

Neighborhood Place and Community.

History, Social Capital, Religion, and Meaning in
The Hill District of Saint Louis, Missouri.

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Introduction

In the built environment, a sense of “place” seems to be a simple concept. It is a quality at the different scales of neighborhood, corridor, center, town, and city that almost everyone recognizes as important. Its more apparent aspects (defined broadly to include all the modifications made by people to nature) lead to more complex layers of history, culture, work, leisure, domestic life, home, religion, social organization, and change (loss and renewal), moving from the more apparent and easily grasped to a rich depth and complexity of meaning that fully reflects humanity.

This article focuses on an Italian-American neighborhood called The Hill in St. Louis, Missouri. Through this focus it tells a more generally meaningful story about the way community can be reflected in the built environment. Modern life increasingly embodies mobility; change; specialization; material possessions; and impersonal economic, commercial, and service ties mediated by formal organizations. The Hill neighborhood informs us about community in a very different mold, sending a message about what largely has been lost in the United States especially since the 1940s. In tandem with the trend of modern urban society, the desire

for community has grown stronger across the country.¹ The Hill contains a model for creating a more complex, rewarding, functional, and satisfying future.

Overview

This article describes the built environment on The Hill and demonstrates that *there is no difference* between the physical environment there and residents’ history, culture, religious beliefs, and social organization. Their history is reflected in the physical environment through the landscaping; through building materials such as brick, terrazzo, and terra cotta; through house form; the Italian architectural vocabulary of arch, pillar, and plaster; the neighborhood piazza; and institutions like Reggio Travel Agency; and Saint Ambrose Catholic Church. Faith and religious beliefs wrap tightly around history and social organization. They are manifested in the home as temple, the yard religious shrines, processions displaying the patron saints of the Italian villages from which residents’ immigrated; and, again, in Saint Ambrose Church. Although it may be unusual to discuss faith in an urban planning article, it is not so strange at all. Eliade said that, “Religious man’s desire to live *in the sacred* is in

fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality . . . to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion".²

The concept of social capital is key to understanding what occurred on The Hill. Social capital is the network of acquaintances, friendships, and kinship ties in a place. Within this network are embedded systems of values, norms, and attitudes, behavior, and social organization, transmitted through a socialization process, sentiments of trust, and group cohesion. Social capital is manifested in the ability of the community to identify problems, set goals, organize to address them, and undertake successful action. Social capital is dynamic: it is enhanced by stability and efficacious action and it is diminished by social isolation, fear, and ineffective or absent social organization. Many people relate social capital to DeToqueville's description of life in colonial America. The practice was identified in modern sociology by Putnam in his study of community life in Italy.³ For Italian-Americans in St. Louis, social capital is represented by the Societa Unione e Fratellanza and by numerous mutual aide societies. On The Hill, social capital is reflected in the built environment especially by the Northern Italian-American Mercantile Company ("Big Club Hall"), Riggio Travel Agency, and Saint Ambrose Church.

Lastly, this article addresses social change on The Hill, in St. Louis, and in urban areas across the United States. Social change on The Hill occurs through shifts in meaning, association, and social values from generation to generation. Change in St. Louis and in the country, unfortunately, frequently relates to the destruction of older neighborhoods similar to The Hill, as urban areas were abandoned wholesale by residents, businesses, and government agencies. The story of The Hill carries a poignant message about the loss of place experienced by millions of other people from 1950 to 1990 especially. Change on The Hill is also a story of renewal and becoming as younger generations have begun to reinvest in the neighborhood. The article concludes with some comments about the future of The Hill and of other urban neighborhoods like it.

Brick by brick, planting by planting, the built environment of The Hill manifests family, struggle, community, faith, and history. Although no article can do it justice, it is appropriate to write this story to inform and encourage others' work, and to shine some light on its value to the descendants of those who created it. The Hill is very significant, yet in the zen view, it is "nothing special". Suzuki says about this: "It is a kind of mystery that for people who have no experience of enlightenment, enlightenment is something wonderful. But if they attain it, it is nothing."⁴

Historical Background and Current Condition

In order to understand the meaning of a place, it is necessary to know its history and that of the people who live there. The Hill was built from faith, hard work, and social capital. Immigration from Italy to the United States was caused by the economic and social transformation of Italy. Industrialization began there about 1850 and was strongest in the north near Milan, breaking down the feudal “usufruct” system of mutual responsibility tied to the land. Prior to this, people living in and around Milan, the region from which most of the early Hill immigrants came, largely were agricultural laborers in the service of the families of land-owning “aristocrati”.⁵ During the second half of the 19th century, workers separated from the land became part of an international “guest worker” migration. Italian workers, called “rondini” (swallows), sought work in Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Great Britain, Ireland, the Balkans, Tunis, Algiers, Egypt, Morocco, Brazil, Argentina, and the United States.⁶

By 1848, there were about 50 Italians from the Genoa area living in an area near the Mississippi River levee in St. Louis.⁷ The social organization of this community continuously incorporated ever-increasing immigration from Italy until restrictive federal laws pushed the

“golden door” nearly shut in the 1920s. From the beginning, the Italian community exhibited strong social capital. The Societa Unione e Fratellanza was established in 1866 with the following mission: “The scope of this Society is not only for the purpose of aiding its members in case of sickness or accident, but also to bring about a closer alliance between all Italians as if they were only of one family and promoting the general welfare of the many as well as of the individual”.⁸

The Italian population in St. Louis grew from 879 in 1880 to 3,784 by 1890. After 1890 emigration from Italy was mostly from the southern part of the country, and this group settled first in “Little Italy” just north of the downtown and afterwards in a second neighborhood a little farther west. Father Caesar Spigardi held the first Catholic services for the community in 1899 in borrowed facilities. By 1902 he had founded two Italian churches, Our Lady Help of Christians and Saint Charles Borromeo.

