HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF BUILDING (RE)CONSTRUCTION IN OLIVETTE PARK, USA

Osman Ataman

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
oataman@uiuc.edu

Abstract

From 1959 to 1990, East St. Louis, Illinois deteriorated from an "All-American City" to a national symbol of urban blight. Located on the Mississippi River, the East St. Louis of today faces severe economic, social, and environmental problems. Nearly one-quarter of the city's work force is unemployed and about 40 percent of families are living below the poverty level. But East St. Louis was not always a distressed community. With strong ties to St. Louis and the surrounding region, East St. Louis once flourished as the country's second busiest railroad hub. Powerful economic and socio-political forces, as well as unfortunate historical circumstance, propelled the city into a downward spiral that drastically decreased the quality of life in East St. Louis. This paper presents the digital re-construction of the buildings and the analyses of the historical aspects of the housing construction and types in this area. Furthermore, it reports the survey and assessment of the quality of building stocks based on the revitalization plan that will provide some guidelines and suggestions for improvement, stability, and future needs.

Brief History

The settling of East St. Louis dates back to the 1790s. On the Illinois side of the Mississippi, just across from St. Louis, Piggot built a ferry landing and began transporting people across the river in 1797. With the road and river passages, people began settling this section of the country which later became known as the village of Illinoistown. By the mid-1800s, these settlers were producing most of the agricultural products consumed by St. Louis residents. Beginning in the 1830s, coal mined in the Belleville bluffs just east of Illinoistown was transported to St. Louis by ferry. In 1861, the people of Illinoistown voted to change the village's name to East St. Louis to symbolize the relationship with its Missouri neighbor.

Fig 1 - East St. Louis became the western terminus of the East

The completion of the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad from Cincinnati to the East St. Louis riverfront in 1857 marked the first of many eastern railroads to establish western terminals in East St. Louis. By the early 20th century, East St. Louis became the western terminus of most of the eastern railroad lines. Advantageous transportation access, abundant available land, cheap coal, and proximity to St. Louis, Chicago, and Indianapolis attracted industries to the East St. Louis area. The years between 1890 and 1930 were known as the "golden era" in the city's industrial history, during which East St. Louis established itself as a major meat-packing, metal-bending, and chemical producing center. These industries promised steady jobs at relatively high wages, attracting an influx of European immigrants and blacks from the South to East St. Louis. The population exploded from about 18,000 residents in 1890 to 75,000 in the 1920s, and it reached its peak in 1945, at 83,000 residents.

Despite its image as a booming industrial center in the early 1900s, certain factors started to develop future economic problems in East St. Louis. Several large plants have closed down or substantially reduced their labor force. Factors behind this trend include the desire to move closer to new market areas; the increasing utilization of truck transport rather than railroads, to reach consumer or producer markets; and the advantages new business operations at new locations rather than modernizing obsolescent old industrial facilities. Nine major industries left East St. Louis between 1950 and 1964, and many middle class families followed their employer's lead. This economic devastation of the area's industry trickled down to the area's retail and service sector and further eroded the faltering economy and population. In total, the city lost nearly 15,000 jobs and 40,000 people between 1960 and 1990. The number of firms in East St. Louis declined from 1,527 in 1967 to 383 in 1987. The city's tax base shrank from $560 million to $190 million between 1970 and 1990, forcing city officials to cut all but its most essential services.

Olivette Park

Once called "Quality Hill," where the region's wealthiest citizens lived, the neighborhood was severely impacted by the city's economic decline and today faces problems equal or worse in magnitude than the city as a whole. Olivette Park is a 70-block area located near the city's central business district.

Fig 2 – Olivette Park in East St. Louis

Between 1970 and 1990, many of the city's middle- and upper-income families fled Olivette Park and other East St. Louis neighborhoods for the suburbs. The neighborhood's population fell from 5,895 residents to 1,958 residents, while the percentage of families living below the poverty level increased from one-third to one-half. As a result of these changes, the number of occupied housing units in the neighborhood dropped from 1,580 to 595. The decreasing number of commercial and industrial tax payers in the city contributed to the erosion of the tax base and, consequently, the neighborhood's infrastructure, such as streets, sidewalks and parks, deteriorated. Today, many of the streets are missing curbs and sidewalks, more than half of the parcels of land in the neighborhood are vacant, and one-fifth of the structures in the neighborhood are candidates for demolition.

