Archive and Artifact: Building A New Institution

NATIONAL BUILDING ARTS CENTER

Mike Jackson, FAIA
Board President, National Building Arts Center
A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

International Council of Museum (ICOM), 2022
The National Building Arts Center wants to tell the full story of building culture.

We aim to lead a new discussion about the American built environment—one in which architectural history opens into a holistic understanding of material, craft, labor, design and sociopolitical context. The material culture of American architecture long has been defined through study of aesthetic innovation divorced from a wider understanding of how building technology depends upon invention, economic and political factors, and inherited knowledge.

We aim to revive traditions in material craft, not simply to conserve historic buildings, but also to revive these crafts in construction today. We aim to present the story of architecture’s allied arts, once indispensable to its achievements, but rarely taught in school or mentioned in academic texts today. The reduction of built heritage to lists of styles and designers has robbed us of a richness in understanding how the built environment came to be, how its contemporary conservation challenges can be solved and how we are responsible for its future. We want to widen, not narrow, what people see in the American built environment.

nationalbuildingarts.org
Sterling Steel Casting Co., Sauget IL

Acquired in 2005
NBAC Campus
America’s largest architectural collection
Demolition in St. Louis MO
‘Urban archaeologist’ tries to save city’s heritage

By Tim Bryant
United Press International

ST. LOUIS — Larry Giles, who loves St. Louis’ spectacular old 19th century buildings, has made a business out of saving from the wreckers the ornate decorations on these structures and selling them so they can be enjoyed again.

He haunts City Hall in search of approved demolition permits and over the years has become acquainted with about all of the city’s building wreckers. His legwork pays off when he learns of buildings about to have a losing encounter with the headache ball.

Giles, a self-taught "urban archaeologist," says unless he recovers the unique terra-cotta sculptures, cast iron building fronts, limestone friezes, columns, elaborate stonework and ornamental brickwork from many 19th-century buildings, they will end up on the scrap heap of what until as recently as 20 years ago was the city’s rich architectural heritage.

Some of the artifacts he sells to a rapidly growing number of home rehabilitators, commercial redevelopers or, with some reluctance, restaurant owners who might want a 100-year-old stone lion to stand guard over a salad bar.

It pays the bills, he says and demands: "What's the alternative? To have it destroyed?"

Giles, 35, stores much of what he retrieves from buildings scheduled for demolition. He is the founder of St. Louis Architectural Art Co., which, for a small company, has enormous assets in what amounts to a museum of 19th-century architecture.

A seven-story cast-iron facade, the largest of 40 he owns, is worth $100,000, he said.

St. Louis in its turn-of-the-century heyday — the era of its 1904 World’s Fair — saw the construction of thousands of architecturally significant buildings. To preservationists, St. Louis is famed for its masonry.

In Giles’ garage, a storefront, a large warehouse and a jam-packed outdoor lot — carefully stacked and cataloged — is stored a large portion of the city’s dismantled past.

Twenty-thousand of the city’s buildings have been torn down in the last two decades, Giles said. The pace of destruction has slowed, but Giles rejects the notion that St. Louis is discovering its rich past.

"It’s probably safe to say there is more demolition of historic buildings here than any city in the country," he said. "People in historical architecture who study this town become so depressed. You can’t be a resident of St. Louis and not see the city coming down around you."

At the very least, St. Louis should begin to appreciate the work of Winkle Terra Cotta Co. and other firms that made the city renowned for its building ornamentation, Giles said.

Better than that, he thinks St. Louisans should preserve their city's history of iron and masonry.

But it is commercial expedience that decides how long a building shall stand, Giles said.

"The accountants determine the tenure of buildings," he said. "It’s all commercial."

In contrast, the soft-spoken Giles considers the labor of 19th century builders more art than craftwork to be casually discarded.

"It's beautiful. It's high art. People like permanence in architecture. It's a stabilizing influence in the environment. It's the integrity of the material. When I take down these damn things I see that it has the same structural integrity as when it was put up."

"You would think St. Louis would learn from other cities."

Larry Giles sits among some of the ornate building decorations he has saved from buildings being destroyed in St. Louis.

Larry Giles, NBAC Founder, 1947 - 2021
Marquette Hotel, St. Louis MO. 1906-1988

Architect
Barnett, Haynes, Barrett

Production
Winkle Terra Cotta Co.
St. Louis MO
Marquette Hotel, St. Louis MO. 1906-1988
Ambassador Building, St. Louis MO 1925-1996
Largest terra cotta recovery project in the U.S.
Ambassador Bldg. Cornice Recovery Project
Terra Cotta. Storage
Recovery Project Types

Apartment Buildings
Banks
Churches
Commercial Buildings
Hotels
Hospitals
Houses
Office Buildings
Schools
Theaters
Wholesale Buildings

Gilbert House, 1911
New York NY
NBAC
Brick Yard
Unglazed terra cotta display panel
Cast Iron Recovery Project

1827 Cass Ave, St. Louis. 1884

NBAC Collection 062-7.0.4
Cast Iron yard at the NBAC

200 different building sets from Small Commercial buildings
NBAC Public Tours. – The Stone Yard

Indiana Limestone
NBAC Tour – The Cast Iron Yard
The cast iron column origins on Main Street?

New Orleans, LA. Granite and cast iron storefront
The NBAC trade catalog collection online 2022

Paul Davey at the Book Scanner

Paul Davey and Emery Cox review the trade catalog collection
The Building Technology Heritage Library (BTHL) is primarily a collection of American and Canadian, pre-1964 architectural trade catalogs, house plan books and technical building guides. Trade catalogs are an important primary source to document past design and construction practices. These materials can aid in the preservation and conservation of older structures as well as other research goals.
Union Iron and Foundry, 1890s

Full catalog available on the Building Technology Heritage Library
Duplicate items for sale

Books on Ebay

Terra Cotta Lion

Wainwright Building
Floor Tile

https://www.ebay.com/usr/nationalbuildingarts
National Building Arts Center

Visit us online: www.nationalbuildingarts.org
Public tours – First Sat. Each Month - 11AM
Thank You

Mike Jackson, FAIA.
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