



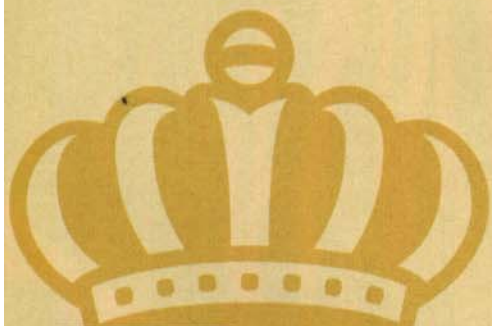
Eric Friedman of Friedman Group is quoted in the "Rise of the Creative Class" article from St. Louis Magazine - May 2006

"We cannot afford to drive out the very people who build our neighborhoods." says Eric Friedman, of the Friedman Group REALTOR® in the Central West End. "The right public policy could ensure diversity of income levels in any community, but I'm not seeing it."

**THE
RISE
OF the
Creative
CLASS**

Staid St. Louis is turning into SoHo, as artists and musicians discover our raw spaces, storied past and cheap rent. Will they SAVE THE CITY?

By LYNDA GREENE *Photographs by* FRANK DI PIAZZA



Imagine a bustling metropolis perfectly placed at the confluence of two magnificent rivers smack in the center of the American heartland. Now, remove half-a-million residents. Drop the national ranking 40 places in 40 years—from eighth to 48th. Sever commercial arteries, bleed out scores of blue-chip companies, tear down significant historic architectural infrastructure and allow what remains to rot. Erect uninspired office towers in haphazard fashion. Neglect schools, public services and mass transit. Invest billions in office, sports and convention complexes and luxury-housing developments. Ensure a deficit of affordable mixed-income housing. Add dodgy politics and atrophic leadership, mix in terminal low civic self-esteem and you've got ... a postindustrial has-been, right?

Actually, such a city—our city—is perfectly situated for an influx of the educated and innovative folks described by economic guru Richard Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class*: the artists, writers, filmmakers, designers, architects, educators, eggheads, entrepreneurs and bohemians whose economic function is to think up cool ideas, attract business and initiate social change.

Educated, imaginative, enterprising people of all ages and persuasions have migrated to St. Louis over the last decade to join an already vibrant, if largely subterranean, creative ecosystem. Here—amid the historic architecture, patchwork street life, distinct neighborhoods, diverse ethnic populations, city parks and grungy warehouses—they find a creative freedom that they've experienced nowhere else. Fueled by a jury-rigged spirit of optimism and ingenuity, they love this city shamelessly. They're determined to restore its glory—and, if we're careful, they just might succeed.

WHO THEY ARE

There is no listing for “Creative Class” in the Yellow Pages. These people are too absorbed in whatever makes them a class in the first place to dwell on what defines their coolness. You have to sleuth them out in their habitats: warehouses and basements, bistros and bookstores, schools and storefronts and the neighborhoods into which they've settled like hermit crabs. In and around the city they fix up storefronts, rehab houses, restore architectural treasures, build neighborhoods, plant gardens, teach children, rescue strays, look out for the homeless and addicted. They fight for neglected parks, threatened landmarks, abandoned blocks and vacant lots, determined to preserve our city's historical and cultural heritage. They forge something our major sport teams, entertainment venues and business enterprises cannot: an urban identity unique to this place.

Some come, bored, from traditional backgrounds. Jim McKelvey worked in software before launching the Third Degree Glass Factory. Jeff Orbin ran an advertising firm before opening a restaurant, Monarch, in Maplewood. Robert Powell worked in business before opening Portfolio Gallery. Catherine Neville and Allyson Mace worked in web design and food service before launching *Sauce Magazine*.

Many come, dubious, from other places. “I was a bit reluctant, after I got a master's in creative writing at NYU, to move back to St. Louis,” says poet Aaron Belz. “I feared I would be putting myself in relative obscurity. Instead, my work has really benefited from the low-key, eclectic intellectuals and artists I've met here. There is no fake hipsterism in St. Louis, because there's no social reward for that—only marginalization. Here, if you're an artist or a city arts patron, it's because you're devoted to a cause.”

Though breaking in isn't easy, all report finding strong support from the likeminded in what they describe as a stimulating, if fragmented, creative climate. “I was a novelty when I came here, and, in some ways, I'm still an outsider,” says Jeigh Singleton, originally from Louisiana and now teaching fashion design at Washington University. “But most creative people don't belong anyway, not in the old social networks; they create their own, which they can do here. It's easy to star in St. Louis; you can find

whatever you want here.”