The rapid economic expansion of St. Louis and the United States created the demand for clay products including bricks, roofing, tile, terra cotta, and pipe, which was met by large deposits discovered in the mid-1800s at the base of what was to become The Hill.⁹ The utilization of the clay deposits was enabled by successive extensions of the Missouri Pacific Railroad in the second half of the 1800s.¹⁰ In 1890, there were 12 Italians

living in The Hill, a number that grew to some 75 families by 1900.¹¹ At the end of the century, there were more than a dozen clay mines and brick, tile, pipe, and terra cotta factories at the northern edge of the Hill.¹² The demand for labor was met at first by workers from the villages around Milan in the Po Valley, such as Inveruno, Marcalo, and Cuggiono. A clay fabrication industry already existed there, based on fine local clay deposits and an artisanal tradition extending to the Romans, using techniques learned from the Phoenicians.¹³

Immigrants to The Hill embarked from European ports like La Havre, France, via the steerage of ships built especially to accommodate the worker migration. One of these ships, the *Gascogne*, is shown in Figure 1. Immigrants referred to these cramped and unhealthy conveyances as “cattle boats”.¹⁴ After arriving on The Hill, the work for many in the clay mines was grueling and dangerous, with 12 hour shifts, six day work-weeks, and wages based on tons extracted. A 1907 newspaper article relates a reporter’s first hand report of a tour of the mines: “Half-naked bodies, bending forward and backward [working picks to remove the clay], seemed as shadows in the feeble light” in a mine that had been the “scene of several calamities, owing to the loose condition of the soil which shifts from time to time with a weight too great for the wooden supports”.¹⁵ In the early days, workers brought their own picks and shovels to the job, and there were no provisions for accident insurance or workers’ compensation. The clay mines and kilns operated there for 40 years, 3 shifts a day, until the deposits played out in the 1940s.¹⁶ Before the end of the century, The Hill’s industrial base was expanded by

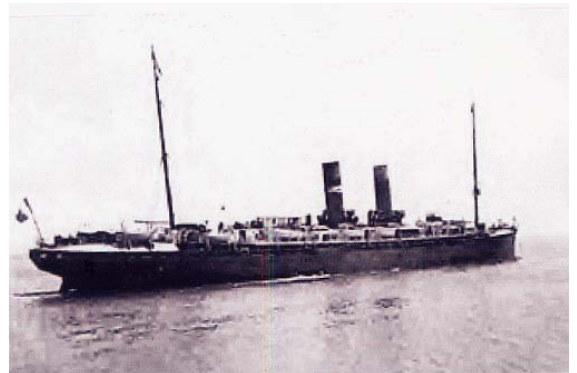


Fig. 1. S.S. Gascogne



Fig. 2. Kiln workers

St. Louis Smelter and Refinery (mid-1800s) and Banner Iron Works and Carondolet Foundry (1890).¹⁷

Few photos of work life appear in the albums of local families. But as dark as were the working conditions, community life on The Hill virtually exploded with vitality from about 1900 to the Great Depression in 1929. That is what the family photo albums record.

Over time, the workers brought their wives, families, and village “paisani” to The Hill. The first major institution there, demonstrating social capital, was the Northern Italian-American Merchantile Company (later operating “Big Club Hall”) begun in 1893 and serving as a mutual aid society.¹⁸ Father Caesar Spigardi started Saint Ambrose Catholic Church, named for the patron saint of Milan, in 1903 and Saint Ambrose School in 1906.

The 1908 Saint Ambrose parish census showed a very rapid population increase with nearly 3,000 total residents, and men outnumbered women by six to one.¹⁹ Wives soon followed their working husbands, and in one year records show that half the adult women on The Hill gave birth.²⁰ Most of The Hill’s population was young in the first two decades from 1890, only 2% were over 50 years of age in 1910.²¹

The Hill came alive after 6 pm on work days. The St. Louis Globe-Democrat reported: “Women in bright-colored dress, highly ornamented, with wide band bracelets and red and yellow turbans, [in conversation] with a lover or husband returning from the mine.” People played violins, mandolins, and guitars and sang on the steps of their homes. Games of cards and bocci were held and the aches of the work day dulled by beer and home made wine. A local resident staged

folk tales, stories, and plays with stringed puppets on a vacant lot near the church.²²

The community was organized according to the villages in Italy from which residents came, represented by the villages' patron saints, like Saint Teresa, Our Lady of Mt Carmel, Saint Dominic, Saint Rosalia, and Saint Sebastian.²³ On the feast days, society members would carry statues of the honored saints on their shoulders through the streets of the neighborhood. As the figures passed, on-lookers shouted "Viva" and attached money and jewelry to the statues as a contribution to the society. At certain corners, the procession halted briefly and prayers were said. Once the saint was returned to Saint Ambrose Church, the celebration would continue with food, drink, song, and dancing. The day ended with fireworks.

The 1920s saw the flowering of The Hill community in many ways. The first immigrants from northern Italy were joined by those from the south. Absent mortgage financing, Italian workers built small but vibrant homes called "shotguns". Early worker tenements were replaced by small brick, single family detached, duplex, and four-plex houses, reflecting residents' disfavor of renting.²⁴ Nearly 1,000 new homes were built on the Hill between 1900 and 1920.²⁵ By this time, there were literally scores of small local businesses serving this relatively small neighborhood: grocery stores, confectionaries, bakeries, shoe repair, taverns, cleaners, auto service, hardware stores, and so on, encouraged by the geographic and social isolation of the area located at the edge of the city and by reliance on the Italian language by first generation immigrants. The neighborhood was platted but

lacked paved streets, utilities, and gas and electric service until the 1920s.²⁶ A number of Italian-owned manufacturing firms also had achieved success by this time including John Volpi and Company (1907), Ravarino & Freschi Spaghetti (1914), Blue Ridge Bottling (1914), Southwest Bank (1920), and St. Louis Macaroni Manufacturing (1926).²⁷

A crisis took place on January 20, 1921 that led to a course of community action that would ultimately unify The Hill in a deep, complex, and highly meaningful way. In that date, the first Saint Ambrose church, a colonial-style wooden frame building, burned to the ground. In three days, Fr. Lucian Carotti, the rector of Saint Ambrose, called the community together (“rich man, laborer, business man, or property owners”) at the Northern Italian-American Mercantile building.²⁸ Residents of The Hill resolved to rebuild the church as rapidly as possible but also in a way that reflected the permanence and success of the community. By February, the architect Angelo Corrubia presented a drawing of the new church to the community. In September, excavation of the church basement began, to be completed the following March. The new rector, Fr. Giulio Giovannini, tirelessly promoted its development. Stained glass windows, the Stations of the Cross and large pillars were purchased with donations from wealthy parishioners and religious, social, and cultural societies. Former villagers from Cuggiono, Inveruno, Marcallo, and Casteltermini donated money to purchase the bronze bells in honor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, Saint Teresa, Saint Nazarius, and Saint Vincent Ferrer, their patron saints. All the people of The Hill supported the purchase of the largest



Fig. 3. First generation



Fig. 4. Second generation

bell, dedicated to Saint Ambrose. Church members from the different Italian villages also purchased statues of their patron saints. Many neighborhood craftsmen and laborers helped construct the church.

