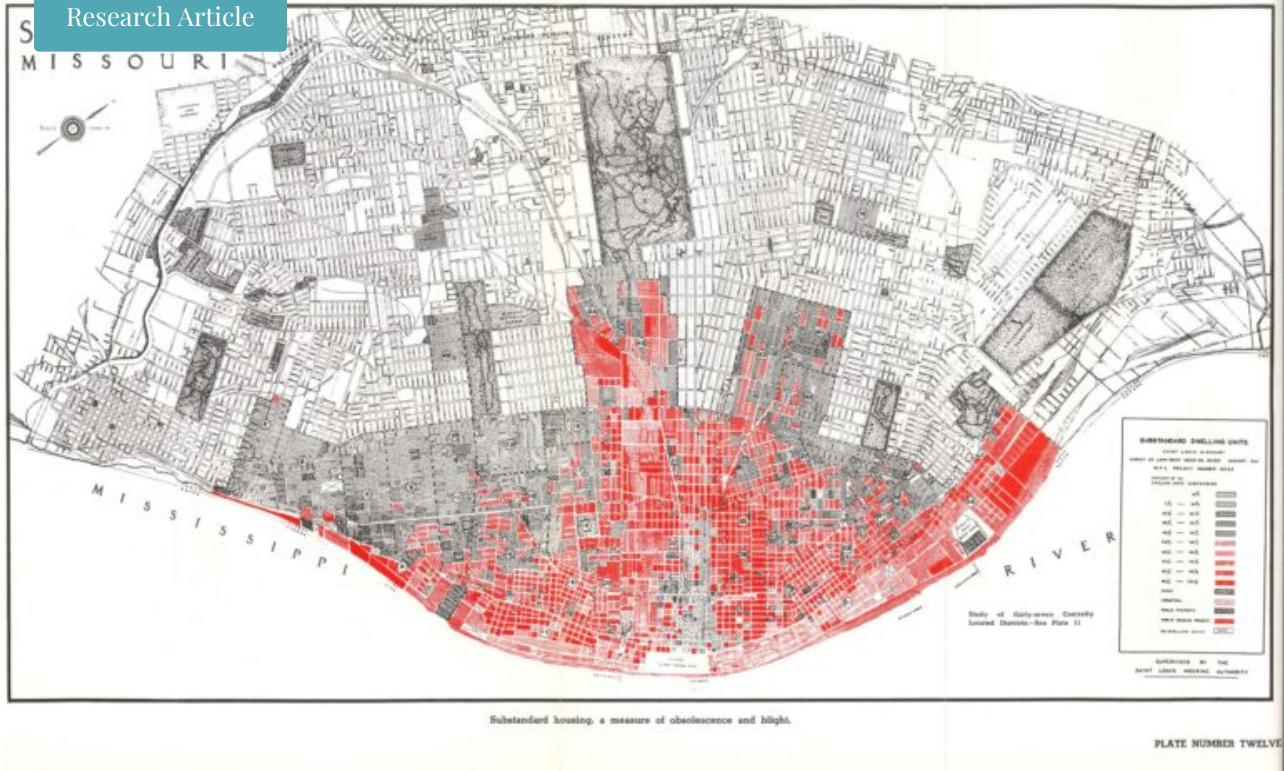


Research Article



Learning from St. Louis: How Can Literary Studies Work with the Public Urban Humanities?

November 19, 2025

Issue: [Entering Urban Humanities](#)

Jason Finch

As an academic discipline, literary scholarship brings the struggle for linguistic and cultural literacy to the interdisciplinary urban humanities and the public humanities. Writers on urban humanities and public humanities (Cuff et al. 2020; Smulyan 2022) may mention literary studies but tend to draw on other fields, such as architecture and design, or cultural history and memory studies. Literary scholars inevitably focus on the past, since their work centres on literary texts that already exist, and this distinguishes them from urbanists, focused more on the present and future. But humanities disciplines, including literary studies, can blaze trails for ‘generative’ scholarship ‘imagining future implications for the city’ (Cuff et al. 2020: 155, 156). Public humanists propose a ‘socially engaged humanities’ able to leave the highly segregated American university campus, to read ‘literature [...] in storefronts and row houses’ (Smulyan 2022: 35). Directing our reading of texts produced in various past contexts towards the future could form part of such an outward-looking project.

Referring to case-study texts that thematize residential segregation and inequality in twentieth-century St. Louis, in the Midwestern United States, this essay aims to clarify the relationship between literary studies and the public urban humanities. Two assertions can begin the work:

- Point 1. Techniques of literary interpretation will unlock urban texts not commonly construed as literary.
- Point 2. Understanding the literary field of a given city reveals aspects of it that are not revealed by other means.