Singleton finds St. Louis' famed conservatism greatly overstated. “People always say, ‘If you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere’—but it's just the opposite,” he insists. “In New York, they'll put crap on the sidewalk and people step around it and call it art. Here, you put crap on the sidewalk and people call it crap. St. Louisans know quality; they won't let you get away with anything.”

WHY THEY'RE HERE

Bob Cassilly, creator of the City Museum and other quintessentially cool projects, traveled around the country looking for the Perfect Place. “Everywhere I went, there I was,” he says. “So I ended up back in St. Louis—where else can you do all this stuff?” Nobody wanted the old “neofascist” International Shoe Building that Cassilly turned into one of the region's major tourist attractions, a collision of *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. “Go north of downtown and you can get away with murder,” he says. “It's a matter of turning the liabilities into possibilities.”

Blessed with dozens of distinct old neighborhoods and scores of neglected aging-beauty buildings, St. Louis speaks to the creative mind. “The architecture is sublime, the arts scene vibrant, the quality of the yard and garage sales unparalleled in the universe,” says Illinois native Galen Gondolfi, founder of Fort Gondo Compound for the Arts, Radio Cherokee and the Typo Café in South City. He came to St. Louis some years ago by way of Boston and New York and is now opening an all-women art gallery and planning a 10-car drive-in movie theater. “I love the postindustrial malaise,” he says, “and the density. You can be anywhere in 20 minutes.”

Creative types react with glee to what the rest of us bemoan. An abandoned shoe factory becomes a tourist's head trip. An old jail becomes an art gallery and event space, a stable becomes a studio and a condemned garage becomes an exciting glass studio.

“I tried to do this twice in other cities, and it never worked out,” says McKelvey of the Third Degree Glass Factory, “so I came home to St. Louis. Same person, same plan, different place. Here, it happened in no time at all.

“St. Louisans put their city down to prove



ABOVE: Jeigh Singleton with Washington University fashion students. RIGHT: Davide Weaver of Art Dimensions. BELOW: Designer Kiku Obata



WE'VE GOT SOME world-class creative people working here, but local companies would never think to enable this talent. **They don't think lyrically.** KIKU OBATA



how worldly they are," he adds abruptly. "It's nothing but posturing—and it's silly. I have a condo in Pensacola and I'm bidding on a place in Tokyo, yet I choose to spend most of my time here because I can do things I can't do in other places."

Creatives say that St. Louis is one of the few cities where they can own a car, buy or rent a decent place, work part-time—and still do their thing. They love the abundance of mixed-use spaces in our seemingly limitless supply of old, underused buildings, where low rents encourage the chancier, more unorthodox enterprises that generate buzz and street life.

Powerful demographic shifts over the last 30 years have only enhanced those advantages. "The traditional two-parent family now represents only 20 percent of American households," says Andrew Hurley, professor of urban studies at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. "The smaller, well-built houses you see around the city are perfect for people on one income."

"It takes fresh eyes to see what this city has," says Singleton. "I looked at L.A. and decided I didn't like my car that much. New York is too dense and lacks our alleys and architecture. And where else can you live in the presence of such a mythic thing as the Arch? From my neighborhood I can walk to the Basilica and the Great Basin in Forest Park in minutes. Here you live close to beauty and history all the time."

Tom Schlafly, the attorney and entrepreneur responsible for Schlafly Beer, the Tap Room, the Bottleworks, an organic garden and a slew of arts festivals and poetry readings, recently drove some out-of-town friends around the city. "They gazed at our old historic neighborhoods and said, 'Oh, it's like Disneyland!'" he says. "What a statement—that the real thing is so good it looks like the fake, which is all most Americans know. We live in the real thing."

Artist and real estate agent Steve Patterson and his partner, formerly of Seattle, were on their way to New York when they rounded the city's southern edge, along I-55. "We saw these beautiful old buildings and thought, 'This is it: We're stopping here,'" he recalls. "Now I've got other Seattle friends looking to buy here, too."

The absence of big-box retailers and chains in the city is another plus. And thanks to Missouri's legislated tax incentives for rehabilitating historic structures (piggy-



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RON BUECHLE, MAD ART GALLERY

backed with federal tax credits), it's never been easier or more cost-effective to restore a building, rehab a house or revitalize an entire block to new life and purpose.