A few days before the church's dedication, eight large chests arrived from Turin with "resplendent ostensorium, chalice, and ciborium in gilded silver, various complete services of candle holders, lamps, and chandeliers" and "sacred vestment of every color, true works of art . . . being all embroidered by hand in silk, gold, and silver." These items were paid by Fr. Giovannini with his entire savings.

On June 13, 1926, the work was virtually complete, "the mountain [The Hill, "La Montaña"] resounded with the festive ringing of the five new bells" and the First Communion of hundreds of children took place. The blessing of the bells that day brought an immense crowd. On the next day, after priests had sung litanies and psalms, the church doors were opened so that members of the parish could enter and join in mass said by a delegate from the Pope. Bells pealed as the neatly dressed throng entered: the church glowed with vestments from Italy, the banners of the many community sodalities arrayed in the front, the patron saints from the little villages in Italy stood in niches along the two walls.

This moment was replete with ritual and meaning, unifying life in Italy with that in America, reifying the small villages in Italy and the families and friends left behind. The sacred nature of home was merged with that of the temple and spread meaning through the settlement.²⁹

At the dedication, Fr. Giovannini said: "we shared our difficulties, our sacrifices, our labor and with God's blessing,

we succeeded in completing an undertaking, which humanly speaking, was believed to be impossible".³⁰ Consider the special situation of this community of immigrants in light of this insight: "The lure of sacred space . . . is strongest among those who are homeless, alienated, estranged".³¹ The consecration of Saint Ambrose allowed the religious residents of The Hill to "found the world, and to live in a real sense", creating a sphere of sacred space over the entire community.³²

The exuberant quality of the 1920s quickly gave way to a spare and sober period of the Great Depression and World War II. The dense network of social relations and informal helping provided good service to residents during the depression era and war years that followed. It was reported that "according to several reports of the St. Louis Community Council, [The Hill] has shown for a long period of time one of the lowest percentages of all the . . . city districts for both adult and juvenile dependency. Whenever a family meets with misfortune or privation, the community strives to lighten its burden by generous contribution and continual support".³³ Over 1,000 Hill residents served in the armed services during the war.³⁴

The wholesale destruction of neighborhoods in post-war America in the decades following World War II caused many cities to resemble German and Japanese cities after Allied bombings`. This tragedy resulted in the main by Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration mortgage insurance underwriting standards biased in favor of segregated suburban single family homes; highway construction; urban renewal based on the federal Housing Acts of 1937, 1945, and 1949; segregated public housing for

the poorest of the poor; and mortgage and insurance red-lining practices.³⁵ Fifty percent (50%) of all U.S. households moved their place of residence during and just after World War II.³⁶

From 1950 to 2000, the population of the City of St. Louis decreased from 856,800 to 348,200. Wide-spread abandonment of housing occurred in north St. Louis City. Little Italy in St. Louis was lost to urban renewal and Our Lady Hope of Christians and Saint Charles Borromeo Churches were razed. The attached photo shows the site of one of these Italian-American churches in St. Louis also established by Father Caesar Spigardi. What happened to the residents of these neighborhoods? What were the emotional consequences of the loss of these places?

In *Grieving for a Lost Home*, Mark Fried describes the consequence of similar events in an Italian-American community on the West End of Boston. He reports that approximately 75% of those dislocated when the West End neighborhood was cleared for “urban renewal” reported moderate to severe depression and grief associated with the loss of place and former relationships within it.³⁷ Two years after the event, Fried recorded the following comments: “I felt as though I had lost everything”, “I felt like my heart was taken out of me”, “I always felt I had to go home to the West End and even now I feel like crying when I pass by”.³⁸ Whom did they hold responsible for the destruction of community? Is it unreasonable to hold federal, state, and local public officials, and residents of the entire St. Louis area ultimately accountable for these events, elected officials most of all? Rather than approving and financing programs that



Fig. 5. St. Charles Borromeo church site

supported abandonment and flight and leaving unregulated practices that would undermine older neighborhoods, why did they not act to protect older communities? In some places, this would have required little effort. But, in the final analysis, the program must have addressed the root causes of the social problems, embraced the common good, and strengthened social capital as a mechanism for change.

Owners of property on The Hill could not secure VA and FHA loans for home remodels due to the building standard requirements.³⁹ In the name of progress, the federal Department of Transportation callously extended Interstate 44 through the northern end of the neighborhood in the 1970s, destroying many houses, invading and dividing the community, and disrupting the peace of village life. Population losses occurred in the critical 15-50 years of age category from 1940 through 1960.⁴⁰

Even a small amount of destruction can have similar, albeit less strongly felt, emotional impacts to those described by Fried. The photos in Figures 7 and 8 show now-demolished commercial buildings on Southwest Ave. just west of Macklind Ave. One woman interviewed after the demolition said it was as if “they tore out something in me”. These buildings were replaced by a grocery store that now sits vacant after an even larger one was built nearby. It is an all too familiar story.

“Settling a territory is equivalent to founding a world”, Eliade wrote and this article is intended to shed some light on why this is so.⁴¹ It also is intended to provide perspective on the consequences of the wholesale destruction of



Fig. 6. Interstate 44

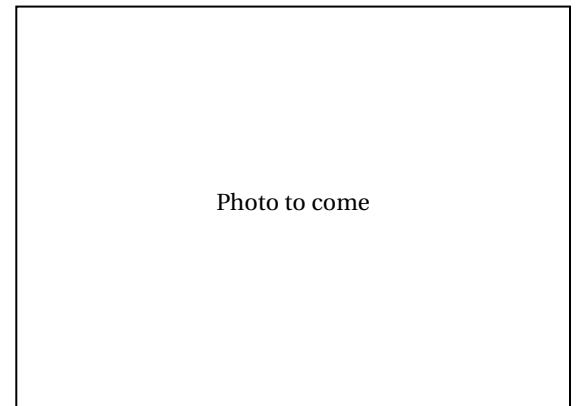


Fig. 7. Demolished store fronts



Fig. 8. Site after demolition

old neighborhoods similar to The Hill after the end of the Second World War.

Although it has lost buildings and been affected by social change, The Hill was not cast aside and abandoned. It is now being rediscovered by the families of its first residents and others in an era that has regained an appreciation for community, distinctive character, and the vernacular - in contrast to the sterile materialism of the suburbs. In some ways, this is besides the point for many residents of The Hill - since the dense family and friendship network of the neighborhood; the shared history, effort, stories; the radiant meaning of Saint Ambrose Church, did not require rediscovery and was impossible to ignore.

