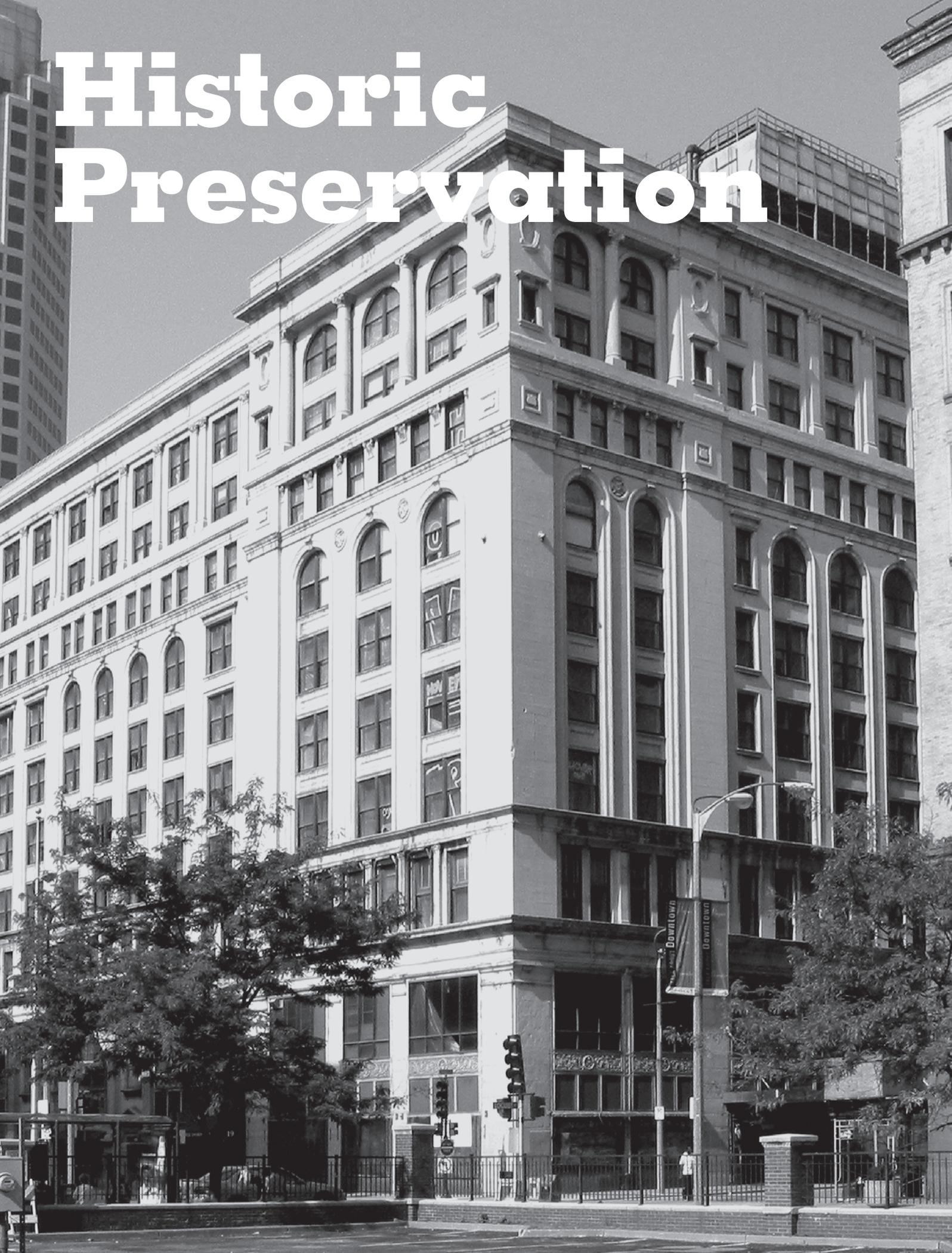


# Historic Preservation





# Paving Paradise: The Century Building Debacle and the Future of Historic Preservation

It isn't every day that the National Trust for Historic Preservation steps into a local development debate with this advice: turn a massive marble-clad downtown building into a thousand-unit parking lot

IN THE LATE-NIGHT HOURS OF OCTOBER 20, 2004, bulldozers began demolishing one of the finest buildings in downtown St. Louis. Fearful that an injunction might halt his pet project, Mayor Francis Slay took a page out of the Richard Daley playbook and ordered crews to commence work under cover of night. By the morning, efforts to save the Century Building were moot. The damage had been done.