Neighborhoods are the linchpin in the creative equation. And we've got 'em—79, in fact, each offering a distinctive blend of convenience and character. Creatives talk passionately of their particular enclaves, neighborhoods where they can walk or bike anywhere they need to go. Because they live where they create, their environment—their daily experience—becomes part of the creative process.

"The diversity of communities here really nurtures the artist," says Brad Fuller, a creative director at Zipatoni, a downtown

advertising company. "The city's patchwork of neighborhoods offers a wonderful array of music, languages, food and culture to keep a creative person's engines fueled."

Best of all, though, is the abundance of what author Richard Florida calls "third places" and "green spaces." Because most creatives work alone, often at home, they value easy access to third places—the café, the coffee shop, the bistro—and green spaces—the park, the bike path—where people of different backgrounds and disciplines meet and exchange ideas.

"Strolling down Delmar or listening to jazz in Dogtown, you ignite the creative imagination," says Fuller. "Prowl the side streets of St. Louis, and you'll find hidden

antique stores, corner cafés and out-of-the-way parks that make you want to linger.” Third places are particularly important because they spawn an indigenous street culture with multiple “scenes.” Naturally occurring, often in the most unlikely places, these scenes—be they centered on music, theater, poetry, film, food or technology—give off their own energy.

Then there’s the city’s surfeit of green spaces: 106 parks, exquisitely laid out generations ago by forward-thinking city planners. “We’re sitting in one of the best locations in the country,” says Minneapolis native David Fisher, who moved here to become executive

community activists almost by default, organizing neighborhood associations to promote awareness, cooperation and, not infrequently, political and social action.

They also help each other. Communicating largely by way of blogs, listservs and word of mouth, they organize artistic, technical, professional and entrepreneurial groups to stimulate business and creativity, mentor and support each other and make themselves understood.

“Independent artists and entrepreneurs create spaces for new kinds of business

do it, or why. “The standard means of motivation don’t apply,” says McKelvey. “Of course we need to make enough money—and we do, by all kinds of ways. But more often we’ll barter, trade, share, negotiate, swap or, in a pinch, bargain. We work for different reasons.”

They live differently, too, happily accepting risks to do something original and satisfying on their own. Singleton says his design students “tend to not want the house in the ‘burbs, the Sub-Zero fridge, the granite counters. They’ll tolerate a less-than-nice habitat for the chance to work alone. In some ways, they’re a ghost class. They like being invisible.”

And yet they eat world cuisine, hang out in coffeehouses and wine bars, frequent tattoo parlors, antique shops, funky boutiques and exotic food, wine and floral markets. They perform and exhibit their work in such hybrid spaces as Left Bank Books, Duff’s—longtime home of the River Styx poetry readings—and the Mad Art Gallery, an old police station that Ron Buechle, a police officer from Venice, Ill., rehabbed into a multipurpose art gallery, studio, film theater, event space and neighborhood forum.

“We’re never going to have a centralized art sector here,” remarks Buechle. “It

has always been fragmented, because the city has always been fragmented—but that doesn’t have to be a negative thing. The fact that little arts enclaves spring up here and there works in a certain way; it adds to the diversity that generates creative thinking.”

Artist Greg Edmondson says, “Cool things are happening, like the explosion of little punk rock galleries on Cherokee—there’s almost an artists’ co-op emerging down there. That’s important: You need spaces that allow people to try things out, to take conceptual risks.” What made it possible? “A huge influx of young people from other places,” he says. “That’s what has shifted longstanding attitudes.” He pauses. “In biology—do you know what ‘punctuated

Of course we need to make enough money—and we do, by all kinds of ways. But more often we’ll barter, trade, share, negotiate, swap or, in a pinch, bargain. We work for DIFFERENT REASONS.

JIM MCKELVEY,
THE THIRD DEGREE GLASS FACTORY

director of the Great Rivers Greenway District (interview on p. 102). “Our natural river setting, with all its attendant connective patterns, is ideal for social cohesion. We don’t have to invent anything—it’s all here. All we have to do is enhance what we have and build our communities within it.”

HOW THEY LIVE

Although most creatives are able to keep body and soul together here, they accept certain trade-offs. The “plankton,” as one South City artist dubbed the younger creatives newly out of school, barely make it. Many do not have health insurance. A fair number work day jobs; many more wait tables, freelance or teach.