One of the common recurring experiences in America since the end of WWII is a sense of placelessness, but this experience can cause people to move in the opposite direction. Perhaps the future will hold a more common appreciation that the greatest grace and the “deepest mystery of place” is the “truth that we are free to enter all that we’ve received as a gift . . . the most common and most ordinary places of our lives”.⁴²

The Built Environment of The Hill

The article below highlights the unique and characteristic in the built environment of the Hill and also what is meaningful. Just as the meaning of place is informed by social factors, the built environment has a marked effect on the community. The built environment is the pushing out into the world of residents’ creativity and productivity; in turn, this meaning redounds for “man cannot plan the world without designing himself”.⁴³ The building activity is an expression of power, identity, and

achievement. The built environment, in turns, informs the community of its power, identity, and achievement. The built environment also reinforces the community identity, social organization, normative values, and social capital. Most often these are apperceived subtly, intuitively, almost imperceptibly by even those who live in a place. But they reside at the core of group identity for traditional Hill residents.

Many of the first residents of The Hill were masons, carpenters, plumber, electricians, and simple laborers. Many worked in the clay mines, at the brick and terra cotta kilns, and made mosaics and terrazzo (tile floors). Building homes and commercial structures on The Hill was an expression of their energy, creativity, and skills. They raised Saint Ambrose Church in a way very similar to the construction of cathedrals in medieval Europe. Through their efforts, the built environment of The Hill manifests their history, their culture, their faith, their social organization, and the then-current conditions of the community.

The built environment also communicates something more than separate buildings or landscape elements: the builders of The Hill, without a town planner or designer, produced a traditional village for their community. The village includes a religious and commercial center and a piazza; important paths; a gradient of building (and social) intensity from the center to the edges; mixed use housing, retail, services, and entertainment throughout; village boundaries; and employment close by. The Hill is a traditional model of community, one of many across the United States, which informs the New Urbanist vision. Kevin Lynch's paradigm of district, node, path, landmark, and edge is used throughout

this article to describe The Hill village as a settlement unit, with commentary added concerning the importance of home and sacred space, and also addressing “meaning”.⁴⁴

The Hill District

The “district” according to Lynch is a large area in a city that one can enter either physically or mentally, composing the basic elements of a city’s image.⁴⁵ Districts are recognized

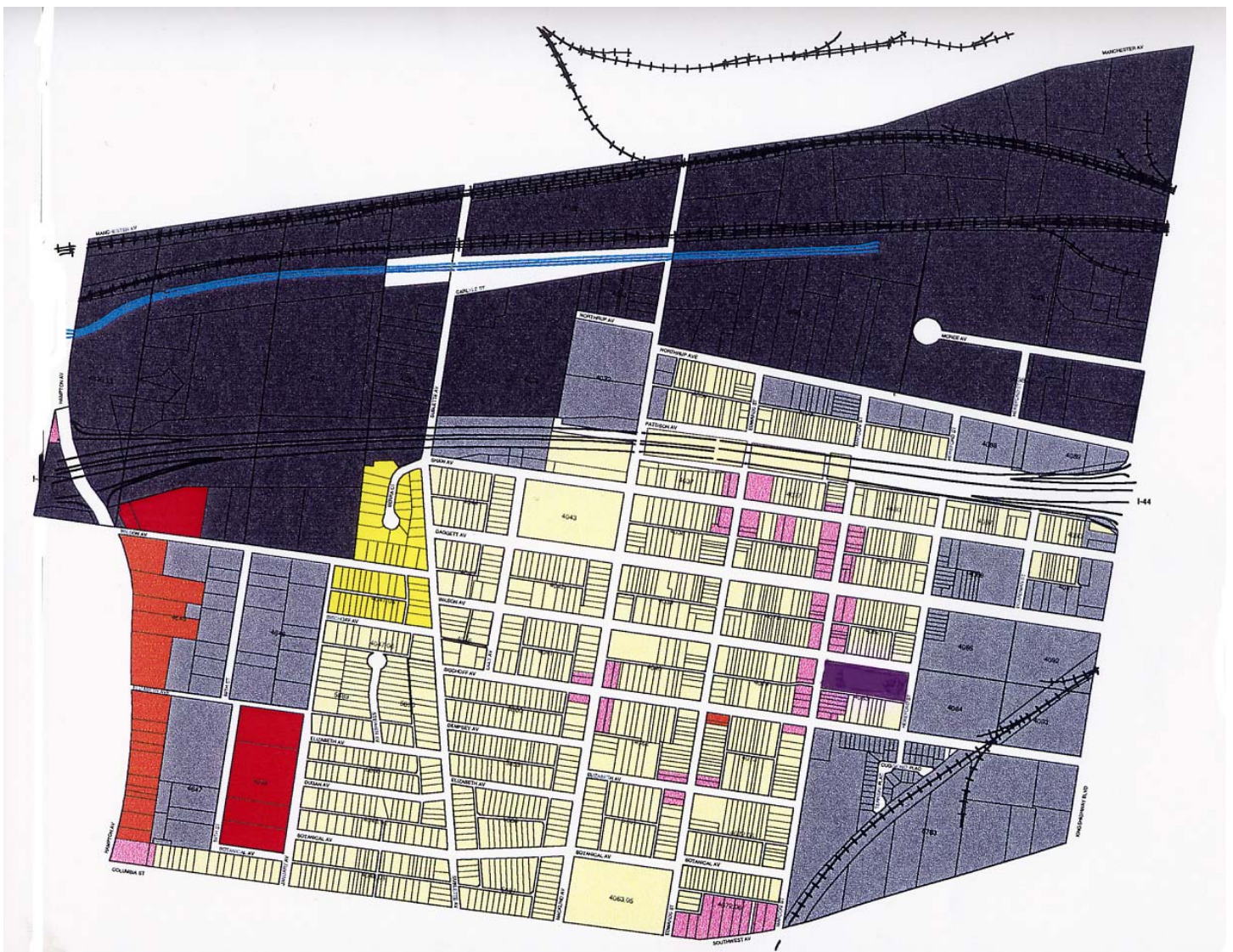


Fig. 9. Zoning map of Hill

internally and from the outside. The Hill district is bounded, roughly, by the Kingshighway Blvd. on the east, Hampton Ave. on the west, Southwest Ave. and Columbia Ave. on the south and the heavy industrial area off Manchester Ave. on the north. The Hill's name (originally "La Montaña") was derived from its location on a gradual slope from the highest point in the city of St. Louis, the site of the Missouri State Hospital. In 2000, there were 1,329 dwelling units and a population total of 2,543 (as compared to 6,089 in 1930). A land use map of The Hill district is contained in Figure 9.