Put another way, Point 1 is about expanding the literary field, and Point 2 is about urban knowledge production. The essay builds on walking as a method of fieldwork (Pierce and Lawhon 2015), as well as library work. This primary research was carried out across four visits to St. Louis between 2017 and 2024, varying in duration from a few days to three months. Reflections on those trips, and the materials gathered during them, intersect here with readings in the public and urban humanities discussed by the Urban Humanities hub at the Institute for Urban Research (IUR) at Malmö University in the second half of 2024. Two main sections of the present essay consider aspects of St. Louis as imaginative place, on the terms proposed in my earlier book *Deep Locational Criticism* (Finch 2016): firstly, an interpretation of the city during the twentieth century as repeatedly attempting to reform (and re-form) itself using physical destruction as a tool; secondly, an account of the city’s neglected literary canon as, on the terms of Pierre Bourdieu, a field of cultural production. This essay is primarily conceptual in a way that prepares for deeper close readings of a St. Louis literary canon.

1940s to 2020s Literary Representations of Mid-Twentieth-Century St. Louis

Literary representations of mid-twentieth-century St. Louis range from those produced almost contemporaneously with the places and conditions they narrate, and those which operate using memory and research to reconstruct the past across a span of several decades. At the time of writing, mid-twentieth-century St. Louis still exists in living memory, but only just. A text not typically treated as literary, but reinterpretable as such,

is the 1947 *Comprehensive City Plan* produced for the St. Louis by Harland Bartholomew and Associates, which was disseminated by the St. Louis news media around 1950. Reinterpretation of the urban past across a decades-long temporal span, built on memories and archival research, meanwhile, animates *The Last Children of Mill Creek*, a 2020 memoir of growing up in mid-twentieth-century St. Louis by Black author Vivian Gibson, who approaches the city through family history. Neither the urban plan nor the family-focused memoir, considering Point 1, belongs to a literary genre in the sense that, say, Tennessee Williams's 1945 play *The Glass Menagerie* or Jonathan Franzen's 1988 novel *The Twenty-Seventh City*, both of them set in and to an extent thematizing St. Louis, do. Yet considering Point 2, Bartholomew's text and Gibson's are both part of what Bourdieu might have called the St. Louis literary field: both reward investigation using techniques of literary reading, and both enrich an understanding of this city's cultural makeup and shifting histories of inequality. Both, additionally, centre a particular imaginative-topographic region in the city alongside others: Mill Creek Valley.

The two texts' meanings are intertwined. In her memoir, Gibson nuances the imaginative history of modern and contemporary St. Louis, which has tended to focus on displacement and outright destruction. She does so in dialogue with earlier accounts of the levelling and replacement by roads, office buildings, university grounds and parking lots, of the area in which she grew up, known variously (and highly stigmatized in local discourse) as Mill Creek or Mill Creek Valley. This area lay due west of the city's downtown business district, or in Gibson's words (2020: 13; maps, 20–23), 'bounded on the west by Grand Avenue near St. Louis University, on the north by Lindell and Olive Streets, on the east by Twentieth Street, and by the railroad tracks on the South' until its almost complete demolition starting in 1959 (Fagerstrom 2000: 8–9).^[1]

White imaginations of Mill Creek in 1940s St. Louis are elucidated by a line from Scene Three of *The Glass Menagerie*, published two years before Bartholomew's *Comprehensive City Plan* was issued. In the line, Williams's protagonist Tom Wingfield hysterically parodies his mother Amanda's interference in his lifestyle ('I don't believe that you go every night to the movies', she says) by pretending to have become a local gangster:

I'm going to opium dens! Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminals' hangouts, Mother. I've joined the Hogan Gang, I'm a hired assassin, I carry a tommy gun in a violin case! I run a string of cat houses in the Valley! They call me Killer, Killer Wingfield [...].

(Williams [1945]: 24)

