Industrial Urbanism as an Archival Project: The Work of the Building Arts Foundation

Joseph Heathcott and Pamela Ambrose

St. Louis-based salvage contractor and self-taught curator Larry Giles has spent the last thirty-seven years assembling one of the largest collections of architectural artifacts in the United States. Under the auspices of the non-profit Building Arts Foundation, he has gathered together tens of thousands of unique artifacts in material and print form. In this interview conducted in the fall of 2006, Mr. Giles talks about the origins of his collection, its unparalleled scope, and his vision for its future home in a new national museum devoted to architecture and the allied arts. The authors provide an update on the work of the Building Arts Foundation as of January 2009.

In a non-descript building in south St. Louis that once housed a supermarket, a shy, unassuming gentleman has quietly assembled part of the largest collection of architectural artifacts in the United States. In fact, the collection is so vast that it has outgrown its current facilities: the former supermarket, plus an old carriage factory and a light industrial building. Much of the collection will soon move to an abandoned cement plant in Granite City, Illinois.

For over thirty years Larry Giles has accumulated the detritus of a lost civilization. As sole proprietor of the St. Louis Architectural Art Company, a highly reputable salvage and resale outfit, he has filled his storehouses with treasures from an age of great building. It is a record both of quantity—the sheer number of artifacts is astounding—and of quality. Artifacts in the collection reflect the highest achievements in American crafts, building arts, engineering, and industrial design. They have been culled from major civic and commercial buildings as well as from corner storefronts, workshops, factories, warehouses, and churches.

Figure 1: The complete limestone front elevation of the Wagoner Mortuary Building, stacked, sorted, labeled and recorded. Photograph courtesy of Michael Allen.

Packed within endless rows and stacks of crates are tens of thousands of objects that attest to a period of great innovation in building design, ornamentation, and utility. Carefully disassembled, labeled, and packed sections of cornices and architraves from dozens of great public façades. Hundreds of decorative terra cotta medallions, limestone lintels, and carved wooden brackets. Intact early twentieth-century elevators with their delicate bird cage tracery, along with the machinery and hardware that animated them. Massive industrial drill presses and lathes. Three-story cast iron storefronts, stowed away in their entirety. Box upon acid-free box of rare mechanical and trade publications. Drawer upon drawer of blueprints. Marble columns. Ceramic tiles. Iron manhole covers. And bricks. Endless unique specimens of brick.

The abundance and quality of the artifacts attest to two conditions that persist in tension. On the one hand, the artifacts reveal the superb architectural heritage that St. Louis developed during its ascent as a powerful industrial metropolis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—paralleling cities such as Cleveland, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Buffalo. The urban landscape of St. Louis benefited from a confluence of proximate natural resources like clay and wood, advanced industrial processes and machine tooling, and tens of thousands of immigrant artisans to put it all together.

On the other hand, the very fact that these artifacts lie in repose in a storage facility underscores the painful disassembly of this and similar cities through industrial contraction, capital flight, population loss, neglect, and demolition. Appallingly, brick is now the major export product of the city of St. Louis. Every day flatbed semi-trucks leave the city loaded down with dozens of pallets of bricks, torn piece by piece from buildings. Under-the-radar salvage operators scour abandoned buildings for copper wire, boilers, and architectural details. The city cannibalizes itself, ripping out its bones and guts to stay alive.

Nevertheless, Mr. Giles's superlative collection engenders possibilities that simply would not exist had these artifacts been pulverized into dust, broken apart for landfill, or siphoned off into antiquities markets. With this material cache of memory, construction knowledge, craft cultures, and design ideas, Mr.