Physical and functional characteristics of a district identify it. These include use, inhabitants, building types, color, materials, detail, ornamentation, massing, orientation to the street, topography, and symbol. The elements are reinforced by the other parts of Lynch's paradigm including paths, nodes, and edges. To this list of physical features is added "meaning". The features are not perceived in isolation, but are "imaged and recognized as a characteristic cluster, the thematic unit".⁴⁶ In St. Louis, The Hill and its meaning as a unified community are recognized throughout the region.

Edges of The Hill

The Hill's edges largely divide it from other parts of St. Louis, isolate it, and reinforce its identity. The edges to the north, east, and west are continuous in form and largely impenetrable because of physical barriers. The north and west boundaries, in the early years, were predominately the location of clay mines, clay inventory piles, kilns, and related industrial facilities. Other heavy industry, such as factories and foundries, are located to the east. When the clay mining

and fabrication operations shut down, the large open fields on the west were converted to some single family houses and mostly to light industry. (The last subdivisions on The Hill were built in the 1950s and are suburban in character.) The edges are reinforced on the north and east sides by rail lines and the northern boundary doubled by the channelized River Des Peres. The large tracts of extraction and manufacturing industries strengthened the already isolated geographic site of The Hill, located in the early years on the edge of the city and unserved by public transport.



Fig. 10. Hill industrial edge

The Hill's south edge (Southwest and Columbia Avenues) is a seam, a path stitching together residential areas. Early on it functioned as a commercial and entertainment corridor and brought together people living in the adjoining neighborhoods. As the population of The Hill increased after 1920s and the available land for housing was being absorbed, Italian-Americans purchased homes and other properties spreading south from this edge.

The dense grid of streets within The Hill is combined with the strong and impenetrable land use edges on three sides. This bounding of The Hill at the outer edges and highly interconnected street network inside, further reinforces community.⁴⁷

While work and home were tightly linked on The Hill for at least half of its history, this connection weakened over time. Until the 1950s, working people on The Hill were concentrated in the employ of the surrounding industries, and those industries intentionally recruited and relied upon employees from The Hill.⁴⁸ As succeeding generations became better educated, the need for these jobs attenuated.

The changing national economy, the shrinking industrial sector, and movement of industry out of the country to profit from lower paid workers, dried up the supply of well-paying industrial jobs. In the 1970s alone, the city of St. Louis lost one half of its industrial jobs. Nationally, the percentage of traditional working class jobs fell from 40% of the labor force to 25% from 1950 to 1999.⁴⁹

Hill Landmarks

Landmarks are the most numerous meaningful element of the Hill's built environment: there are literally thousands of them. "Landmarks", as used here, vary widely in size from something as small as a square inch to as large as building facades. They can be building elements or landscape features. They are distinctive in form, color, and quality and they concentrate meaning, whether perceived as such from outside the community or not. By definition, they cannot be entered physically. For purposes of this article, they are divided into the following groups: landscape, decoration, and building and lot elements (e.g. arches, pilasters, fences, facades). A very small selection of examples is shown.

Landscape. Many first generation residents were agricultural workers on the estates in Italy. The natural environment of The Hill projects color and energy, containing many signs and messages. Front lawns are neatly manicured or planted with flowers. Back yards often contain fruit, vegetable, and flower gardens. Landscape elements dotting the neighborhood include Lombardy poplars, catalpa, fig, banana trees, and numerous grape arbors and



Fig. 11. Landscaped front yard



Fig. 12. Herb garden



Fig. 13. Grape arbor

places to sit and visit. These elements reflect hospitality, family heritage, and connection to nature echoing traditional Italian landscapes.

Decoration. The large and varied number of decorative elements in the built environment give The Hill a lively appearance. The most formal of these are the mosaics on walls, mosaic terrazzo flooring, and terra cotta architectural details. The mosaic terrazzo in Figure 15 is an attractive element at the entrance of a modest corner grocery. The terra cotta disk is set into the facade of a residence and is a formal element of Italian architecture called a “roundel”.⁵⁰



Fig. 17. Decorative fence



Fig. 14. Mosaic



Fig. 15. Mosaic terrazzo



Fig. 16. Terra cotta roundel

Other decorations are less formal but perhaps more impressive visually. Garden edges, fences, and planters were made by pouring concrete into a mold and pressing colored stones; pieces of glass and pottery; and other objects into the still-wet surface. The elaborate fence shown in Figure 17 was over 125 feet in length. In other examples, small rectangular pieces of stone are joined with mortar to produce yard planters and other objects.

The Hill's builders added to the luminous architectural environment through the use of structural building materials including ceramic roofing tiles, bricks glazed in brown, yellow, white, and green hues, pastel shades of stucco, and light-colored terra cotta trim and decorative panels. Immigrant laborers and craftsmen from The Hill, drawing upon a heritage of clay building material production in the Italian Po Valley, mined clay and fabricated these products in the factories down the street from their homes. The light and ornamental visual effect did not signify the grinding labor to produce them, rather it reflected the joy and hope of building a new community and more stable economic environment in America.

Hundreds of building facades on The Hill emanate vitality through contrast, decoration, color, and pattern, as shown in the two wonderful examples. The first, Figure 20, is a mixed-use building with commercial space on the first floor and residential units above. If one looks past the retail window replacements and the fascia stone foundation, the building vibrates with the contrast between the dark red brick and the white terra cotta trim, enhanced by the terra cotta plaques and finials. In the next example,



Fig. 18. Stucco



Fig. 19. Glazed brick

the vernacular home façade contains custom brick-work with simple patterns, color, and contrast, produced by an unknown craftsman.⁵¹

Building Features. The Hill's first generation residents brought with them not only the architectural vocabulary of Italy – the arch, column, capital, pilaster, parapet, masonry fence, and so on – but the building skills to express these forms. These elements were adapted to conditions in America; for example, classic arches were used in porches attached to the front of more typical St. Louis house forms; concrete and brick were substituted for stone in pilasters, decorative fences, and columns. The ornate concrete fence, sometimes replaced with a wrought iron or a hedge, is a common feature of older homes on The Hill and creates a clear demarcation of semi-public space between the small building lots.



Fig. 20. Mixed-use building



Fig. 21. Patterned brick façade



Fig. 23. Column and capital



Fig. 24. Pilaster



Fig. 22. Porch arch



Fig. 25. Poured concrete fence 1

The House on The Hill

The interior lay-out of older homes in The Hill is characteristic of traditional homes in Italy.⁵² Older houses on The Hill typically are narrow and long, called “shotgun” style. The space under the front porch, as seen in Figure 28, is the entrance to the house and leads directly into the kitchen, the principal living area for the family. The front steps lead to the formal front door and to three consecutive rooms, usually serving as bedrooms. To this day, residents of The Hill virtually never use the front door of this type of house as the home entrance. This lay-out and economical usage is similar to homes in Italy where heat was conserved by placing the kitchen in the lowest area so that warmth from the oven rose through to the sleeping areas above.