The demolition of the Century Building resulted from a perfect storm of bad decisions, and the episode offers a case study of what can go wrong in historic preservation despite decades of accumulated wisdom in best practices. For most preservationists, the destruction of irreplaceable pieces of the historic urban fabric is unacceptable unless it clears the way for exceptional new architecture worthy of future preservation efforts. Local and state officials should act as stewards of their built heritage, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation should provide guidance and leadership to promote innovative adaptive reuse projects.

In the case of the Century Building, these roles, responsibilities, and best practices were ignored. City officials lined up behind a tragically short-sighted demolition scheme while squelching viable alternatives to appease developers. Demolition made way not for exceptional new architecture, but rather for a bland, unnecessary, one-thousand-unit parking garage. Most shockingly, officials at the National Trust—looked to for leadership in preservation efforts—provided the financial support to make the project possible, betraying their own long-term constituency. The ramifications of this reversal for historic preservation—and for the cities salvaged through its practice—appear grim.

## Fracturing the Civic Landscape

Anyone who has been to St. Louis knows two things about it: it is a city rich in architectural

heritage, and it has destroyed that heritage with reckless abandon. St. Louis is renowned for its superb trove of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century architecture. In the decades following World War II, however, the city lurched into decline, suffering catastrophic losses in population, jobs, and capital. Land values plummeted through the 1970s and 1980s, and the reduced tax base left the city with few options but to defer maintenance of infrastructure. Desperate to compete with automobile-oriented suburban malls and office parks, city officials used urban renewal funds to demolish superb old buildings for surface parking lots.

The news was not all dismal. Beginning in the early 1960s, citizens coalesced for an all-out fight to save the Wainwright Building, Louis Sullivan's terra-cotta-clad masterpiece situated in the heart of the city's business district. Declared a National Landmark in 1968, the Wainwright Building catapulted historic preservation into the public eye, and St. Louisans took a fresh look at their built heritage. In the 1970s, preservation enthusiasts began to make use of federal—and later, state—tax credits to finance the rehabilitation of houses, shops, and whole neighborhoods. By 2005, the Landmarks Association had facilitated the listing of hundreds of individual buildings on the National Register, and thousands more through inclusion in historic districts. St. Louis had emerged as one of the leading cities in the national preservation movement.

Despite their best efforts, however, preservation activists have regularly seen their labors in one neighborhood counteracted by large-scale demolition in another. The city's downtown has been particularly gutted. The Washington Avenue Loft District has had some improvements, but the downtown as a whole retains a listless quality, drowning in a dull sea of surface lots and parking garages. Faced with their city's fragmentation, St. Louisans cherish the great public buildings still standing. These structures connect them to a rapidly disappearing past and represent options for adaptive reuse

*Previous page: The Century Building, prior to demolition. Alan Brunettin ©2004. This page: Construction of the parking lot on the site of the Century Building. Photo taken July 2, 2006. Alan Brunettin ©2006.*

in the future. With indications that St. Louis is now adding population for the first time since 1950, the availability of unique, beautiful, solid buildings is emerging as the city's foremost advantage.

### **Anatomy of a Preservation Fight**

When the Downtown Now! Coalition released its Downtown Plan in 1999, there was reason for optimism. Noting the ugly history of demolition and fragmentation behind them, planners clearly recognized the path forward was in adaptive reuse of the city's remaining historic buildings. Unfortunately, the Francis Slay administration quickly betrayed the vision laid out in the Downtown Plan and in 2001 began to work feverishly for the demolition of one of the city's greatest commercial structures.