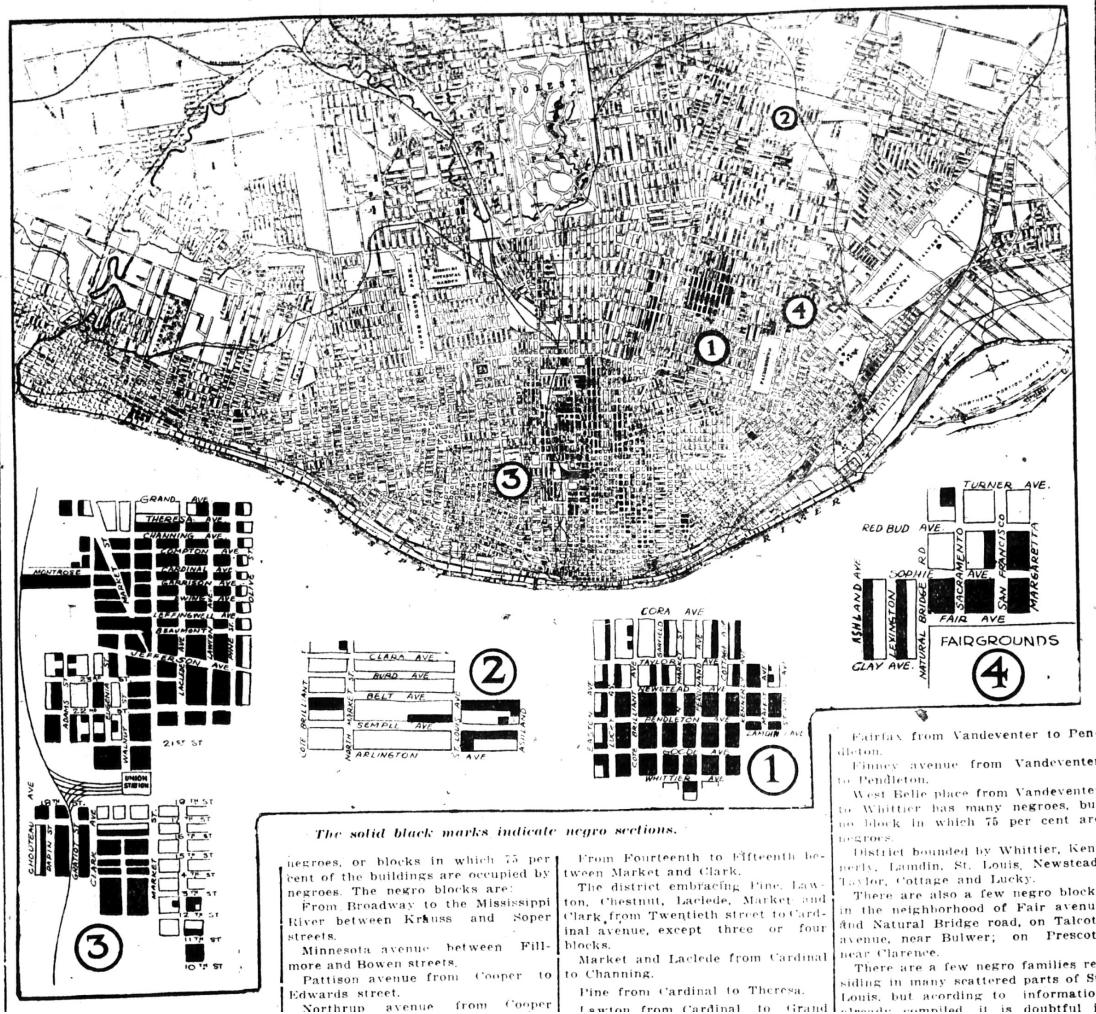
In the run-up to its clearance in 1959, Mill Creek Valley functioned as the Black downtown of St. Louis (Gibson 2020: 13; Wright 1994: 23). However, powered by contemporary media discourse, cultural memory (as of the city's Prohibition-era Hogan Gang), and the image made world-famous in 1930s gangster films, Williams's Tom instead identifies 'the Valley' as a red-light district, as somewhere that audience members will understand to be the lowest neighbourhood in the city, and thus also as a piece of local colour for the play's setting. Understood as a literary representation of St. Louis, Bartholomew's plan and the near-contemporary view in *The Glass Menagerie* echo one another, contrasting in outlook on Mill Creek with the retrospective from decades later provided by Gibson, who lived in

the area as a small child. For Gibson, Mill Creek was not a place of picturesque horror as it was for Williams's Tom, or a shameful zone needing replacement, as it was for Bartholomew: it was home. Through the interplay between these literary urban representations, it becomes more possible to grasp how Mill Creek gained a symbolic status in racialized imaginations of St. Louis urbanity originating in what, in discussing New Orleans, D. Ryan Gray (2020: 20) calls the 'two-tiered racial hierarchy' enforced in the US South during the Jim Crow era of segregation. More than in New Orleans, such matters in St. Louis were complicated by the latter city's ambiguous position in relation to the 'South' as a region and its identity within the United States: during the antebellum years, this was a city where the internal battle between proslavery and antislavery elements was particularly vicious (Arenson 2011: 65–81).