Zoning

Olivette Park is primarily residential, but also contains a mix of commercial, social service, industrial, religious, and public land uses. One-third of the parcels are residential, either single- or multi-family, and five percent are commercial or industrial. This provides residents with a mix of redevelopment options. In addition, there is a surplus of vacant land that could be used for redevelopment. According to the physical condition data, more than half of the parcels in the neighborhood are vacant. The future viability of the neighborhood is dependent upon finding creative and profitable uses for the substantial amount of vacant land.

Land Use	Number of Parcels	Percent
Single Family Residential	402	24%
Multi-Family Residential (1-4 units)	147	9%
Multi-Family Residential (5+ units)	17	1%
Retail/Wholesale	56	3%
Industrial/Warehouse/Utilities/Transport	27	2%
Parks/Schools/Community Garden	60	3%
Social Service/Government/Health Care	32	2%
Church/Religious Facility	20	1%
Mixed Use	31	2%
Vacant	880	53%

Fig 3a,b – Current Land Use

Quality of Building Stock

Olivette Park contains an impressive stock of residential and commercial building structures. Sixty percent of the homes in the neighborhood were constructed with solid brick or stone attests to the overall high quality of homes. These structures have largely withstood the test of time, as more than 75 percent of the structures in the neighborhood were rated in good or fair condition in the physi-

cal condition survey. The neighborhood contains many large, historic homes, and there has been an increasing interest in historic preservation in Olivette Park. While many of the historic homes in the neighborhood are currently vacant, close to 30 percent are suitable for rehabilitation. Restoring these old homes would preserve the historic character of the neighborhood while providing new housing opportunities.
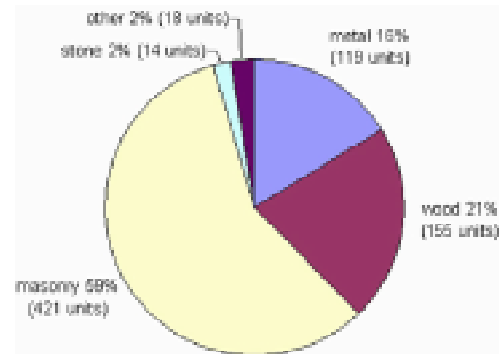

Fig 4 – Exterior Building Materials

Housing

Olivette Park experienced a dramatic decrease in the overall number of housing units from 1970 to 1990, as well as the number of occupied housing units. Both the number of housing units and the number of occupied housing units in the neighborhood decreased by nearly 60 percent in those two decades, according to the U.S. Census. Remaining Olivette Park homeowners spend a disproportionate amount of their income on mortgage and housing-related expenses (50% in average). In East St. Louis, on the other hand, homeowners spend about one-third of their income, and homeowners in St. Clair County spend about one-fourth of their income on mortgage and housing-related expenses. Renters in Olivette Park also spend more of their income on rent than those in the city and county, spending 27 percent of their income on rent in Olivette Park in 1990, compared to 17 percent in East St. Louis and 13 percent in St. Clair County.

Fig 5a, b – Housing Examples in Olivette Park

Fig 5c – Housing Examples in Olivette Park

These high housing costs also often prevent owners from spending money on routine maintenance and improvements, which further erodes the value of the housing stock. A portion of these high housing-related expenses are accounted for by the high property tax rate in East St. Louis. The total property tax rate for FY 1993 was 13.4673 per $100 of assessed valuation. Despite efforts of state and local government to reduce the property tax rate, it remains one of the highest in the state, due to the city's modest tax base.

Dilapidated and Dangerous Buildings

According to a building condition survey of the neighborhood, at least 83 parcels of land in the neighborhood contain derelict structures. Taking into account that some of these buildings occupy more than one parcel of land, it was determined that 68 structures need to be demolished. At least one-fifth of the structures in the neighborhood are unoccupied. These derelict structures represent one of the most serious concerns of neighborhood residents surveyed. Despite the creation of a new city demolition program, more than 80 percent of residents interviewed rated the city's demolition efforts as poor or totally inadequate.