But no matter how many hats they don and doff to make it all work, they sink deep roots into their places. Most become

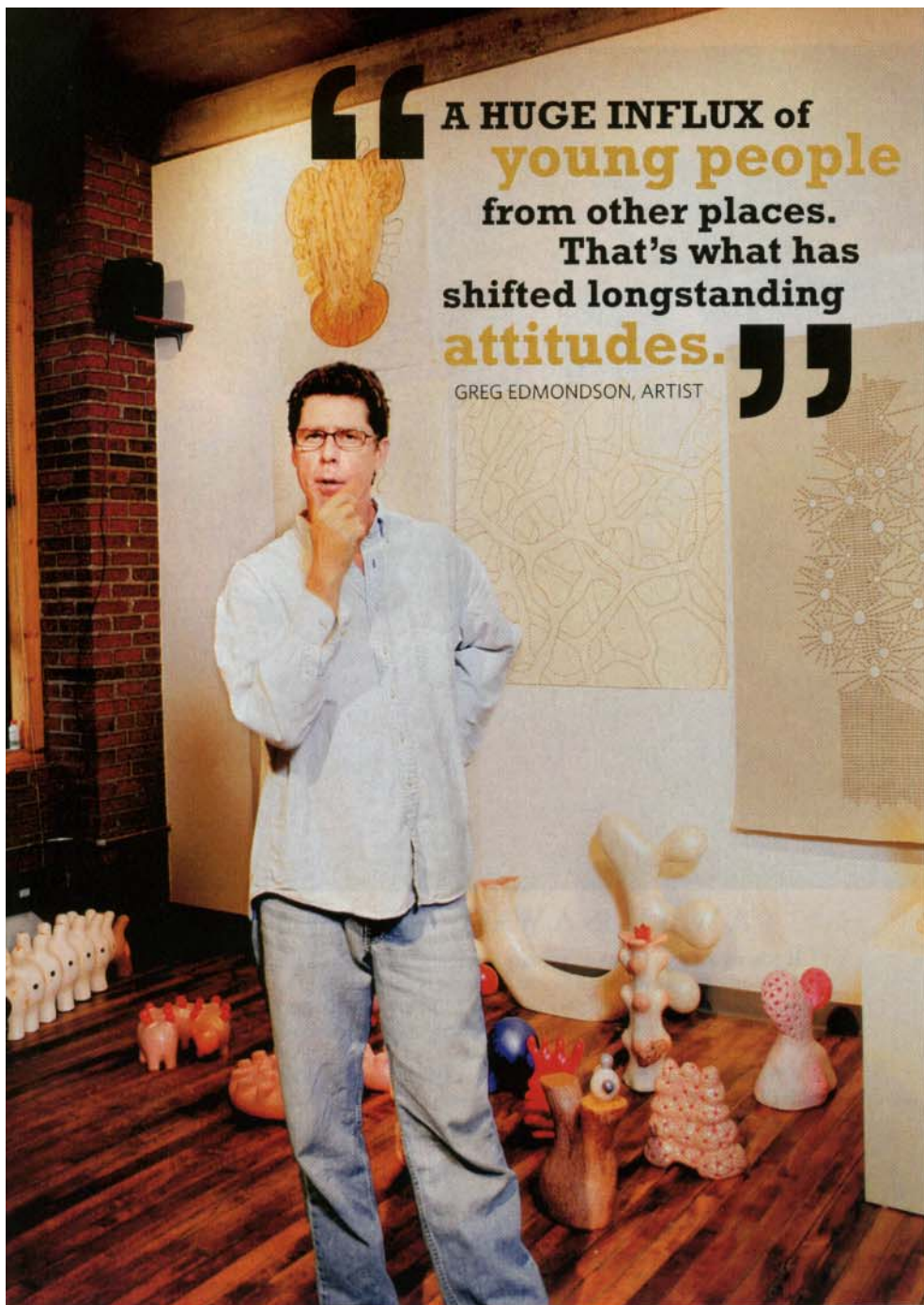
development,” says Mike Levinson, founder of BUILD St. Louis, a network of small-business owners. “These new businesses, always unique and reflective of their neighborhoods, attract people. Get people to mix, and you can change old stereotypes.” (You also influence the economy: Sociologist Paul Ray estimates that 63 million Americans are “cultural creatives,” spending roughly \$229 billion a year in ways that deliberately reflect their values.)

Creatives tend to craft new concepts for living and working. Think of Kurt Vonnegut’s mythical “karass,” which he described as a “spontaneously forming group joined by unpredictable links that actually get stuff done”—without ever discovering how they



“A HUGE INFLUX of young people from other places. That’s what has shifted longstanding attitudes.”