To understand the meaning of the house on The Hill, it is important to begin with a review of religion’s role in people’s lives there. The members of the first immigrant generation came from a tradition of almost unbroken unity of civic, economic, family, community, and religious life. For the first and second generation on the Hill, religion penetrated all aspects of their lives. All major life events, including child birth, coming of age, building and occupying a home, marriage, and death, were marked and informed by religious norms and ceremonies. For religious residents of The Hill, the moment of conception was when the soul joined the body, to spend a fleeting period of life, and then to be reunited with God after death. For many of the older residents of The Hill, life literally was spent in prayer. It is in this context that it is essential to view the house on The Hill as a temple, infused with even greater meaning stemming



Fig. 26. Poured concrete fence 2



Fig. 27. Parapet



Fig. 28. House lay-out

from the difficult conditions in Italy before the residents' voyage to America.

Many writers have addressed the sacred nature of the house. "The house is an organic unity whose essence is some definite power, just as much as is the temple or church", wrote Van de Leeuw.⁵³ This is appropriate to the meaning of home for the first generations on The Hill, expressed by church blessings of new houses and by the many religious articles in the homes. The sacretization of space on the Hill is articulated in many ways including the yard shrines, the scribed detail of a crucifix into a window frame, and religious figures of putti. More prominent than religious altars in the house are the many intricate yard shrines that associate religious belief with the physical space of entire house parcels. Italian regional affiliations are extended to the domestic scene through the patron saints of the villages displayed in yard shrines.

The residents' newly found permanency of settlement and economic advancement infused the construction of a home on The Hill with particular meaning through contrast with the social and economic dislocation they experienced in Italy as the 19th century closed and their previous tenure as renters.

To revisit Eliade, "the religious man [seeks] to live as near as possible *to the Center of the World* . . . he also [wants] his own house to be at the Center".⁵⁴ The "Center" of the home is linked to that of Saint Ambrose Church in a critical way, as discussed below. The church is the "*Center of the World*", but a multiplicity of centers of the world is possible for religious men and women, for an infinite number



Fig. 29. Yard shrine



Fig. 30. Scribed window frame detail

of communications with the transcendent are possible.⁵⁵ The home and Church are united in the sacred space of the village.

Nodes on The Hill

Nodes are places that a person can enter and that radiate meaning in a number of ways: characteristic form, intensity of use, concentration of architectural themes, and as a juncture of travel.⁵⁶ There are a number of more and less well-defined nodes on The Hill including groupings of semi-public space around front yards and porches, the piazza-like center of the neighborhood, Northern Italian-American Mercantile Company building, and Saint Ambrose Church itself.

Saint Ambrose Catholic Church. Saint Ambrose Church is deeply rich, fine, and complex in terms of both physical characteristics and meaning. Its construction in the 1920s is described earlier in this article. This section examines its architectural and decorative features including the stained-glass windows and other interior details.

The building is a classic Lombard-Romanesque design modeled after Saint Ambrose Church in Milan, Saint Petronio Church in Bologna, and Santa. Maria delle Grazie, also in Milan. Saint Ambrose, the patron of the church, is also is the patron saint of Milan, serving as a unifying historical and religious presence for The Hill residents. Special amber colored shale bricks were used for the exterior walls and campanile, which were decorated with fine-flash finish terra cotta. These materials were made in the factories at the edge of the neighborhood. The church



Fig. 31. St. Ambrose - exterior view

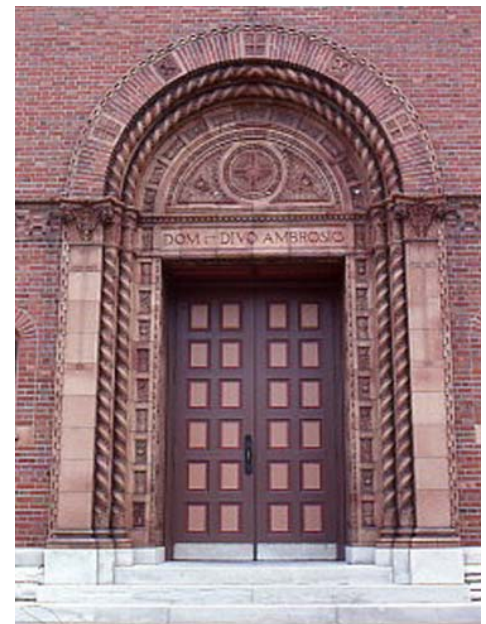


Fig. 32. St. Ambrose - entrance



Fig. 33. St. Ambrose - original altar

interior is divided into three naves, with the central one being 30' x 94' in dimension. Rounded structural arches are supported by marble-scagliola (faux marble) columns used throughout. The exterior of Saint Ambrose is shown in Figures 31 and 32.

The original altar, which was replaced in the 1960s, is shown in Figure 34 and is stylistically similar to those in Italian churches. The altar is the locus where, in the words of Eliade: "communication with [God] is made possible . . . a door to the world above, by which [God] can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven".⁵⁷ Here a break is effected in space and time: the altar forms the base of the central spiritual axis, and becomes the center for the physical and emotional orientation of the community.⁵⁸

Statues of the patron saints of the different villages in Italy, and others of significance, are placed in niches along both the side naves.

One of the main support columns is shown in Figure 34. Its capital contains the same putti figures found as decorations throughout the neighborhood. The stained glass images are noteworthy for their architectural aspects: the central scene shown in Figure 35 is framed by an arch and columns, as well as a decorative parapet similar to that used in other Hill buildings (see Figure 27). The small rectangular pieces of white art glass joined together in the windows depicts a masonry technique used in outdoor shrines and other yard pieces.

