

# 2 BACKGROUND



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## Grand Center Historic Context

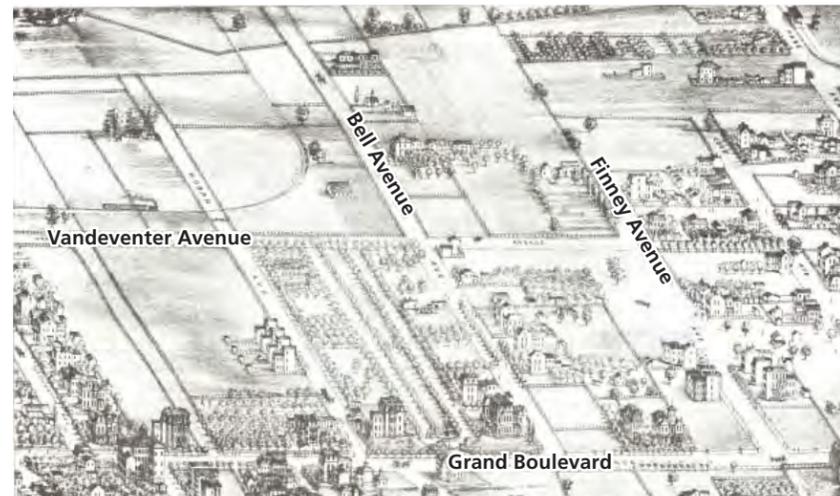
St. Louis history is rich and complicated. The evolution of the Midtown area cannot be summarized in a couple paragraphs, but, it is important to understand the key points in history that shaped the past and the lessons they tell us about the future.

### Agricultural Patterns

Today, it is hard to imagine rolling farmland extending east and west from Grand Boulevard in the late 1700s, but the history of the land can still be seen in the street patterns and unusually long blocks on the western side of Grand. In the days of the early settlement of St. Louis, narrow strips of individually owned farm land, known as "Common Field" were assigned to settlers. These were laid out side by side to allow early settlers to work the land in strips as a safeguard against Indian attack. The "Grand Prairie Common Field" was laid out along the west side of a ridge line that corresponds to present day North Grand Boulevard. Since the field lots were perpendicular to this ridge, the streets of present day Grand Center were laid out to follow the old lot lines of the common fields.

### Civil War in Midtown

By 1861, the American Civil War came to St. Louis at Camp Jackson or Lindell's Grove, as it was also known, which stood near the site of Saint Louis University's present day Busch Student Center. There was only one civil war battle in St. Louis, the Camp Jackson Affair, May 10, 1861, and it occurred just south of Grand Center.



**Common field land pattern in what would become Grand Center**

source: Pictorial St. Louis 1875



**Current street grid in Grand Center**

source: Google Earth, 2013

### The Heyday

Fast forward a few decades to the 1870s when downtown residential and commercial development had expanded west to meet up with Midtown. By the 1900s, Midtown was considered a "second downtown" due to its density and tall buildings. It had become the City of St. Louis' entertainment district, home of many theaters and vaudeville houses. Within a 10 year period, five theater houses featuring both vaudeville shows and early motion pictures were built: the Odeon (1904), the Princess (1912), the Victoria (1917), the Grand Central (1913) and the Empress (1913). Grand Avenue became known as the "great white way" due to all of the signature neon signs that advertised for each theater.

These theaters had ornate, decorated facades and large neon marques addressing the street as if it were its audience. The sides and backs of the buildings were plain, windowless facades and had a "back stage" impact on the block. This development pattern can still be seen today at the Fabulous Fox. The imposing northern façade of the building facing Washington Avenue is very obvious today and has a negative impact on the sidewalk environment.