The buildings under fire were the Old Post Office (OPO) and the Century Building. Designed by federal architect Alfred Mullet and constructed between 1877 and 1884, the Old Post Office is a somber pile of grey limestone in the Second Empire style. It served as the city's main postal station until 1937. Across the street from the OPO stood the Century Building, designed by the firm of Raeder, Coffin, and Crocker and completed in 1896. With its massive Beaux-Arts façade, the Century was one of the few remaining marble-clad buildings in the United States. But for preservationists, the Century's real value was its part in an ensemble of superb buildings, comprising a remarkably intact, early-twentieth-century civic landscape in downtown St. Louis.

Recognizing the buildings' potential for adaptive reuse, the city's Downtown Plan provided explicit directions to reject all future demolitions within a three-block radius of the OPO. But the Slay administration soon defied the recommendations of its own committee. In 2001, city officials announced that they had chosen a development team—DESCO, Inc. and DFC, Inc.—to renovate the OPO as

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the new home for the Missouri Eastern District Court of Appeals and an extension of the suburban campus of Webster University. They would demolish the Century Building to erect a parking garage. According to officials in the Slay administration, the future tenants demanded adjacent parking "within view" of the OPO. The decision to "sacrifice" the Century to this end was a "tough choice," they said, but was the only way the project could work.

Preservationists didn't buy it. The Landmarks Association of St. Louis—the group that had originally saved the Old Post Office from the scrap heap in the 1960s—found the idea that the Century Building had to be destroyed to save the OPO patently untrue. The adjacent area was already in redevelopment. Viable alternatives did exist, and reputable developers advanced efforts to save the Century, but the Slay administration squelched them. The city had chosen its developers and would not budge.

To seasoned preservationists, such intransigence on the part of city officials was a routine feature of St. Louis political culture. But what transformed the Century Building

demolition from a local battle into a national scandal was the role of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Distraught over the city's actions, St. Louis preservationists looked to their national allies for support. After all, the National Trust's own advertising asserts that "No one looks back fondly on the time they spent in a parking garage." Preservationists naturally assumed the Trust stood by its words.

When first confronted with the DESCO-DFC plan, the Trust unequivocally opposed the sacrifice of the Century Building. In a January 2001 letter to the Missouri General Services Administration (owner of the OPO), Midwest Trust Director Royce Yeater challenged the parties to find a new parking solution. Yeater concluded, "preservationists never like the prospect of trading one potentially historic building for another." Besides, alternative parking provisions

abound in downtown St. Louis, with ten underused parking facilities in the ten blocks surrounding the Old Post Office.

Like all demolition schemes that involve federal money and historic properties, the OPO plan triggered a routine Section 106 review in court. During the hearings, Landmarks Association representatives argued that the developers should be barred from receiving tax credits because the project included the demolition of a building listed on the National Register. The city and the developers countered that the demolition of the Century Building and the redevelopment of the Old Post Office were technically separate projects. Since the tax credits would only fund the renovations of the OPO, the city was therefore free to dispense with the Century Building as it saw fit. Though a cynical political maneuver, it fell just within the law. The courts ruled in favor of demolition, and the project was clear to proceed.

### **A Betrayal of Trust**

Throughout 2003 and into 2004, preservationists in St. Louis stepped up efforts to save the Century Building. Unable to sway

city officials and DESCO-DFC from their single-minded devotion to demolition, preservationists turned to their old allies at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. They were shocked, however, to find that the Trust had become complicit in the scheme.

In June of 2004, the Landmarks Association discovered that the National Trust had decided to provide gap financing for the project: \$6.9 million in tax credits. Not only had the Trust refused to intervene in support of its old allies; it was actively working against them, backing a local redevelopment coalition that was openly hostile to the local preservation movement. As policy analyst Kevin Priestner put it, the Trust's move constituted an "egregious act of mission drift."

