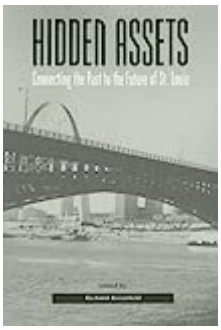
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Richard Rosenfeld, ed. *Hidden Assets: Connecting the Past to the Future of St Louis.* Louis Metromorphosis Book Series. St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2006. 188 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-883982-56-0.

Reviewed by Eric Sandweiss (Department of History, Indiana University)

Published on H-Urban (August, 2007)

Writing Urban History in a Post-Booster Era

Like a number of distressed older American cities whose economic stars faded with the dawn of the postindustrial era, St. Louis still benefits from a cultural infrastructure set in place during earlier, more prosperous generations. These assets, tracing their origins variously to corporate philanthropists, artistic and educational leaders, social reformers, and far-sighted public officials, enjoy long life-cycles and remain to some degree independent of the short-term vagaries of the market or political opinion. Less easily demolished than waterfront warehouses and less portable than corporate home offices, they represent today what criminologist Richard Rosenfeld calls "hidden assets" awaiting exploitation by those who would reposition their city to take advantage of new conditions for social or economic improvement.

Two such assets in St. Louis are the Missouri Historical Society (MHS)–a quasi-public institution, founded in 1866 and increasingly committed, since the 1970s, to examining not only the city's past but its future–and the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UM-St. Louis), a campus of considerably more recent vintage with a metropolitan research and teaching mission typical of the urban public universities of the 1960s. Within UM-St. Louis, the Public Policy Research Center (PPRC), since 1989, has provided a home for social scientists eager to use the city and its surrounding counties as the backdrop for their studies. With the publication of *Hidden Assets*, MHS and the PPRC have released the second in a projected series of books intended, in the words of PPRC director Mark Tranel, "to be a resource for scholars and academicians, those who will study our region and provide the analysis that comes before action" (p. viii).[1]

Rosenfeld, a St. Louis native who teaches at UM-St. Louis, has built a distinguished academic career based, in part, on his research within the region, but his intention as editor of this new volume seems to be neither to highlight his own research nor to trumpet the "assets" represented by the book's two sponsoring organizations. Instead, he has gathered ten contributors, each willing to reflect upon some historical strength that might serve as the basis for what the editor calls "non-obvious development" (p. xviii) within a metropolitan area that, by more conventional "standard measures," trails not only the nation's obvious leaders but also many comparable

midwestern industrial centers (pp. x-xv).

Rosenfeld's fine introduction enumerates both the region's often-discouraging ranking by the familiar benchmarks (population, income, education level, etc.) of metropolitan statistical comparison, and the countervailing assets that frequently escape cursory notice. His listing of those assets will be almost tiresomely familiar to St. Louisans accustomed to urging skeptical out-of-town visitors to look beyond the obvious signs of distress to which the popular media have gravitated. Rosenfeld's version of the list includes the city's affordable, high-quality housing stock; vibrant neighborhoods; active cultural scene; leading research universities and medical centers; historic architecture; beautiful parks; and fabled sports traditions (pp. ix-x). Because I suspect that the residents of Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, or Cleveland, if called to do so, would develop similar lists, students of these and other comparable cities may find in *Hidden Assets* a useful point of comparison to their own areas, or even see in it the basis for a broader discussion of the utility of statistical benchmarks in assessing contemporary metropolitan life.

Yet this book remains, resolutely, a portrait of one place. Unfortunately, the elements of that portrait–the contributed essays–lack the sort of systematic discipline suggested by the editor's introduction. Not only do the topics represented within the eight chapters diverge somewhat from the neat list of metropolitan assets as Rosenfeld himself defines them, but the approaches, goals, and writing styles vary so greatly that one wonders if the volume might have worked better as a series of working papers than it does as a single book. Within its covers one finds historical essays, informal sociological studies, breezy music reviews, and jargon-heavy policy pieces. The net result is a pastiche not only of one city's resources but also of the many ways in which we describe them at a moment when the conventional tropes of urban success–typically based on the accumulation of people, things, and money–no longer seem to provide us with sufficient direction for making wise choices about the urban future. In that sense, *Hidden Assets* may prove worthwhile for readers well beyond its primary intended audience.