In addition, elegant mansions were built in the area including those along Grandel Square. At that time, Midtown had become a magnet for churches. So many were located here that it was called "Piety Hill". Social clubs and fraternal organizations also located here. The massive structures of the Saint Louis Club (now the Saint Louis University Museum of Art), The Knights of Columbus Medinah Temple (now the Centene Center of the Arts) and the Scottish Rite still occupy a key block on Lindell Boulevard.



**Street cars on Grand Boulevard, circa 1925**

source: [www.city-data.com/forum/st-louis/](http://www.city-data.com/forum/st-louis/)



**Neon marques in Midtown**

source: [www.city-data.com/forum/st-louis/](http://www.city-data.com/forum/st-louis/)

The business climate in Midtown thrived during the Great Depression and even through World War II. Midtown became a hub for public transportation and a stop on major streetcar and bus routes. In the 1920s, major movie studios built large movie “palaces” in Midtown to show the “first run” of their movies. Three of these palaces were built between 1922 and 1929 and remain today. They are the Missouri Theatre (1921); St. Louis Theatre (1926) and the Fox Theatre (1929).

### Midtown’s Decline

Like so many other urban areas, Midtown began its decline in the 1950s as an automobile-dominated society moved to the newness of the suburbs. Noisy streetcars and rails were replaced by quieter rubber tire buses and the streets became emptier. As the population declined, the patrons did not return. By 1960, the population of St. Louis had declined by 73%. Midtown entertainment venues, along with office and residential buildings, eventually were vacated. By the 1970s, many of Midtown’s buildings and stately homes had been demolished. It was fortunate that the major theater venues in current-day Grand Center such as the Fox were not lost to the wrecking ball. In 1968, the St. Louis Symphony Society purchased the St. Louis Theater and completed a full renovation. Powell Hall, as it is now called, is the home of the St. Louis Symphony. Founded in 1880, it is the second oldest orchestra in the nation preceded only by the New York Philharmonic.



**The Fabulous Fox 1937** source: Missouri History Museum

## The Birth of Grand Center

Led by Father Paul Reinert, President of Saint Louis University, along with key civic leaders, a revitalization plan was undertaken in 1980 to rehabilitate the neighborhood and activate the surviving buildings within an eight block area. The City Center Redevelopment Corporation (CCRC) was founded in 1981 and included Father Reinert and leaders from Saint Louis University, Third Baptist Church, the Urban League, the Scottish Rite, local businesses and two banks. The CCRC was successful in listing remaining buildings of the area on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1982, they introduced a new brand for the area calling it "Grand Center". Due to the efforts of the CCRC, the Fabulous Fox Theater and the former Ethical Society, now called the Sheldon Concert Hall were both restored and reopened. In 1987, the non-profit, Grand Center, Inc. (GCI) was formed. Its executive director set on a mission to develop a plan to establish Grand Center as a regional and national-caliber arts, entertainment and education district. The City of St. Louis invested two million dollars in public realm improvements such as streetscape, vintage lighting and parking improvements in the late 1980s, much of which remains today.

## Redevelopment and Restoration

Throughout the `1990s, GCI was instrumental in the redevelopment and restoration of many of Grand Center's remaining, but derelict buildings. More importantly, they were instrumental in the establishment of a critical mass of arts and education institutions within the Grand Center area. GCI was the driving force behind the conversion of the former First Congregational Church on Grandel Square into the 470 seat Grandel Theater; the establishment of Jazz St. Louis (Jazz at the Bistro); the redevelopment of the Continental Life Building and the relocation of Nine Network of Public Media to the community. Private development had also returned during the 90s.