GREG EDMONDSON, ARTIST



equilibrium’ is? There’s this old-school idea of how things evolve: The Grand Canyon was carved out over billions of years, because the water moved it out one grain of sand at a time. Well, punctuated equilibrium says yes, that’s so, but every once in a while there’s a cataclysmic event that changes things suddenly and profoundly. Things move at a glacial pace and then, poof! They explode.”

Catherine Neville, co-founder and editor of *Sauce Magazine*, says: “I detect a new energy in St. Louis. It’s been building for about nine years but has really taken off in the last five. I live off Grand, and I can walk to a Vietnamese restaurant, a Japanese restaurant,

a Bosnian restaurant ... Food is an integral part of any city’s identity. Now it’s adding life to these wonderful old neighborhoods.”

St. Louis has always supported a diverse arts community—everything from the high-art institutions older creatives crave (and younger ones age into) on down to the urban grunge scene. “We spend more money on the arts than most cities of our size,” notes Terry Jones, professor of political science at UM–St. Louis. The tax-supported Zoo-Museum District, a national model of public cultural funding, allows free or low-cost admission to five major cultural venues, and most major arts organizations engage in

extensive, often free outreach activities and nurture local talent. “I never watched so much TV in my life as when I lived in New York,” says Gondolfi, “because I could never afford to do anything.”

Richard Florida says that an indigenous music scene—think New Orleans jazz, Chicago blues, Seattle grunge—creates an audio imprint essential for the kind of “conversation” creatives crave. But the fact that our city lacks a distinctive “St. Louis sound” these days doesn’t particularly worry the locals. In fact, its absence explains why younger musicians are settling here in increasing numbers. “Since you’re in no danger of ‘making it’ here, at least in rock and roll, you’re freer to develop into something real,” says musician and photographer Bob Reuter. “When nothing’s going on, you can do anything. Music can’t be laid in; it’s got to rise from within, and it does here, because it’s happening slowly, as it should.”

Certainly Nelly, Chingy, Erin Bode, Story of the Year and Lapush have shown St. Louis to be a significant talent incubator. Jim Dunn, who with Laura Hamlett founded *playback: STL* several years ago, praises enlightened local presenters and a supportive musical community. “We haven’t achieved anything like Gaslight Square yet,” he says, “but, musically, we’re getting there.”

Socially too, thanks to creative neighborhoods that by their very nature invite tolerance of differences. Case in point: the Delmar Loop, brainchild of Joe Edwards, whose Blueberry Hill bar and restaurant has generated, over 20 years, an urban socioeconomic miracle. “We proved it’s OK to have a smoke shop and a tattoo parlor on the same block as a Dairy Queen,” he says. “There’s more diversity along this 10-block stretch than anywhere in the city—maybe the Midwest.”

Architecture, housing, neighborhoods, affordability, culture—all great draws. But in the end, few can explain their feelings for the city that inhabits them: “I think it’s the Arch ... this great curved arm, enfolding us all.” “There’s this profound sense of place.” “There’s something comfortable, even comforting, about the layout. It’s a city you can get your arms around.” “The river is a big part of it, because that’s how the groove of the place works. It flows *through* you.” “It’s got a vibe, a pulse, so the city’s *in* you, even if you leave.” “I love that it’s old and tired ... you want to take care of it.” “What would happen if we left?”

THE NEW CHALLENGE

The good news, then: St. Louis is attracting creative, gifted, passionate people of all ages and persuasions whose impact on our city is undeniable.

The bad news? Creativity is not self-sustaining. If we want to keep our creative class, we have to nurture the vital, ephemeral quality that makes them who they are.

Designer Kiku Obata, though thrilled by St. Louis' potential, worries about a lack of vision in the established business community. "We have everything a city needs to become a great creative and economic center," she says, "everything but the belief that it can happen. This should be one of the great creative centers of the country, but there's no dialogue here. We've got some world-class creative people working here, but local companies would never think to enable this talent. They don't think lyrically."

Creatives do, and they speak eloquently about problems they believe this city must solve if it is to survive—and they are to remain and thrive.

SUPPORT COMMUNITIES

Florida says that communities—rather than careers, companies and families—are the new constants in America's social equation. "Neighborhoods are the families of the future," agrees Bill Byrd, vice president of the Benton Park West Neighborhood Association and a graduate of UM-St. Louis' Neighborhood Leadership Academy. He praises the Weed and Seed program, which has helped his racially diverse neighbors find common ground. "Get people outside and talking, and they learn their differences are matters more of perception than of reality."