St. Louis as Imaginative Place: (1) Urban Form and Urban Destruction

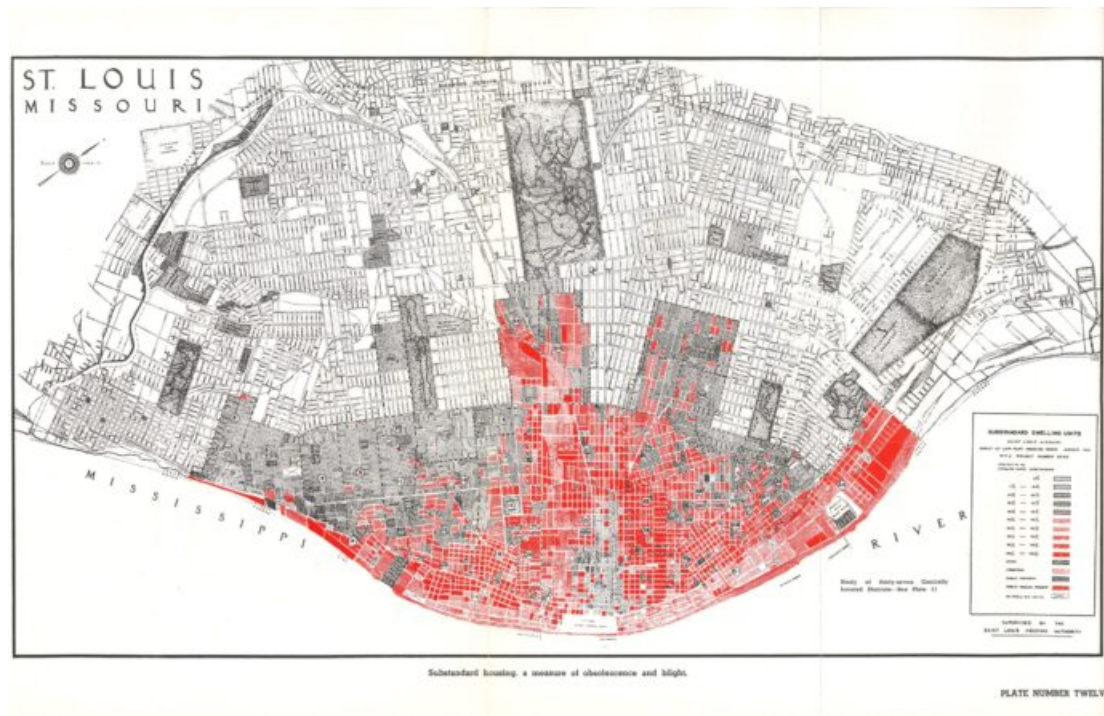
At the time of writing in 2025, St. Louis is the central city in a post-industrial urban area close to the frontier dividing the United States regions of the Midwest and the South. It is a southwestern outlier of the post-industrial Rust Belt, today sharing characteristics with cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh, including the large-scale abandonment post-1970 of housing in Black-majority urban districts (Hackworth 2018; Hackworth 2021). The city proper, which in 2025 had a population of less than 300,000 but anchors a metropolitan area of 2.8 million, still among the top 25 US metros, is on the west bank of the Mississippi River just south of its confluence with the Missouri River, while a significant portion of Metro St. Louis lies on the eastern side of the river in the state of Illinois. The city's complex, conflict-filled history stretches back to its foundation in the eighteenth century as a French colonial settlement, then its transfer to the United States with the Louisiana Purchase, following which, during the Civil War, St Louis became the headquarters of the Union army within a state where slavery was legal in 1860 (Arenson 2011; Johnson 2020). During Reconstruction, in 1876, the City of St. Louis declared independence from St. Louis County, of which it had previously been part, ultimately limiting the independent city's tax base and giving the St. Louis region a divided identity that was to endure. Addressing a broader American public, Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* associated St. Louis with an out-of-date sort of industrial griminess. More recent urbanists, meanwhile, know this city as the site of a gigantic and failed experiment in creating what Dana Cuff and her colleagues (2020: 160) call 'material utopias', namely the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects, completed in 1954 then demolished in stages from 1972 to 1976, portions of it thus lasting under twenty years.

Blocks in Which Negroes May Hereafter Take Up Residence as Provided in New City Ordinance



Two years after *The Glass Menagerie*'s 1945 premiere, Bartholomew's *Comprehensive City Plan* called for the removal of areas abutting the city centre which it identified as slums filled with 'substandard housing' (Map 2). Mill Creek Valley was notable among them. As early as 1916, the area which by mid-century was being called Mill Creek Valley appeared as one of the two largest patches of 'Blocks in Which Negroes May Thereafter Take Up Residence' in a map published by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* newspaper aimed at enforcing Restrictive Deed Covenants that were racist (Gordon 2008: 72; Map 1). At the end of the 1940s, Mill Creek's demolition was adopted as official policy by the mayor's office and Council of Aldermen, which between them formed the city government of St. Louis. Following the 1949 US Housing Act, which provided federal funding for the clearance of undesirable urban areas and the construction of public housing, this decision was then publicized in the local media, notably via the *Post-Dispatch* and local radio stations. This media strategy continued the one that had been followed by the engineering academic Raymond Tucker, who would serve as Mayor of St. Louis from 1953 to 1965, when he had been the city's Smoke Abatement Commissioner shortly before the United States entered the Second World War, as a means of campaigning for legislation restricting coal-burning factories within the city limits (Tucker Papers S/2/2/2). During 1950, in a series of articles which it turned into a dramatically colour-printed supplement, the *Post-Dispatch*

presented local issues including housing, racial inequality, suburbanization and the fate of an ageing downtown under the heading 'Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose' (P.-D. 1950).



Post-1980s accounts of the area, which became named as Mill Creek Valley during the mid-twentieth century, have included efforts other than Gibson's to make the voices of those displaced by its clearance heard (e.g. Fagerstrom 2000). In a 2010s era characterized by efforts at reparative remembering of past displacement and destruction, as well as the confinement by Whites of the city's Black residents inside a supposed 'ring of steel' (Gordon 2008: 77), the architectural historian Michael R. Allen (2017) described Mill Creek as the city's 'invisible monument', where '[g]reat vernacular architecture fell into what today is the city's most placeless, strange landscape'. As well as with the fate of Mill Creek, the image of St. Louis as a city has become entangled with the fate of the large-scale public housing designed to replace areas like it labelled as slums, most famously the Pruitt-Igoe projects. As Gibson (2020: 143) documents, many African Americans who owned property in areas such as Mill Creek and the Ville (a second zone where Black residents were permitted to live after the 1910s) moved to areas like Hamilton Heights in outer northwestern St. Louis, built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries then after the mid-1950s were rapidly abandoned by their White occupants just as areas closer to downtown had earlier been.^[11]