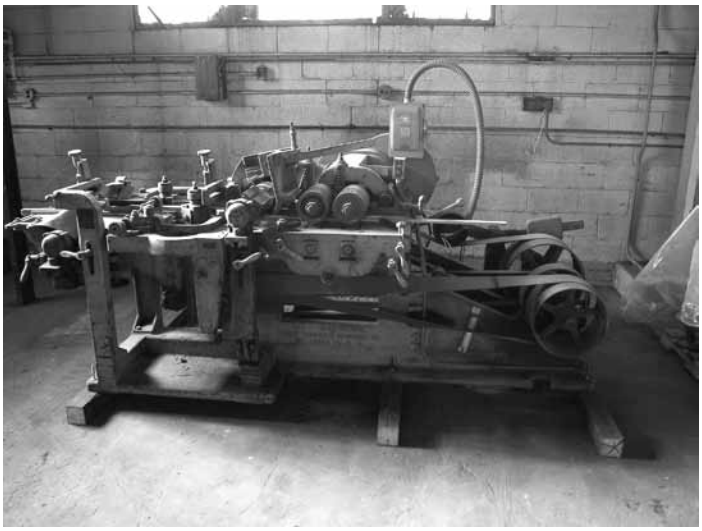

Figure 2: Hall & Brown woodworking machine, one of several originally used for vocational education in the St. Louis Public Schools. Photograph courtesy of Michael Allen.

Figure 3: Marble pilaster capital from the Century Building, demolished amid national controversy in 2006. Photograph courtesy of Michael Allen.

Giles has managed to create an unparalleled archive of American building. He is determined, moreover, to bequeath this archive to the ages in the form of a National Architecture Museum.

In 2000, Mr. Giles founded the non-profit Building Arts Foundation (www.buildingmuseum.org) in order to "promote public awareness of the crucial role of architecture, construction, and urban design in the history and future of greater St. Louis." The foundation's unparalleled collection of architectural artifacts will form the basis of a museum dedicated to exhibitions, programs, tours, and—most dear to Mr. Giles—vocational training of young men and women in the rapidly disappearing building arts.

Architectural historians Joseph Heathcott and Pamela Ambrose sat down with Mr. Giles in the fall of 2006 in St. Louis to talk about his collection and his vision for its future.

PA: *Let's begin by talking about what made you interested in collecting.*

LG: When I was a small boy, I would take bicycle trips around St. Louis with several friends, and I will never forget riding along Manchester Avenue from Kingshighway west to Hampton Avenue through the old town of Cheltenham, which was once the largest brick-producing region in the world. I became fascinated by all those majestic brick and terra cotta kilns that back then still lined both sides of Manchester for nearly a mile.

JH: *How did St. Louis become the "brick capital" of the world, as it was once known?*

LG: The invention of the dry press method here produced stock and ornamental brick that would only have been available to the wealthy in other countries. So St. Louis became the center of production and the development of the art. By the turn of the century, Hydraulic Press Brick Company had developed the most extensive line of special shapes, moldings, and ornamental brick in the world. The direct result of this made St. Louis the nation's most beautiful brick city with the most creative and diverse brickwork.

PA: *So when did you begin to take an interest in recovering these historic materials?*

LG: I began recovering ornamental pieces from demolition sites in 1972. After starting the St. Louis Architectural Art Company, my attention was drawn to the incredible variety of ornamental brick used to enrich the facades of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century buildings.

JH: *Larry, what impresses me about your curatorial approach is that you are not simply interested in the artifact, but in the artifact as part of a broader industrial and trade system. Are there particular strengths in your collection of brick and brick artifacts, and are there holes that you would like to fill?*

LG: Well, in the collection there are approximately 30,000 ornamental bricks that represent 250 different designs plus variations made by St. Louis brick makers. Variations of common and stock face brick, color, and texture are numerous, and we are developing a comprehensive collection along with refractory brick and paving blocks. Ultimately the collection will include examples of the various machinery and equipment used in manufacturing processes of both hand- and machine-made brick.

PA: *You've managed to back up tens of thousands of architectural artifacts with documents and business records. How do you go about assembling all this material?*

LG: I have been assembling a research library for the study of architecture and the allied arts for about thirty years and at present have collected 20,000 books, periodicals, and trade catalogs that relate to architecture and the allied arts, with some 800 titles alone devoted to brick and terra cotta. The Internet book databases and online auction services have revolutionized the field of collecting research materials. Databases such as bookfinder.com and services like eBay have been great resources.

