

More say, 'Meet me in St. Louis' as city rebuilds

After a decades-long decline, 'Gateway' on comeback trail

By Charisse Jones
USA TODAY

ST. LOUIS — When Brad Fratello and his partner first moved into their downtown loft, the vista from their picture windows featured abandoned, graffiti-scarred buildings.

Now, the sound of jackhammers rings out like a serenade as long-empty spaces are reborn as posh lofts and new neighbors walk streets that recently were desolate after nightfall.

"When we come home, we (say), 'Did you see the three things this afternoon that weren't there this morning?'" says Fratello, a professor of art history who moved downtown three years ago. "New windows were put in. Somebody scraped the paint off this old sill. Just little things that mean they're getting cared for again. . . . It's definitely a palpable, real feeling of a neighborhood springing up around you."

St. Louis, nicknamed "Gateway to the West" and symbolized by the 630-foot-tall Gateway Arch that graces its skyline, was once the USA's fourth-most-populous city and a major manufacturing hub from its perch on the Mississippi River. But it lost more than half its population over 50 years. Neighborhoods and a once-thriving downtown were pockmarked with deserted buildings, and residents lamented the city's faded glory.



By Tim A. Parker for USA TODAY

Vickers: Worries that minorities will be left out,

Now, the hollow spaces of the former garment district are being filled with condominiums, bistros and shops. The old post office, for years a relic surrounded by other vacant buildings, has been refurbished, its space fully rented. Last month, a \$365 million baseball stadium for the St. Louis Cardinals opened downtown, perhaps the most conspicuous sign of a comeback that one former critic has called one of the nation's strongest.

"It's definitely more remarkable because it had gone so far down," Neal Peirce, chairman of the Citistates Group, which studies metropolitan regions, says of St. Louis' turnaround. Peirce wrote a highly critical report of the city's downtown nine years ago. "To see the amount of restoration that's going on is really amazing," he says.

Downtowns are on the rebound from Philadelphia to Denver and San Diego, says Christopher Leinberger, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution who studies downtowns and suburban town centers. St. Louis has adopted strategies used by other cities and taken steps of its own.

St. Louis has been a leader in using federal and state tax credits that encourage developers and homeowners to rehabilitate older buildings, officials say. The Missouri state credit, enacted in 1998, helped spark roughly 90% of new investment downtown, says Dick Fleming, head of the St. Louis Regional Chamber and Growth Association.

Long urban decline

Diminished investment in cities after World War II paralleled the launch of suburbia, aided by the construction of thousands of modestly priced homes suited to the budgets of returning soldiers and their families. In St. Louis, racial tensions helped fuel a population exodus that began in the 1950s and continued for half a century.

Census Bureau estimates show, however, that since 2003 the decline has reversed, and the population has inched upward.

Many of those coming to the city are young professionals and empty-nesters from the suburbs opting for the convenience of living in converted factories and offices.

"What's happened in St. Louis in the last five years is the center city has become a crown jewel rather than something for which we had to apologize," Fleming says.

A plan the city approved in December 1999 called for \$1.2 billion of investment downtown. Since 2000, more than \$3.5 billion has been poured into the area, says W. Thomas Reeves, executive director of Downtown Now, which oversees the redevelopment.

Money flows downtown

Since 2000, Reeves says, 1,700 apartments and condominiums have been built in the area, and 4,900 more are planned by 2008. Prices range from \$90,000 to \$900,000. Additionally, 26 restaurants have opened since 2004.

Other developments include:

► A \$50 million renovation of the 120-year-old post office. At least \$300 million in development is taking place in the square surrounding it.

► Several hotels have been built downtown during



By Tim A. Parker, Reuters

Where Cardinals play: Busch Stadium, opened in April, has a view of the 630-foot-tall Gateway Arch.

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(cont.)



By Tim A. Parker for USA TODAY

Neighborhood changing: Brad Fratello, with dog Sebastian, lives in a loft in downtown St. Louis. When he and his partner moved in, they had a view of abandoned buildings. Now, they see improvements every day.

the past five years, including the Renaissance Grand across the street from the city's convention center.

► Ballpark Village will sit next to the Cardinals' new Busch Stadium. The \$700 million project will have residential and office towers, plus bars and restaurants. Construction should begin by the end of the year and be completed by 2008.

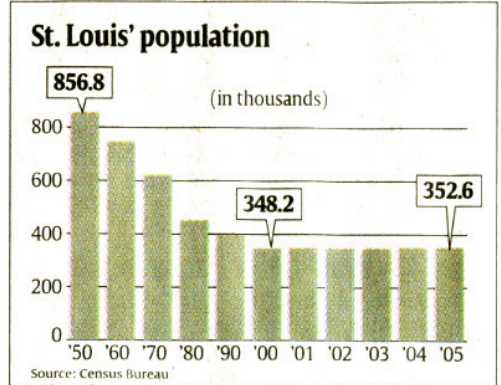
The resurgence is visible beyond downtown. Forest Park, one of the largest urban parks in the USA, underwent a \$94 million restoration completed in 2004. Lambert-St. Louis International Airport unveiled a \$1 billion expansion April 13.

Row houses in several neighborhoods are being refurbished, and new homes are rising.

McCree Town, a violent southside neighborhood that was filled with dilapidated housing, has been rechristened Botanical Heights, and people are lining up to buy new homes.

St. Louis still faces major problems. More jobs must be created, the public schools are troubled, and the riverfront should be upgraded, Mayor Francis Slay says.

Others worry that most African-Americans, who make up 53% of the population, and the city's working



class are not benefiting from the rebound. "That's the real challenge for the city," says Eric Vickers, 52, a community activist who is part of a group lobbying for minorities to be better represented among contractors and construction workers. "Is it going to develop in a way that's truly inclusive? Because otherwise I think we will see another plateau and stagnation."

City officials say they're striving for equity. Barbara Geisman, executive director for city development, says at least 20% of the homes built or renovated in the past five years are affordable housing. "We have people who stuck it out in the bad times, and you want them to be able to stay," she says.

After losing some corporate headquarters in recent years, the city hopes the presence of local institutions such as Washington University will help nurture new industries.

The city's can-do spirit is partly what compelled conductor David Robertson, 47, to become the music director of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and to buy a loft with his wife downtown.

"We felt there was something about the way the city is lifting itself up by its bootstraps, the way it's remaking itself," says Robertson, who became the symphony director in 2005. "We wanted to put our weight behind that and say, 'We were there when.'"