Saint Ambrose Church represents a conjunction of the historic, geographic, physical, social, and spiritual elements of community life on The Hill. Its importance

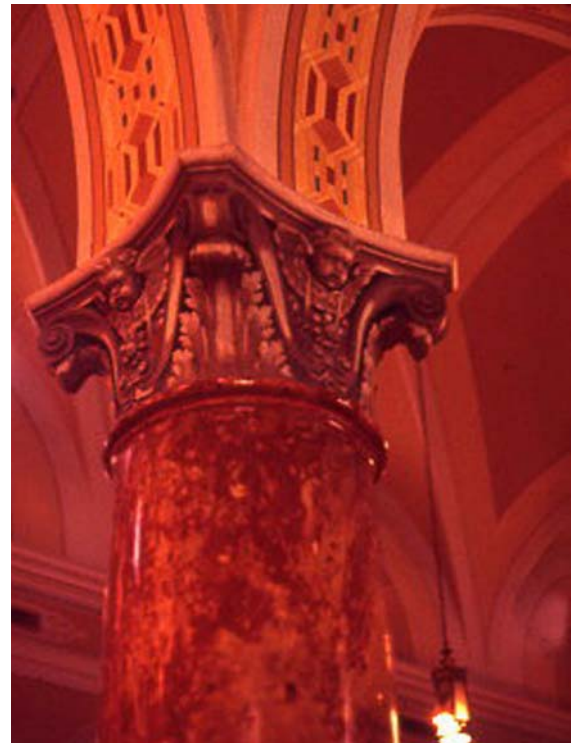


Fig. 34. St. Ambrose - interior column



Fig. 35. St. Ambrose - stained glass

hardly can be exaggerated. It represents the “cosmic axis” around which the territory of The Hill becomes habitable.⁵⁹ Saint Ambrose Church originates and unifies The Hills’ homes, businesses, shrines, yards, and gardens, the entire territory of the community. Eliades states: “it is by virtue of the temple that the world is resanctified in every part . . . however impure it may have become”.⁶⁰

Neighboring Clusters. The land-use pattern of many parts of The Hill built prior to the end of the World War II - with relatively high density single family detached / duplex / 4 family flat residences, narrow lots, large front porches, alleys moving cars to the rear of the house, and uninterrupted sidewalks - reflected and supported neighboring and sociability. The pace of life on The Hill in early decades was quickened by a large, young households; new family members and paisani from Italy who came to live at first with sponsoring households; and by roomers from Italy as they established themselves economically.

The subtle gradations from private to public life were resolved on The Hill by more private - public space on the front porches and steps, close to the more public sidewalk, and right above the more private family living area in the half-basement at the front of the house. These gradations allowed community life to move easily from the street, to the front porch, and into the kitchen. Conversations were carried on between people on the sidewalk and on the front porch, and among people on the adjoining front porches and steps. Friends could be invited onto the porch and steps. Close friends and relatives could be invited into the kitchen.



Fig. 36. Neighboring clusters

Figures 28 and 36 provide examples of this type of social node on The Hill.

Piazza Node. Immigrants to The Hill brought with them the tradition of the piazza in medieval Italy as an open area adjoining a church, containing a fountain and temporary markets, enclosed by higher density residential and commercial uses, and at the terminus of access paths.⁶¹ They applied this pattern to the constraints imposed by the city's grid street plat. The zone map in Figure 5 shows the location of The Hill's piazza, extending roughly from Bischoff Ave. to Shaw Ave. on Marconi St.. It then extends in a "T" from Edwards St. to Hereford St. on Shaw. This latter portion of the piazza is not clear from the zoning map because the commercial land uses are somewhat inconsistent with the residential zoning there.

The focal point of the piazza is Saint Ambrose Church on the corner of Marconi St. and Wilson Ave. The site location of the church building is set back a small distance from the street to form as much of an open gathering space as is available. Importantly, the main path of the village is between Saint Ambrose Church (and Saint Ambrose School behind it) and the Northern Italian-American Merchantile Company and Riggio Travel Agency at Marconi and Shaw. On this path were located the community's funeral home, doctor's and lawyers' offices, grocery stores, bakeries, the Italian newspaper, barber shops, furniture stores, restaurants, bocci lanes, and taverns. Similar land uses were located on the Shaw Ave. part of the grid street piazza. This portion also included the local political club and La Familia theater.

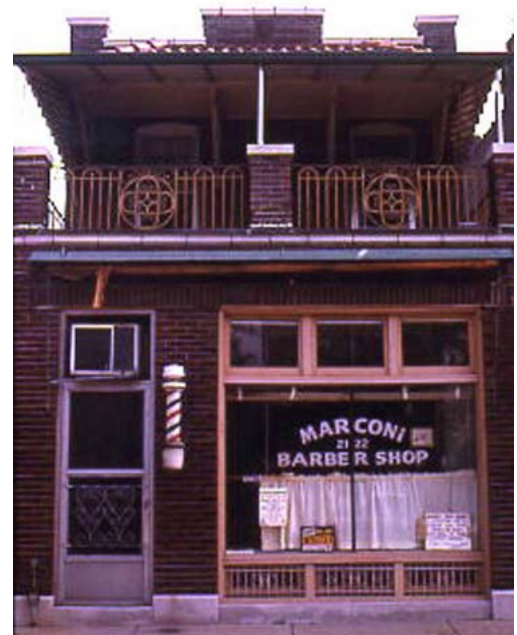


Fig. 37. Commercial bldg on piazza

The intensity of land uses is greater near the center of piazza. Attached buildings and some two story ones replace the largely detached structures elsewhere. There are mixed-used residential and commercial buildings with living areas above the business spaces. During its early years, a great deal of the community life of The Hill occurred within this piazza, including the most meaningful activities: marriage, baptism, medical care, funerals, education, and immigration.

Riggio Travel Agency. Riggio Travel was an important cultural institution on The Hill and its former location is an expression of neo-classical design. The step-by-step movement of people from the villages in Italy to The Hill was mediated by Riggio Travel Agency, which served as a savings depository for workers to draw upon to pay for the voyages of family and village members to America. Riggio Travel (like the Bank of America née Bank of Italy in San Francisco) evolved into Southwest National Bank. As Southwest National Bank, it provided residential and commercial loans to Hill residents, a good example of the economic development power of social capital.

Northern Italian-American Mercantile Company – “Big Club Hall”. The Mercantile Company, a mutual aid society, was the first major institution established on The Hill, in 1893, even before the founding of Saint Ambrose Church in 1903, and forms a separate node. Its facility, called the Big Club Hall, was the focal point for regular meetings and annual parties of The Hill’s large number of service organizations, regional clubs of former Italian villagers, women’s and men’s religious sodalities, political



Fig. 38. Piazza street



Fig. 39. Riggio Travel Agency

organizations, and young people's athletic clubs. It hosted many of the local wedding parties.

Big Club Hall stands out by virtue of its sheer mass. The recessed brick surfaces of the facades, finished with decorative brick-work, are typical of Lombard Romanesque architecture. The Hall housed the energy of the many small groups that constituted The Hill's rich social capital and was the site of parties and celebrations and the serious work of helping each other and improving the community.