JH: *With many building material collectors operating in the United States, and also a dense online auction in industrial ephemera, does this hurt your efforts by driving up prices, or does it help by loosening artifacts into the market?*

Figure 4: Part of the Foundation's collection of over 120 cast iron storefront systems, originally produced by Mesker Steel Company and other leading firms. Photograph courtesy of Michael Allen.

LG: The Internet I think has leveled the playing field quite a bit. That is to say it has enabled the amateur and part-time dealer to offer material that may have only been offered previously by specialist dealers. But I have seen architecture and industrial arts book prices increase substantially over the years.

JH: *So let me follow up. Describe the life of an artifact after it comes to your operation. How do you take it in, conserve it, document it, and process it for storage and retrieval?*

LG: We begin with field notes and sketches that are used to prepare finished drawings and key sheets in order to identify various component groups and sub-assemblies. The largest material groups are terra cotta, stonework, and cast iron storefronts. With larger recovery projects, the material will be brought in by boom truck on pallets and moved into the cleaning area where it is laid out on tables and cleaned by removing the remaining brick and mortar from the back and sides of each piece. I have adapted precision aircraft pneumatic riveting hammers for the delicate work of removing sometimes very difficult cement mortars. At this point the material is ready for chemical cleaning to remove carbon deposits and sometimes paint. We then organize and pack the material into custom crates that we build and then mark as to contents. Cast iron storefronts are stacked on timber cribbing and are offloaded and laid out in the yard to be photographed, measured, and to have preliminary drawings made for the final elevation drawings to be produced. As with all the artifacts, my main concern is protection and efficient storage.

PA: *I'm running the risk of asking the "favorite child" question, since most collectors have a hard time singling out a specific favorite in their collections, but what has been your greatest recovery effort and the one artifact in the collection that you prize the most for its historical value?*

LG: The greatest recovery effort would have to be the 1926 Ambassador Theatre office building designed by Rapp & Rapp Architects with Winkle terra cotta executed by sculptor George Ernst. It involved removal of over 300 feet of terra cotta cornice and frieze from three elevations at the eighteenth floor, the recovery of seventy-eight terra cotta pier and spandrel assem-

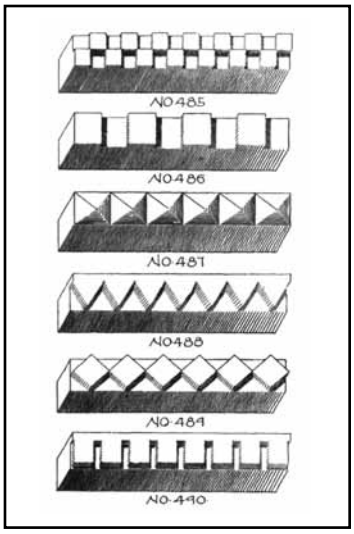

Figure 5: Illustration of decorative stringer courses from the Hydraulic Brick Press catalogue, 1895. Courtesy of Larry Giles.

blies from the third, fourth, and fifth floors on two elevations, and then the removal of seven 30-foot terra cotta arches that announced the theater portion of the building on two elevations. This project was the largest terra cotta recovery project to date in the world. It's hard to pick a favorite or most prized artifact, but I would have to say that the Winkle terra cotta cornice of winged victory figures salvaged in 1983 from Eames & Young's 1897 Title Guaranty Building certainly ranks as world class.