Fig 6a,b – Unoccupied Building Structures in Olivette Park

These kind of derelict structures not only pose a public safety threat on their own, but also threaten adjacent conforming to code and occupied properties. Furthermore, they often function as havens for illegal activity and cause problems for nearby residents.

Digital Re-Construction

The analysis of an urban area requires a careful examination of the elements, which form that area, and the forces that work upon it (Alkhoven 1991). This examination is important because any study in architectural history is best when contextual and can be put in a formal framework only if the interpretations are done from the past to the present. The transformation of an urban area can only be studied in relation to its past for the future. In other words, we need to learn from the past in order to design for the future.

In a like manner, historical analysis study of Olivette Park is best accomplished in relation to its context, East St. Louis city plan. The characterization of the city as a network with individual works of architecture might best be addressed by looking at the individual work in relation to its place in the city's network. Both the architecture/plan and history/context relationships can be examined through mapping. The comparison of these things through time however would be best expressed by using a layered map that gives a simultaneous view of the city buildings' reconstruction through time. History and architecture in their respective contexts could in a layered map be carefully examined as changing elements.
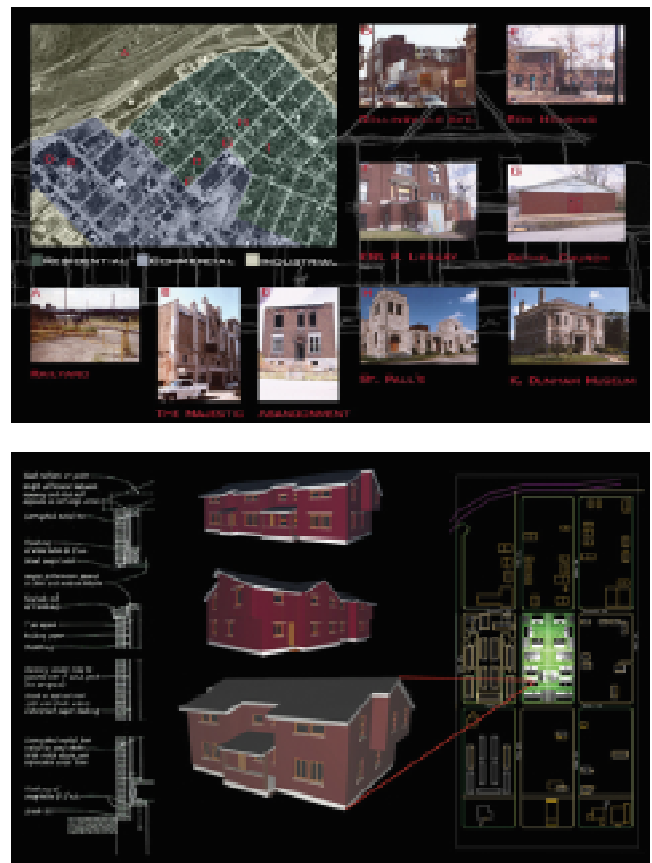

Fig 7, 8 – Organization and Analyses of Buildings for Digital Re-Construction

This is an on-going project where the data collection and model-building are still continuing. I believe that the organization and utilization of the non-visual information in an interactive way can make it possible to analyze the historical development of an urban set-

ting. Furthermore, the creation of a digital environment where different interest groups such as facility planners, architectural designers, researchers provide various diverse information may result new directions for theoretical and applied research.
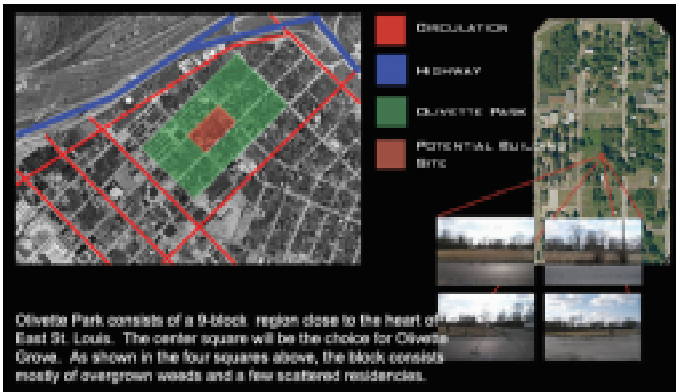

Fig 9 – Organization and Analyses of Buildings for Digital Re-Construction

Acknowledgements

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