

# Reading Ruins for Commemorative Justice



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The ground that we walk upon today as Saint Louis University (SLU) students has been sown with the blood of suffering. Events like the killing of Michael Brown, the razing of Mill Creek Valley and the demolition of Pruitt Igoe demonstrate how racial violence is integral to St. Louis's spatial formation. These examples of racial violence and oppression can explain current inequities within the city.

Barriers have been erected within the space of St. Louis to keep the painful truth of the city's racial violence out-of-sight and out-of-mind. When I say the words "Delmar Divide," we all intuitively understand how the codification of racism into mid-20th century housing covenants is still with us today in the form of disinvestment away from Black and brown St. Louis communities north of Delmar Boulevard. The buildings of St. Louis have stubbornly reinforced the city's segregation into two separate spaces, even if all

the original racist planners and policymakers have died off.

One of the most obvious manifestations of this spatial division is the slew of abandoned buildings in St. Louis. The 2019 Environmental Racism in St. Louis Report notes that upwards of 90% of the city's vacant properties are in majority-Black neighborhoods. Sundry Whiteside, Board President of the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations, writes of the emotional impact that abandoned buildings have upon their communities, expressing how they "give birth to destructive behaviors, a loss[sic] sense of pride and complete hopelessness" to nearby residents. Abandoned properties have become looming figures of dereliction that are used to justify narratives of disinvestment and the criminalization of poverty. But they are also sites for a radical re-imagining of what is possible in St. Louis: platforms for commemorative justice.

The Majestic Theatre in East St. Louis was closed in the 1960s due to the economic decline of a deindustrializing East St. Louis, an area whose white population fled for the suburbs of St. Louis during the same timespan, according to "The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of



the United States.” East St. Louis was known for its exploitation of Black labor in the 19th century; the massacre that was the 1917 Race Riots stemmed from the common industrial practice of replacing striking white laborers with Black laborers new to East St. Louis. The Aluminum Corporation, Monsanto and steel companies standardized this racist exploitation, a practice that, combined with white entitlement, incited racist killings.

Once the money in East St. Louis dried up in the 60s, these corporations extricated themselves from East St. Louis, abandoning former glories like the Majestic Theatre. The perception of East St. Louis today is one of high crime and poverty—per the latest Census data, 33.4% of East St. Louis residents are in poverty.

Despite being told this, all I saw at the Majestic Theatre was a bright future engaged with the ruins of East St. Louis’s exploited past: a mural coated

alongside the side of the Majestic. Kas, known as @blackbobbross on Instagram, is the artist behind the mural and he expressed his vision of the Majestic as a community center focused on accruing Black wealth and art in East St. Louis. Ultimately, he wants to “bridge the gap for the East side,” using the Majestic as a means to refute both the city’s violent past and the contemporary narratives of East St. Louis that stem from a cursory reading of these pasts.

Across the Mississippi, ruins have become integral to a just future. The destruction from the past—killings, divestment and discrimination—provides a canvas for beautification and reclamation of narratives; symbols of justice are built from ruins of racism. We as SLU students can replicate this critical practice of engaging with and honoring our “ruins” in St. Louis, one small commemoration at a time.