost of some \$600,000) to a partnership between RHCD and NationsBank (which will be Bank of America by the time this goes to press). RHCD is an important part of the mix because of its nonprofit status, which meant it could access tax credits toward historic redevelopment. NationsBank could provide capital. "We are partners in the ownership entity," says Mary Campbell, who is both a senior vice president at NationsBank (Bank of America) and the market executive for community-development banking. "The bank funded all the predevelopment costs. We paid everybody we needed to keep the project moving until we were able to close on conventional financing.

"We put in cash equity. We're doing the construction financing. We're doing the permanent financing, and the CDC (Community Development Corp.) is actually buying all the tax credits. So at the end of the day, through four different financing tools, we're 100 percent of the money in.

"The partnership with the bank and the RHCD is unique and good," Campbell continues. "It gives RHCD the financial capacity to do what they do, which is to do projects and provide assistance and go into emerging markets just like we can. As far as we're concerned, we are one of, if not the only, bank in the country that actually buys, owns and develops real estate on purpose — aggressively does community development

from the perspective of ownership and being a developer. For our market, that's never been done by a financial institution."

Campbell is a promoter for community development, but NationsBank wouldn't be investing \$5 million-\$5.6 million if it didn't believe a profit would be made. "NationsBank commits to downtowns all over the country. This is a great place to start," she says. "The bank liked the presence of Wash. U. It wasn't a hard sell."

With a scheduled completion date of Dec. 15, the renovation of the building is taking shape. Schuchard is proudly taking people on tours. A large, high-ceilinged basement space will provide storage facilities, as well as a space for community workshops run by the Forum for Contemporary Art. "We're not reinventing the wheel," says Schuchard. "We'll work with existing programs and bring in our students." The basement space will also serve as exhibition space for tenants and "any sort of guerilla-art activity."

The ground floor will have gallery space for student exhibitions (no more shows in dreary Bixby Hall), curated exhibitions, lectures, performances and rehearsals. The idea is to make the building a locus for downtown activity, in proximity to ArtLoft and the nightclub scene. A restaurant and courtyard (perhaps with a sculpture garden) on 16th Street is also being considered.

Sixteen units are designated for low-income rentals, with recent graduates from the Washington University art school receiving first priority (Wash. U. holds a 15-year lease and donated the property, so it has first dibs). A review board at the school will confer with the building's management on applicants (who must meet income requirements of \$20,000-\$23,000 per year). The artist units, which will rent for \$350-\$400 per month, are 1,200-1,800 square feet, with generous natural light from windows facing north and south. Ten larger units will rent at what has been deemed market rate, \$650-\$1,250 per month.

Schuchard goes to the sixth floor, which is the closest to completion. The drywall is up, the various entryways to each unit have been constructed. Schuchard points to the hardwood floors — maple, he says. It's all palpable, real, visible. ■