The 2000s represented a significant growth period within the context of the arts and education district mission. In 2002, GCI and the City of St. Louis created a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District to stimulate growth and reinvestment. To date, \$80 million in TIF financing has been reinvested in the community. In addition to the new Nine Network building, three brand new arts and education facilities were opened in Grand Center practically within a decade. These include the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts (2001), the Contemporary Art Museum (2003), Cardinal Ritter College Preparatory High School (2003) and the University of Missouri St. Louis/St. Louis Public Radio Building (2012). Renovation

and adaptive reuse of Grand Center's buildings were also a focus of GCI's efforts. These include: the Centene Center for Arts & Education in the former Medinah Temple (2006), the Moto Museum (2007), the Triumph Grill (2008), Moto Europa (2011) and Hotel Ignatio (2011) all in the former Hart Printing Building. They also include: Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Kranzberg Arts Center in the former Woolworth Building (2008), the Grand Center Arts Academy, the first visual/performing arts and academic charter school in Missouri in the Beaux Arts building across from Powell Hall (2012) and the Metropolitan Building (2012). During this period, new restaurants like, KOTA Wood Fire Grill, City Diner at the Fox, Urban Chestnut Brewery, Field House and Dooley's Beef n Brew House, have all come on the scene in the last couple of years.



The Metropolitan Building, renovated in 2012



St. Louis Public Radio, completed in 2012

## The Future

Also new to the scene will be community radio station 88.1 KDHX and the Larry J. Weir Center for Independent Media (2013) which will feature a 125-seat music venue and café on Washington Avenue. The St. Louis Theater is currently being renovated for mixed use. It is the last historic building in Grand Center to be renovated.

As Grand Center awaits the arrival of more contributions to this cultural district, new chapters continue to be written in Grand Center's rich history. It is time for a renewed investment in Grand Center's public realm and a focus on the needs of the pedestrians that are sure to be coming to Grand Center.

## A Framework for Great Streets

The 2011 Framework Plan process laid the ground work for a participatory dialog about community, aspirations and a bright future in Grand Center. It brought stakeholders together in their passion for this place. It also created a common language among the participants about great streets, complete streets and urban design principles. The Framework Plan laid the foundation for the Great Streets project to naturally build from this collective knowledge and momentum. As a result, the Great Streets project did not require a baseline level of stakeholder education or evidence for the merits of great streets principles. The Framework Plan process allowed the Great Streets design team to focus on the "what" and the "how" and not on the "if".

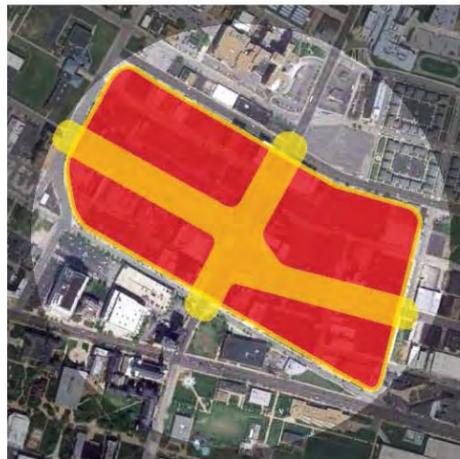
### GREAT STREETS START FROM A FRAMEWORK



Great Streets project schedule  
source: Don Stastny

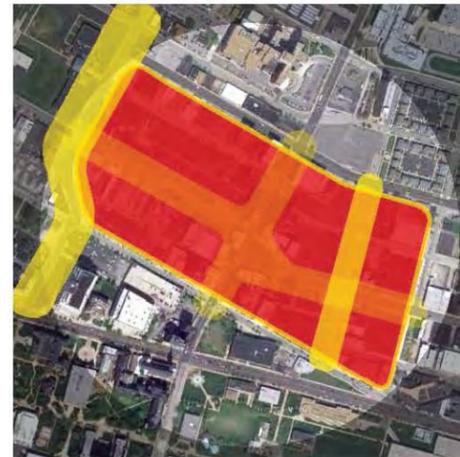
The Framework Plan included the following key proposals:

1. **The Spine and the Transect** – The Framework Plan calls Grand Boulevard the “spine”. It is not only a major north-south arterial and bus route in St. Louis; it is the “Grand-way” where the entertainment venues of the past and present are located. From the tall buildings, traffic congestion and views from steeple to steeple, it is clear that Grand Boulevard is the “spine” of the community. Additionally, it is the street from which the east-west cross streets intersect. These streets are called the “transects” and include Olive Street, Washington Avenue and Delmar Boulevard. Washington is considered the main “transect” of the community.