PA: *So, what has been your greatest disappointment in losing a precious artifact to demolition?*

LG: In my time there have been many losses, but the one that still haunts me would be Albert Swasey's 1903 thirteen-story

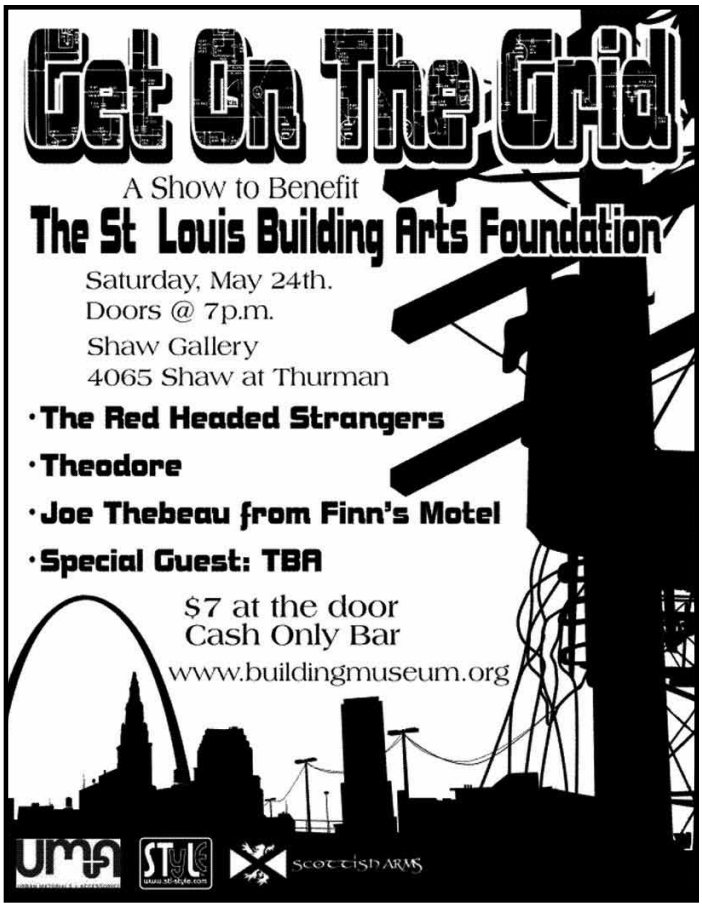

Figure 6: Flyer from a BAF benefit concert. Courtesy of Larry Giles.

Buder Building (originally the Missouri Pacific Building). It was imploded in 1984 along with the Eames & Young 1907 seventeen-story International Building (originally the Liggett Building) for the Gateway Mall redevelopment.

JH: *Larry, let's shift gears in the time we have left to talk about the Building Arts Foundation. What role do you see for the BAF in developing a greater awareness of our built heritage?*

LG: The Foundation's goal is to promote public awareness of the crucial role of architecture, construction, and urban design. The museum that we plan to create will help us achieve that goal.

JH: *How so?*

LG: Well, with a museum we can think of all kinds of creative ways to interact with these unparalleled artifacts. I see the collection providing the basis for museum displays and exhibitions, educational programming, tours, and vocational training. There could also be practical training in the allied arts of construction, restoration, architectural and urban design, home repair, and community development. If we can partner with industry, construction trades, universities, neighborhood groups, and government agencies, we can bring together different segments of the metropolitan community who share a common concern for the architectural and urban heritage left to us.

Update

Since this interview was conducted, Larry Giles reports that the Building Arts Foundation completed its arduous move into the former cement factory in Granite City, Illinois, just across the river from St. Louis. In addition, the BAF made several major new acquisitions, substantially expanding the collection. In the area of artisanal and industrial technology, the BAF acquired a suite of rare large production woodworking machines from the old St. Louis Manual and Training School, the shop machinery and production line of the old Franklin Lighting Company (a pioneer in early electric light manufacturing), and the entire overhead belt drive infrastructure that once ran tool and die machines for the Bayer Company. For the library, the BAF acquired 23 tons of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trade periodicals from the Seattle Public Library. Giles has entered discussions with the Association for Preservation Technology to digitize portions of the library, as the BAF holds the definitive collection of materials in several key areas such as architectural ceramics and cast iron. While fundraising remains sporadic and decidedly grass roots, BAF supporters hope that by consolidating the collection in one place, more attention can be drawn to its extraordinary scope.

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