There remains much to be said for treating assets in the traditional sense of material goods; this is the approach taken by several of the contributors who focus on manufacturing and innovation in St. Louis. Yet even this common ground creates some wildly different variations, as the juxtaposition of Thomas Eyssell's "St. Louis and the Automobile" and Nasser Arshadi, Harvey Harris, and Thomas George's "Technology Transfer and the Modern University" makes clear. Eyssell's essay surveys the city's history as an automotive manufacturing center, first in the wide-open days prior to the consolidation of the big three U.S. manufacturers (when not only this but many cities vied to turn their wagon- and buggy-making resources to the challenge of horseless-carriage manufacture), and later when the city consolidated its standing as the nation's second-leading automotive center (a position it retained until quite recently). The essay sweeps fairly cursorily across its material, but nonetheless offers a more entertaining narrative than that delivered by a team of authors who promise "a rigorous assessment of technology transfer efforts in academic institutions with the goal of identifying critical factors for a successful strategy" (p. 44). The essay on technology transfer delivers, as this introductory language promises, a relatively technical and practical (and only incidentally historical) account of recent local high-tech business startups in the city. While it will likely prove useful to those interested in joining the industry, it does little to clarify what makes St. Louis unique in this respect or how these experiences fit into broader trends.

To the extent that the physical fabric of the city represents another sort of asset, Robert Duffy's essay on St. Louis architecture and Mark Tranel's quite different chapter on the planning behind metropolitan greenways share a common theme. Duffy, architectural critic for the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, has long been one of the most articulate and impassioned defenders of the city's built heritage, and has never pulled punches in his fight against the remarkable shortsightedness of political and business leaders anxious to promote the city's image as being somehow more "forward-minded." Here, the reader glimpses only a small bit of what Duffy is capable of giving, in the form of a survey of the city's architectural highlights and recent preservation battles that feels altogether too rushed to do justice to either the author or his subject. Tranel's essay comes as close as any in the collection to delivering on the promise of original historical research linked to contemporary issues, though one wishes for a more detached perspective on the contemporary efforts of the Great Rivers Greenway initiative. The perspectives of the historian and the advocate do not always converge, and Tranel's essay reminds us of the difficulty of retaining both.

Human capital forms the focus of Rod Brunson's study of the city's African American barbershops. Brunson's localized, qualitative, participant-observer ap-

proach makes for an article that succeeds particularly well in conveying the specifics of social relationships at the neighborhood level, even if at the cost of offering the sort of systematic assessment of general resources that the book purports to provide. Andrew Scavotto writes knowledgeably about another "human" asset, the city's active blues music scene, though in a manner that may be of more use to the newcomer seeking to find out who's who and what-plays-where than it is to historians hoping for a deeper picture of how the city's early blues scene (as well as its subsequent revival in largely white-patronized nightclubs) fits in to larger patterns of musical or cultural exchange.

Sports are represented in two good essays, one by Sharon Smith surveying the vibrant tradition of local amateur athletics, and the other by Donald Phares on the city's professional teams. The latter essay is most useful when it departs from its recounting of the names and histories of St. Louis's various teams (information which is, naturally, readily available in other places) and delves critically into the machinations of public and private financing that have supported the city's sports facilities–a topic with deep historical roots and vital contemporary relevance.

Hidden Assets is not the first effort to survey the resources and historical trends of contemporary St. Louis and I feel sure that St. Louis is not the only city to inspire such books.[2] What, then, makes it worth picking up? Particular interests and specific questions are bound to bring some readers to this volume, and they will find within it information that may indeed fulfill the PPRC's (and the editor's) hope of inspiring informed decisions about growth and change. But overall, the value of the book's diverse essays is rivaled by its less tangible value as an artifact of a post-booster era. Unlike the weighty city histories of the early twentieth century, contemporary urban portraits like this one reflect the flux, the uncertainty, of a moment when it is no longer clear exactly what constitutes success at the metropolitan scale. Unburdened of our assumptions that more is better and that good things come to those who pull their weight, we can only cast about for the hidden assets that may yet trigger "non-obvious development" in places whose advantages were once obvious in the extreme.

Notes

[1]. As a matter of disclosure, I should say that I have in the past been employed by both UM-St. Louis and MHS. The first volume in the current series is E. Terrence Jones and Brady Baybeck, eds., *St. Louis Metromorphosis: Past Trends and Future Directions* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2004).

[2]. In addition to the first book in the "Metromorphosis" series, see FOCUS St. Louis, *St. Louis Currents: A Guide to the Region and Its Resources* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997); and East-West Gateway Coordinating Council, *Where We Stand: A Strategic Assessment of the St. Louis Region* (St. Louis: 1992 and published annually thereafter).