**Spine and transect - Grand Boulevard and Washington Avenue**  
source: Don Stastny

2. **Corridors** – Along the east and west edges of the community, the “corridors” or Spring and Theresa Streets, complete the diagram of the community structure. These streets are natural edges for community planning and pedestrian/vehicular portals from Lindell Boulevard. Spring on the west is the transition from the edge of the arts and education zone to a more residential development pattern. Theresa on the east is planned to be reconnected to Lindell Boulevard and is at the center of redevelopment potential. Surface parking lots to the west and the up-and-coming Locust Business District on the east, make Theresa a key development corridor.



**Corridors - Spring Street and Theresa Street**  
source: Don Stastny

3. **Gateways** – The Framework plan suggests that four key intersections of the spine, transect and corridors, at Grand/Olive, Grand/Delmar, Washington/Spring and Washington/Theresa, should have a special meaning and emphasis in the community. The Great Streets project includes a fifth gateway at Grand/Cook. It is suggested that these be “art gates” and emphasize the existing architecture as gateway elements at these intersections.



**Gateways**  
source: Don Stastny

4. **Intersections as Rooms** – A treatment of other more minor gateways or nodes at other key intersections is described as “an outdoor room.” This suggests that corner buildings and other edges should be thought of as defining space just as the floor, and walls of a room define space.



**Intersections as rooms**  
source: Don Stastny

5. **Cross-block System** – The long east-west blocks of Grand Center established long ago by the agriculture patterns of the early settlers are not conducive to the pedestrian needs of today. A strategy to allow cross-block pedestrian circulation from one east-west street to another at multiple points along the street, allows for a network of pedestrian circulation. Other benefits become clear such as options for different development patterns, increased access, pedestrian-scaled amenities and an infusion of green corridors throughout the community. Currently, a process is underway to design the “Art Walk,” a cross-block connection from Lindell on the south to Washington at the Sheldon and then Spring/Washington north to Delmar.