The dynamiting of several of the Pruitt-Igoe blocks in 1975 was filmed by cinematographer Ron Fricke as part of Godfrey Reggio's documentary film *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). Shots of the abandoned Pruitt-Igoe buildings taken by Fricke from a helicopter follow footage in *Koyaanisqatsi* of New York City, first a speeded-up view of Midtown Manhattan and then an apparently impoverished area in the Bronx, or another of the city's outer boroughs. Ninety seconds from the end of the clip, we see first Pruitt-Igoe and then other twentieth-century American buildings, as well as a bridge, get blown up too (all in slow motion). The musical score, written by composer Philip Glass specifically for the film, creates a build-

up of tension towards a climax as multiple charges of dynamite lodged in the buildings are remotely detonated, leading to their slow-motion collapse (Reggio [1982]: 05:00–05:30). Thanks to its appearance in *Koyaanisqatsi* alongside time-lapse footage of New York City and others of American reservoirs, power infrastructures, and the deserts of the US Southwest, the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe gained the status in America and elsewhere during the 1980s of a symbol. Pruitt-Igoe came to symbolize the failure of modernist urban planning. Hence the title of a 2011 documentary film directed by Chad Freidrichs in which academics, city officials, and (most memorably) former residents of the blocks spoke to camera: *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (Freidrichs 2011).

To viewers of *Koyaanisqatsi*, Pruitt-Igoe might have seemed deserving of its fate. During the 1980s, architectural postmodernism dominated American urban design, after all. Postmodernist urbanism in America sought quirks and details rather than large-scale standardization or purity of form, taking its cue from a 1970s book whose title I, in turn, have adapted for the title of this essay: *Learning from Las Vegas*, by the architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour (1977). Via the title of this essay, I am asking what can be learned from a city that has come to symbolize the many failures of twentieth-century US capitalism and policy: efforts at progressive municipal government and federal policy; claims to have ameliorated inequalities of race and wealth. To learn from St. Louis means reappraising this city: not just counting the black marks against it, but asking what its achievements in the twentieth century and since have been.

St. Louis as Imaginative Place (2): Literary Canon

Compared with, say, New York, Chicago, or New Orleans, there are few literary representations of St. Louis, and many of those which do exist are dismissive of the city or describe it negatively, sometimes as a way of characterizing the United States and its city regions more generally. *The Twenty-Seventh City* is a piece of literary postmodernism which also echoes the ‘New Journalism’ underpinning other 1980s US urban fictions, such as Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (concerned with New York). In Franzen’s novel, St. Louis symbolizes the culturally null, minor, or dull aspects of American urbanity. It is represented as not just a generically American urban region but being as even more minor and duller than the others. A young White adult character from a prosperous suburb of the city, Luisa Probst, has been on a high school exchange to France, meeting people who (bafflingly to her) considered St. Louis glamorous, then hears that the daughter from her host family is coming to visit.

It was strange that a tour group from Europe would want to see St. Louis. Then again, the people Luisa had met in France hadn’t seemed to know what a boring place it was. Even the grown-ups had thought she must have a great old time living in San Louie and listening to the blues every night on a riverboat. People in Europe were convinced that St. Louis was a really hot town .

(Franzen [1988]: 52–53)

Still, a St. Louis canon could be assembled. Writers of prose fiction and nonfiction in the St. Louis canon active between the 1880s and the 1980s include Kate Chopin (1850–1904), Winston Churchill (1871–1947), Fannie Frank Cook (1893–1949), Thomas Wolfe (1900–1938),

Joseph Stanley Pennell (1903–1963), Chester Himes (1909–1984), William S. Burroughs (1914–1997), Stanley Elkin (1930–1995), Harold Brodkey (1930–1956), and Franzen himself (born 1959).

What attempts there have been so far to chart a St. Louis literary canon have chiefly emerged from local desires to assert the city's significance. One example is a work arranged topographically as a historical guidebook, edited by Lorin Cuoco together with the St. Louis-based avant-garde novelist William H. Gass, who taught at Washington University for decades (Cuoco and Gass 2000). Cuoco and Gass seem to seek what I have called 'imaginative place', or in other words 'place as conceived and as encountered in experience at varying levels of depth' (Finch 2016: 201), in the shape of an essence of St. Louis that is experienced differently by diversely positioned writers in different eras. Their book was published by the Missouri Historical Society, a privately funded research association rather than a public institution, at the end of the twentieth century, as was the thousand-page anthology *Seeking St. Louis: Voices from a River City, 1670–2000* (L. Sandweiss 2000). This collection, a commemorative narrative history built around the notion of diversity in perspective, provides many of the materials for a literary history of twentieth-century St. Louis. The same press, a few years earlier, had published John A. Wright's instructive *Discovering African American St. Louis*, arranged more thoroughly than Cuoco and Gass's volume, as a topographic guidebook to a long-present, long-culturally-downplayed dimension of the city (Wright 1994).