Fig. 40. Big Club Hall

Paths

A path simply is a route along which a person moves. Paths that are important to place identity may be lined with special or concentrated uses, may connect nodes, may be set off by landmarks, or may have a directional quality.⁶² We already have discussed The Hill paths along Marconi St. and Shaw Ave. that form the neighborhood piazza. There are two additional paths on The Hill.

Path of the Saints. The practice that symbolized and carried out the spiritually renewing function of religious rite was the religious procession that took place on The Hill. On the saint's feast day, the statues of the patrons of the different villages could be seen above the halting movement of the crowd. The path was fixed through the village. The procession halted at temporary shrines and prayers were said. At the end of the procession, the statue was returned to its niche on the side of Saint Ambrose. Different societies carried their patron saints through the neighborhood, in a recommitment of faith, as in the Corpus Christi ceremony depicted in the photo.



Fig. 41. Historic religious procession

Path to the Mines and Kilns. The second path was important for perhaps the first half-century of the neighborhood, the connection along Macklind Avenue between the residential community and the industrial valley of clay mines, factories, and kilns that spread east and west from the intersection of Macklind and Manchester Avenues. It is not difficult to imagine the hundred of workers from the Hill walking down this street to the call of factory whistles at the break of day and returning wearily in the gathering dusk. The path does not look like much today, few walk along it, it is gradually being forgotten; but I can feel the presence of these laborers in the spirit of the place. It is “nothing special”, in Suzuki’s meaning of the term.



Fig. 42. Path to mines and kilns.

The Hill District Revisited

We have covered the important elements of the built environment and identity on The Hill, addressing edges, landmarks, homes, nodes, and paths. To complete the depiction of The Hill district, let us turn to the vital commercial life that existed there mostly until the 1950s. The sidebar itemizes the small businesses on The Hill in 1930.⁶³ More than 100 retailers, services, and entertainment operations (including two theaters that did not find their way to the list) flourished within a relatively small precinct in a dense tapestry of services. While a number were located in The Hill “piazza” near Saint Ambrose Church on Marconi St. and Shaw Ave., most were spread out around the neighborhood, within a few blocks of everyone’s home. The most numerous stores were confectionaries catering to young people’s appetites for candy, soda, and ice cream. From

a design standpoint, most of these were housed in mixed use buildings with residences above places of business. These were not just convenient places to shop but were also important venues for socializing and informal helping.

Conclusion

First, although it is helpful to understand the different parts that make up The Hill district, residents and visitors understand it as a unity, a simple case of the whole being greater than the parts. In fact, that perception may stand in the way of recognizing the parts and may have negatively impacted the continuity of place identity over time. A number of the characteristic features of The Hill's built environment have been lost or modified over time, as discussed below. Second, there actually is *no difference* between the physical environment and residents' history, culture, religious beliefs and social organization. The built environment and people's norms, religious beliefs, and social organization are the *same thing*, inextricably intertwined. While we can talk about the physical environment in isolation, it is arbitrary and deforming to ignore the social organization and beliefs systems that are contained in this physical presence.

Transformation: Loss and Renewal

The bells of Saint Ambrose Church still call the faithful to church and remind the descendents of the immigrants within hearing of their compelling heritage. Place is a diverse and rich concept. For those connected to The Hill by birth or marriage, it is the care taken to lay a pattern in brick, affix the terra cotta decorations, build religious shrines, mix and layer

the fine concrete into the molds for pilasters or low fences. For these individuals, place also relates to its social history. It is the young men playing stick ball under string of exposed lights in the beer garden on a floor of crushed pecan shells. It is in the old photos of families posed in front of grocery displays and scales. It is young people playing accordion and mandolin on front steps. It is all the births and confirmations and weddings and funerals. It is the bricks made from clay hewn from the mines and compressed and fired by their ancestors' hands, now in the walls of Hill buildings and the street paving. It is the net of personal relations in which everyone is known and connected.

What of the current situation on The Hill? In fact, many of the physical objects that make up the identity of The Hill have been lost over time (see Figs 15, 16, 17, 33), perhaps because their owners did not fully know their importance. Other structures weathered a decline in the decades following the 1960s but have now been restored (see Figs 39, 40).

Perhaps the value of The Hill to the first generation Italian immigrants could never be completely appreciated by their descendents. The intensity of religious commitment and the connection with Italy may have necessarily weakened with successive generations. The immigrants' desire for economic success in America might naturally have propelled the better educated future generations away from the Hill, toward new, larger homes in the suburbs and the mobility afforded by material success. The small shotgun houses may becoming obsolete artifacts. The very social isolation of the first generations on The Hill may have produced the desire among the youth to see and understand more of the world.

Many people who read this article will think that The Hill is a wonderful and unique place, but this is not the idea that I wish to leave the reader. The Hill is unique in its particulars, but similar to literally tens of thousands of neighborhoods across the United States. Some of these neighborhoods are healthy and stable, some are in trouble, and some have disappeared altogether. In its rich manifestation of *place* - neighborhood, community, and social capital - The Hill contains many lessons for a country that appears to be reawakening to the value of community.

I hope this article stirs its readers to ask the following questions. Can it be that the bells of St. Ambrose ring more importantly to the spirit than just to those within earshot? How can the important lessons of The Hill - the values of sociability, mutual help, friendship, faith, family, frugality, work, building, economic diversity, and simplicity; in short, community - be taken up by other neighborhoods? How in the future can places like The Hill be more inclusive in the spirit of these values? How can we, as citizens and as government officials, do better by these places? Can we even rebuild the neighborhoods that have been lost, infusing their residents with the community spirit of The Hill?

Let us close with a few words of hope from T. S. Eliot (whose father owned the Hydraulic Press Brick works where The Hill laborers toiled):⁶⁴

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

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- ¹¹ Toft, op. cit., p. 8; Societa Unione e Fratellanza Italiana, op. cit., p. 87.
- ¹² These companies included Evans and Howard Fire Brick Company, Blackmer and Post Fire Clay Products, Winkler Terra Cotta, Mitchell Clay Manufacturing, Laclede-Christy Clay Products, Hydraulic Press Brick, Sanders, Buelker, Murry and Seins, Laclede No. 1, Humes, Christy Fire Clay Company (The Hill, Ethnic Heritage, p. 14; 40th Anniversary, pp 88-96, Mo. Hist., p. 1)
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- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 12.
- ¹⁹ Mormino, op. cit., p. 58.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Mario Miano put on this entertainment.
- ²³ Toft, op. cit., pp. 18-19.
- ²⁴ Saint Ambrose Parish, Fortieth Anniversary Book, op. cit., p. 87.
- ²⁵ Toft, op. cit., p. 11-12.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
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