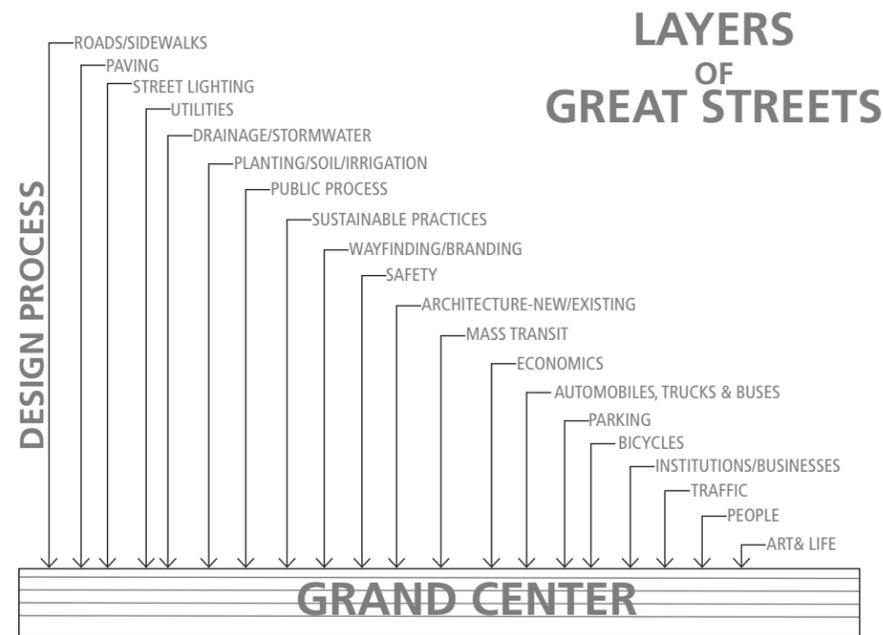


**Cross-block system**  
source: Don Stastny



# Layers of Design

Throughout the planning and design process for the Great Streets project, a Master Plan for Grand Center evolved from the Framework Plan’s idealized concepts and principles into a working design plan. It focused on being responsive to the micro-issues of existing conditions and improving the practical function. Integrated development strategies, modal integration and the framework of art integration came together with a strong physical design proposal that created a new look for Grand Center. The ultimate goal was to recommend improvements that are functional, durable and delight the user.



The rigor of streetscape and urban design within the context of the Great Streets principles is a complicated and intertwined set of layers - layers of design, consultant disciplines and urban infrastructure. The following are a description of the design and discipline layers that were involved in this project:

**1) Urban Design and Landscape Architecture Layers** – A strong design proposal was shaped by quantitative and qualitative analysis, spatial observations of existing conditions and a listening ear for the aesthetic direction of stakeholders. It was the integration of layers of design and engineering with community aspirations that lead to an approach that feels like Grand Center.

**2) Lighting Layer** – Starting with the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the existing lighting conditions and overlaying stakeholder aspirations for something uniquely Grand Center led to recommendations for new ways to think about lighting in the community. With safety at the forefront and the practical need to redefine overall lighting strategies, considerations for special opportunities such as event lighting, building highlighting, environmental lighting enhancements and light as art opportunities became the highlight of the study.

**3) Public Art Layer** – Stakeholders from Grand Center and St. Louis visual arts institutions worked together to articulate the “essence” or “gestalt” of Grand Center and how it should be translated visually in the overall community design approach for public art. These recommendations included 1) goals/guidelines for permanent and temporary art integration, 2) opportunities and locations for art installations and 3) as integrated hardscape and landscape design solutions.

**4) Transportation Layer** – The study of how people get to, from through and around Grand Center looked at many layers of multi-modal access, venue traffic and public transportation. The inventory and analysis of traffic counts for daytime, evening and event/venue traffic peaks throughout Grand Center and the limitations of the transportation network beyond Grand Center, started a dialog about validation of the transportation strategies of the Framework Plan. Analysis of the proposed street narrowing, intersection enhancements, transit locations, pedestrian needs, bike rider needs and emergency vehicle access were additional layers of scrutiny of the Framework Plan’s proposals. In addition, the integration of the redevelopment potential with the future parking demand model led to recommendations for long-term development densities and parking strategies to accommodate increased density in Grand Center.

**5) Land Use and Development Strategy Layer** – This study documented the outcomes of concurrent market and land use reports being prepared for Grand Center in order to understand the broader context for the potential for new residential and commercial uses. The existing and projected residential and commercial demand as well as the overall market climate in St. Louis was studied to understand the development potential for Grand Center. Concepts for anticipated infill development were illustrated on the Master Plan to understand the implications for vehicular and pedestrian circulation, land use distribution and parking demand in the future.

**6) Branding Layer** – Within the context of the existing Grand Center brand, “The Intersection of Art and Life”, the recommendation for a more comprehensive signage/wayfinding strategy that enhances the visitor’s experience was the focus. The analysis documented the existing wayfinding cues and messages on local streets and from major highways that direct to Grand Center. It also documented the the gaps in the wayfinding system. Recommendations focused on creating a new wayfinding strategy with alternative routes, venue wayfinding, pedestrian wayfinding and cross-educational opportunities in order to reinforce the new transportation strategy.

**7) Civil/Stormwater Layers** – Inventories of existing infrastructure conditions and the assessment of its practical impact on design solutions was the focus. The recommendations emphasized Green Infrastructure and Best Management Practices (BMP) for storm water mitigation and their integration in the hardscape, landscape design strategies and aesthetics.