Alongside *The Glass Menagerie*, several other literary texts of the mid-twentieth century cast light on St. Louis's contradictions at that point. Successful mid-century fiction such as Wolfe's *The Lost Boy* (1937) and Benson's *Meet Me in St Louis* (1942; afterwards filmed with Judy Garland in the starring role) looked back fondly to the beginning of the century. Such representations suggested that the city had enjoyed a golden age around the time of its 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, or World's Fair. In the same era, Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* emphasized the city's griminess and romanticism, paralleling the anti-smoke campaign which Tucker had led a few years before the play was first performed. The 1940s also saw exiled St. Louisan T. S. Eliot win the Nobel Prize in Literature (in 1948) in part acknowledging his sequence of poems *Four Quartets*, first published earlier in the decade as World War Two drew towards an end. One of the poems in the sequence, 'The Dry Salvages', begins with a fourteen-line stanza, formally a sonnet, in which the Mississippi at St. Louis seems to appear as a 'brown god [...] almost forgotten / By the dwellers in cities', yet remains 'implacable':

Keeping his seasons, and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting .

(Eliot 1944: 25)

In 'The Dry Salvages', Eliot hints at the environmental long durée in which St. Louis exists. Where the atmosphere of *The Glass Menagerie* recalls the city menaced by smoke for which the sulphurous coal that could be mined not far off in southern Illinois was held responsible by Tucker and others (Tarr and Zimring 1997: 201), Eliot refers to the river

which (thanks to the bluffs above it on which its downtown sits), led European settlers to occupy the site of today's St. Louis in the 1760s. Equally, in the last lines of the St. Louis sonnet, Eliot follows Wolfe by recalling the details experienced in a childhood there decades ago, including 'the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard' and 'the evening circle in the winter gaslight'.

The St. Louis literary canon may seem a decayed or insignificant branch of American literature. Wolfe and Benson's nostalgic accounts of turn-of-the-century St. Louis developed already extant pessimistic modes of viewing this particular city. According to the educator and amateur cultural historian Denton Jacques Snider (1841–1925), a member of the St Louis Hegelians group, the city was already sinking into nostalgia as early as the 1880s, having been at the crux of world events during the Civil War decade of the 1860s (E. Sandweiss 2000: xxx; Leighton [1999]). Eric Sandweiss has argued that the World's Fair itself was a backward-looking event, as was the Pageant and Masque that commemorated it in 1914, a decade after the Fair had brought visitors from all over the world to St. Louis (Ibid.: xxx–xxx). Sandweiss writes from the perspective of the twentieth century's dying moments and, as a St. Louis-based researcher, seems preoccupied with rather solipsistic narratives of decline which underline the city's supposed specialness. All of this may suggest that there is little worth investigating in this area of secondariness or even greater obscurity. But just as Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour (1977: xi) take 'the commercial strip', exemplified by Highway 91 on its passage through Las Vegas, seriously as aesthetic form and thus as requiring careful architectural description alongside the 'studies of medieval Europe and ancient Rome and Greece' which architecture students earlier in the twentieth century had been instructed in, so I take the St. Louis canon seriously and consider that it needs close attention.

A Field of Failure? Or One of Endurance?

Learning from St. Louis involves learning to comprehend complex relationships between cities' pasts, presents, and futures. The work aims to be generative of the future in a way that is honest and knowledgeable about contested histories. In conclusion, let us return briefly to the two points grounding the investigation of literary St. Louis that were proposed in the introduction.

Point 1. Techniques of literary interpretation will unlock urban texts not commonly construed as literary.

Research methods originating in literary studies, such as close reading, narrative analysis, contextual study of authors and readers, and work on genre, help answer urban questions. As an urban plan and a memoir, the case study texts of this research occupy the border between what is commonly seen as imaginative literature and what is not. An autobiographical text is a personal narrative which, in various ways, both resembles and does not resemble a work of prose fiction such as a novel: it is organized as a piece of literary rhetoric but stakes a claim to be considered verifiably true. An urban plan is essentially a future-oriented fiction: it presents a vision of the city as, as the planners and those funding them claim, it *could* be. Both the memoir and the visionary plan can be read

as urban literature. To use Bourdieu's terms, the texts by Bartholomew and Gibson are part of the St. Louis 'field of cultural production'. This is a field with a low level of 'relative autonomy' in comparison with, say, the markedly aesthetic nineteenth-century French writing on which Bourdieu (1993: 55) focuses. Randal Johnson (1993: 9) calls Bourdieu's approach to literary and other cultural forms 'radical contextualisation'. The outcome of studying the St. Louis cultural field through the city's literary canon might not be to place canonical works of literature deeply into their social context, however, but rather to show the inherent literariness of cities as textually mediated ideas.

Point 2. Understanding the literary field of a given city reveals aspects of it that are not revealed by other means.