But many wonder whether civic leaders possess enough vision to really deliver on the promise this city holds: architecturally rewarding, comfortably secure, integrated communities. "They're going to have to decide if we really need another megaplex on the riverfront rather than neighborhoods people will want to live, work, play and send their children to school in," says Joe Jackson, a South City piano restorer and entrepreneur. "The schools are a major problem."

END DISCRIMINATION

"Racism is particularly potent and offensive here because it comes from the top," says Matt Ghio, attorney and urban activist. "Our politicians preach from an outdated

playbook to a choir that doesn't even exist anymore, because we're all living together anyway—black, white, Asian and Hispanic—trying to make this work."

Certainly our major art institutions' outreach efforts have helped, says Kansas City native Robert Powell, founder of Portfolio, an African-American art gallery in Grand Center. "But beyond these noble programs, the two cultural worlds remain separate," he says. "Few talented blacks feel comfortable enough to stay here."

Transplants say that they simply "live over it." Natives, unsure of how to redress old wrongs they barely understand, tend to live around it. All, deeply aware that racial barriers are not only morally problematic but economically counterproductive, say that they're frustrated. "Creative people do not want to live in a segregated city," says Davide Weaver of Art Dimensions (who raised \$350,000 to resuscitate Taste St. Louis after a 10-year hiatus this fall), "but the wounds are so deep, it's very difficult to establish common ground."

History may work against us, says Joseph Heathcott, professor of American studies at Saint Louis University. "White St. Louis just wants to forget about the past and move on—and that's never going to happen."

Kris Kleindienst, co-owner of Left Bank Books, says the solution is not a token call to multiculturalism. "It's about sharing economic resources fully. Nothing will change until North City enjoys the same thriving economy we see in South City."

Why should responsibility fall to the creative class? "Creativity, by its very nature, challenges the nonsense of racism," says African-American writer/poet K. Curtis Lyle. "Creative people don't know some things are supposed to be impossible."

REHAB AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Some South City and downtown housing has appreciated so rapidly that the artists and entrepreneurs, whose very presence pushes up the value of the spaces they occupy, have had to migrate elsewhere. "We cannot afford to drive out the very people who build our neighborhoods," says Eric Friedman of the Friedman Group in the Central West End. "The right public policy could ensure diversity of income levels in any community, but I'm not seeing it."

UM-St. Louis' Hurley says that our

priorities are skewed: "We've got to ask ourselves why the housing in North City, which is every bit as beautiful and historic as anywhere here, is left to rot, while developers happily dump money into South City—which, by the way, is now one of the most racially diverse areas in the Midwest."

Creatives feel wildly unappreciated by City Hall, and they worry that the city, eager for revenue, lacks a consistent plan for what St. Louis can be for *all* its citizens. "I see good things going on in some areas, where pure greed determines development," says Steve Smith, founder/owner of the Panda Athletic Club and the Royale Cafe, "but City Hall doesn't recognize the value of what the less well-heeled people do for this city."

SUPPORT PROGRESSIVE POLICY-MAKING

"I think when the charter amendment went down," says writer Thomas Crone, "many of us lost hope of accomplishing anything here. We need to run and elect aldermen of vision—people who are willing to break with an old power structure."

Unnecessary bureaucracy particularly rankles. "The city seems intent on making it difficult to do anything," says Smith. Fisher calls it an insider's ballgame. "You work around it, but it's a beat-down mentality." Schlafly, who opened his brewery's Bottle-Works in Maplewood rather than in the city, is coy: "Let's just say the city is not well served by the tradition of aldermanic courtesy."

Unless civic and political leaders can find ways to encourage broad support for diverse creative activities—and establish colorblind policies—St. Louis may lose the windfall it has unwittingly gained. And even government officials worry about *that*. "We cannot afford to be perceived as a closed-minded or intolerant city, nor do we want to be that," says Ald. Jim Shrewsbury. "We want to make our city lively and diverse. Services and amenities that appeal to creatives are things we need to keep fostering."

All agree that St. Louis, ripe for change, can fulfill its promise. "Things can happen here," says McKelvey. "Nothing is holding us back. The barrier isn't there; it's imaginary." St. Louis is a gateway city, after all, and our growing creative class gives new meaning to the old moniker.

"There's no need to engineer anything, only enable the creativity at hand," says South City artist Anna Hancock. "Just let us *do* it." ●