St. Louis preservation advocates were bewildered. "For the National Trust to capitulate to the expediency of the moment simply makes no sense," noted Landmarks Association Executive Director Carolyn Toft in a St. Louis Post-Dispatch article. Toft charged that National Trust president Richard Moe's actions undercut two decades of close collaboration and mutual support between local preservationists and the National Trust. After all, Toft explained, "we know the building, we know the neighborhood, we know the downtown."

Over 3,500 preservationists around the country signed an online petition in protest. Many resigned their membership in the National Trust, charging that it had abdicated its responsibility not only to St. Louis preservationists, but also to its national constituency. In his comments on the petition, Michael Tomlan, director of the Historic Preservation program at Cornell University, reflects the exasperation of long-term Trust members: "The project violates everything the National Trust is supposed to stand for. They have gone terribly wrong."

The Trust closed ranks in response to the national outcry. Moe released a statement that demolition of the Century for a parking garage was the key to revitalizing the entire OPO district. St. Louis preservationists contended that Moe was relying solely on the assertion of Mayor Slay, the very person most zealous about demolition. Most cynically, Moe parroted the city's earlier argument that the National Trust's award of \$6.9 million in tax credits would only pay for the renovation of the Old Post Office, not demolition of the

*Top: With a wrecking ball poised above its corner, the Century Building waits. Bottom: A local architectural salvage company at work, with permission to remove the historical ornamentation from the Century Building prior to demolition. Both images by Alan Brunettin ©2004.*



Century Building. Preservationists around the country, according to St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist Robert Duffy, regarded this last point as transparent semantics: everyone knew full well that the Trust provided the crucial piece of gap funding for a project that included demolishing an historic treasure.

Finally, Moe claimed that since neither the mayor of St. Louis nor the Old Post Office developers exhibited the political will to locate the parking garage elsewhere, he had no alternative but to support the demolition plan. Opponents countered that the Trust also lacked political will, as it refused to challenge a redevelopment scheme that so clearly contravened the principles and best practices of historic preservation. The Trust, they argued, could have easily demanded retention of the Century as a condition of the tax credit award. But Trust officials were singularly focused on saving Alfred Mullet's Landmark Old Post Office at the Century's expense.

The best efforts of preservationists in St. Louis and around the nation were to no avail. DESCO-DFC moved ahead with the demolition of the Century Building, and once again the city of St. Louis lost a piece of itself that can never be replaced.

### **Historic Reckoning**

The decision by the National Trust to oppose local preservationists and to back the city's redevelopment scheme is one of the most significant in the history of the organization. The Trust's actions left the Landmarks Association high and dry, setting the local preservation movement back twenty years.

Virtually any other major city would have treasured the Century as an opportunity for innovative adaptive reuse. Portfolios of historic buildings are fueling the current renaissance of cities like Boston, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, and Providence. In Providence, for example, the city government has committed substantial resources to historic preservation and has established progressive cultural and housing policies that encourage socio-economic diversity. In fact, as urban journalist Roberta Gratz argues, most cities today view parking shortages as a sign that their downtowns are on the upswing.

But St. Louis is a city mired in old ways of doing business. Still in shock over its cata-

strophic population loss, city officials have been slow to move beyond the strategy developed in the 1960s and 1970s of competing with the suburbs by providing ample parking in its dense urban core. The Slay administration in particular has demonstrated an outmoded preference for prioritizing short-term real estate deals over long-term planning and stewardship.

Whether or not one cares about the Century Building as a unique architectural accomplishment or as part of the historic urban fabric of St. Louis, its demolition sets a dangerous precedent. By funding the OPO project, the National Trust has clearly signaled its departure from its original mandate, and that it is now in the business of backing local redevelopment schemes however witless, myopic, and ill-conceived. Worst of all, the actions of the Trust have emboldened opponents of historic preservation and left the movement vulnerable to serious attack. The question now is, if preservationists can no longer trust the Trust, who will be the advocate of last resort? ●

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*Opposite page: photo by William Herman Rau, January 21, 1896. No. 534. The Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection.*