Bourdieu's notion of *champ* ('field') includes the idea of overlapping social formations that have their own laws and structures, while they are part of larger systems of power (Johnson 1993: 6). St. Louis has a literary field of its own, while the city's culture also exists in national and transnational hierarchies. This literary field helps enforce a lowly position in the imaginative hierarchy of US cities for St. Louis. Reading the St. Louis canon using insights from literary urban studies about how cultural representations help form hierarchies of settlements (Finch et al. 2017) reveals a split personality given to self-harm that has continually damaged the material well-being of this city region. In terms of American urban culture, and despite its centrality to an urban region in 2025 inhabited by almost three million people, St. Louis is not only secondary to New York as the prime city in terms of magnitude and culture, but also behind at least five or six other cities that are all in some way secondary but have metropolitan and primary qualities (both imaginative and material) that St. Louis lacks or falls short of. These include Washington, D.C. (federal capital), Boston (earlier cultural and spiritual capital), Chicago (capital of the Midwest, centre of Chicagoland, capital of Black America, capital of Slavic America, and so on), New Orleans (as former slave market and New-York-like trading metropolis of the South; later culturally rich centre of hybridity); San Francisco and Los Angeles (capitals of the West; in the case of the latter, embodiment of twentieth-century America with its characteristics of mass entertainment and mass automobility).

Generative literary historical research on the St. Louis literary canon, focused on the 1940s and 1950s but connecting that to the divisions and ongoing (and renewed) struggles of the 2020s, would use literary techniques such as studies of genre, narrative, and sources to read the Bartholomew and Gibson texts taken as case studies here as literary texts (thus testing Point 1). Building on this (and testing Point 2), I then would ask what this work reveals about the city that has not been revealed before, and what such knowledge could contribute to public action in 2020s St. Louis. This work arrives more than a decade after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a St. Louis County police officer sparked unrest, in the 2025 context of militarized crackdowns on public expressions of dissent against the activities of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) federal law enforcement agency. An example of work in the public literary urban humanities would be generated, applicable beyond St. Louis and beyond the United States.

St. Louis, I hypothesize, suffers from an ongoing inability to coalesce as a metropolis. This is a city whose main characteristic since the early twentieth century has been one of relative decline compared with other cities in an urban network, that of the United States, driven by an ideology of competition in which to be seen to succeed is to be valorized. To a considerable extent, St. Louis anticipated the growth of Los Angeles as a western ‘horizontal metropolis’, its multiple centres initially networked by an extensive streetcar system which gave way to suburbanization in which the automobile was king (Hanakata et al. 2023: 346–48). But the cultural footprint of St. Louis is far less distinct than that of Los Angeles, with the symbolic failure and visualized destruction of Pruitt-Igoe the only aspect of it to have been incorporated in the urbanist’s canon of semantically important images.

The city’s literary canon charts this status as a declined and neglected urban field in a unique way: on Bourdieu’s terms a less autonomous field, perhaps a subfield of the coherent urban personality which this city, like others, has. The hope of such coalescence stands behind the optimistic 1950 series of *Post-Dispatch* articles publicizing Bartholomew’s 1947 *Comprehensive City Plan*. It lurks unhelpfully in the title of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, authored by one of the St. Louis region’s many literary exiles, and in that novel’s plot. Franzen’s title, after all, is a badge of shame for a city which once claimed (whether truthfully or not) to be the fourth city, population-wise, of the United States. His plot hinges on the political and financial intrigue surrounding an imaginary 1980s referendum on whether the city and county of St. Louis should once more merge into one. The perspective of Franzen’s novel presents an extreme contrast with the boosterism of Logan Uriah Reavis in the 1870s. Reavis was a journalist who notoriously claimed to have demonstrated scientifically that St. Louis was ‘the future great city of the world’ (L. Sandweiss 2000: 297–313). The hope for and failure of such coalescence is charted by Gibson in *The Last Children of Mill Creek* through the changes which she and members of her family experienced, including her own move away from the city to the undeniably primary American metropolis, New York City.

Multiple narratives of failure surround St. Louis, then. But the city and its region also endure into the mid-twenty-first century in a way that results from the security of settler colonialism on the North American continent and the military power of the United States. Learning from St. Louis, for public urban humanists positioned elsewhere on the globe, means combining these complexities without othering a city region that is fundamentally comparable to others.

NOTES

[i] Mill Creek began as co-extensive with the group of blocks north of the city’s Union Station which are part of area 3 in Map 1, published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on 3 March 1916. As the map shows, this area was far closer to the city centre immediately west of the Mississippi River than any of the other areas in which Black residents had official permission to live. Mill Creek grew into surrounding blocks to the north, west and south of area 3 in Map 1. By 1947, Mill Creek (its centre marked by the numbers 21 and 22 on Map 2) lay at the heart of the vast area surrounding the city’s downtown which Bartholomew marked out as containing substandard housing needing redevelopment, or in other words

demolition, in his *Comprehensive Plan*.

[ii] The Ville originated as area 1 in Map 1, published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on 3 March 1916.

References

Archival

Tucker Papers. 1938–1952. Raymond R. Tucker Smoke Abatement Records, Julian Edison Department of Special Collections, Washington University in St. Louis Libraries (see https://aspace.wustl.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/137979).

Map 1. 1916. 'Blocks in Which Negroes May Hereafter Take Up Residence' *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2 March 1916 (microfilm, State Historical Society of Missouri Saint Louis Research Center).

Map 2. 1947. 'Substandard housing, a measure of obsolescence and blight', Plate Twelve in Bartholomew, *Comprehensive City Plan* (State Historical Society of Missouri Saint Louis Research Center).

Print and Online

Allen, Michael R. 2017. 'Mill Creek Valley: St. Louis' Invisible Monument'. *Decoding the City* [website]. <http://www.decodingstl.org/mill-creek-valley-st-louis-invisible-monument/>. Consulted 9 June 2025.

Arenson, Adam. 2011. *The Great Heart of the Republic: St Louis and the Cultural Civil War* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Bartholomew, Harland. 1947. *Comprehensive City Plan: Saint Louis, Missouri* St Louis: City Plan Commission.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* Edited by Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP.

Cuff, Dana, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Todd Samuel Presner, Maite Zubiaurre, and Jonathan Crisman. 2020. *Urban Humanities: New Practices for Reimagining the City*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Cuoco, Lorin, and William H. Gass (eds). 2000. *Literary St. Louis: A Guide*. St Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press.

Eliot, T. S. 1944. *Four Quartets*. London: Faber & Faber.

Fagerstrom, Ron. 2000. 'Mill Creek Valley: A Soul of Saint Louis' [self-published report held at Missouri Historical Society Library and Research Centre, St Louis].

Finch, Jason. 2016. *Deep Locational Criticism: Imaginative Place in Literary Research and Teaching* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Finch, Jason, Lieven Ameel and Markku Salmela (eds). 2017. *Literary Second Cities*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Franzen, Jonathan [1988]. 2010. *The Twenty-Seventh City*. London: Fourth Estate.

Freidrichs, Chad, director. 2011. *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*.

Gibson, Vivian. 2020. *The Last Children of Mill Creek*. Cleveland, OH: Belt.

Gordon, Colin. 2008. *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gray, D. Ryan. 2020. *Uprooted: Race, Public Housing, and the Archaeology of Four Lost New Orleans Neighborhoods*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Hackworth, Jason. 2018. 'Race and the Production of Extreme Land Abandonment in the American Rust Belt'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42.1: 51–73.

- Hackworth, Jason. 2021. 'Why Black-Majority Neighbourhoods Are the Epicentre of Population Shrinkage in the American Rust Belt'. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 112.1: 44–61.
- Hanakata, Naomi, Christian Schmid, Monika Streule and Ozan Karaman. 2023. 'Incorporation of Urban Differences: The Commodification of Urban Value'. In *Vocabularies for an Urbanising Planet*, ed. Christian Schmid and Monika Streule. Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 335–56.
- Johnson, Randal. 1993. 'Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature, and Culture', in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1–25.
- Johnson, Walter. 2020. *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* New York: Basic Books.
- Leighton, Denys P. [1999]. 'Denton Jacques Snider (1841–1925)'. In *Dictionary of Missouri Biography*, ed. Lawrence O. Christensen, William E. Foley, Gary R. Kremer, and Kenneth H. Winn. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. <https://missourienyclopedia.org/people/snider-denton-jacques>. Accessed 7 May 2025.
- Pierce, Joseph and Mary Lawhon. 2015. 'Walking as Method: Toward Methodological Forthrightness and Comparability in Urban Geographical Research'. *The Professional Geographer* 67.4: 655–62.
- P.-D. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*). 1950. 'Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose: Collected Edition of a Series Which Appeared in The Post Dispatch March–May 1950' [newspaper supplement; held at St Louis Public Library]
- Reggio, Godfrey, director [1982]. *Koyaanisqatsi*. (Extract: 'Koyaanisqatsi – Pruitt-Igoe [HD]', YouTube.com. Accessed 6 May 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNNjrHR53ZA>.
- Sandweiss, Eric. 2000. 'Introduction'. In *Seeking St. Louis: Voices from a River City, 1670–2000*, edited by Lee Ann Sandweiss. St Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, xiii – xxxiii.
- Sandweiss, Lee Ann, editor. *Seeking St. Louis: Voices from a River City, 1670–2000*. St Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press.
- Smulyan, Susan, ed. 2021. *Doing Public Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- Tarr, Joel and Carl Zimring. 1997. 'The Struggle for Smoke Control in St. Louis: Achievement and Emulation'. In *Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis*, edited by Andrew Hurley. St Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 199–220.
- Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour [1972]. 1977 *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Revised edition. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Williams, Tennessee [1945]. 2000. *The Glass Menagerie*. London: Methuen.
- Wright, John A. 1994. *Discovering African American St. Louis: A Guide to Historic Sights*. St Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press.

Authors



Jason Finch

Professor of English Language and Literature » Åbo Akademi University

Jason Finch is Professor in the department of English Language and Literature at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. A scholar of urban humanities, mobility humanities and public humanities, Jason was trained in spatial literary studies with a focus on British modernism. He now researches literary representations of urban place, and transportation spaces as imaginative zones in which identities are formed and contested. Publications include *Deep Locational Criticism: Imaginative Place in Literary Research and Teaching* (John Benjamins, 2016) as well as *Literary Urban Studies and How to Practice It* (Routledge, 2022), plus numerous co-edited volumes and special issues. Essays have appeared in the *European Journal of English Studies*, the *Journal of Transport History*, the *Journal of Urban History*, *Urban Studies*, the *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* and *Literary Geographies*. Pursuing his interest in Midwestern US urbanism, Jason has been visiting St Louis, Missouri and surroundings to research cultures and neighbourhoods there since 2017.