The Society of Architectural Historians

Missouri Valley Chapter

Volume XV Number 2B Summer 2009

News Letter

THE ST. LOUIS EXPOSITION AND ENTERTAINMENT HALL

by David J. Simmons

During the 19th century, the St. Louis Exhibition and Entertainment Hall represented the largest and most lavish entertainment venue to be built in this city. It existed just 22 years before its demolition. Located immediately west of the downtown business district at 13th and Olive, it offered the public an entertainment experience consisting of more than 200,000 square feet of exhibition space, a large music hall seating more than 4,000 patrons, and a moderate-sized theater. It hosted such diverse amusements as the Gilmore and Sousa bands, Shakespearean and grand opera festivals, and the annual six-week Fall Exhibition Fair staged by the St. Louis business community to show off local products. It was this Fall Celebration that inspired the local business establishment to construct this entertainment palace in 1883.

The St. Louis Exposition Hall, looking northeast from Olive and 14th.

Tracing its roots back to the first annual St. Louis Mechanics Fair in 1841, the annual Agricultural and Mechanics Fair was organized in 1856. It was influenced by the Crystal Palace exhibitions in London and New York, and by the annual Missouri State Fair first held at Boonville in 1853 Under the auspices of the Fair Association, this family oriented fall exhibition blossomed into a major city event, attracting more than 100,000 visitors every October and November to the fairgrounds on North Grand Avenue at Natural Bridge Road. To meet increasing demand, the Fair Association purchased adjacent property and expanded exposition space. Local merchants displayed their wares and sold their products, reaping handsome profits. All seemed well until 1875, when a change in the Fair administration signaled a new direction for the fairgrounds. Fair directors wanted to increase the use of the fairgrounds, adding attractions to make it a summer destination. Visitors applauded the installation of the zoological gardens at the fairgrounds in 1876, but the promotion of horse racing drew a negative response from the business community. They saw this activity as a threat to the family appeal of the fairgrounds. Horse racing attracted a predominantly male crowd and encouraged the presence of gambling with its criminal element.

When downtown merchants learned that the Fair Association planned to build a new race track at the fairgrounds, they decided to launch a new fall celebration in the downtown business district. It would encompass a grand exposition of art and local products enhanced with musical entertainment, lavish parades, and street illuminations. At the center of the celebration, a new exposition and entertainment complex would house the interior aspects of the festival. At the start of 1883, a group of local businessmen organized the St. Louis Exposition and Entertainment Hall Association, to construct and operate the new building. After appointing a board of directors and electing Samuel Kennard its president, they issued $500,000 in stock to finance the project. After considering both city-owned Washington Park and Missouri Park as the location for their new building, they selected the latter because of its central location and close proximity to the business district. Situated at the eastern end of Lucas Place and bounded by 13th and 14th Streets, Olive and St. Charles, Missouri Park had been created from two land parcels owned by millionaire James H. Lucas. During the 1850s, Lucas developed Lucas Place, St. Louis's first successful enclave for the wealthy. To entice clients to his development, Lucas created a park at the foot of Lucas Place to block through traffic. In 1857 he donated the northern parcel to the city for a park in memory of his father, J. B. C. Lucas. After selling the larger southern parcel to the city for $95,000, he convinced city fathers to join the two parcels together, making Missouri Park. The city transformed it into a rustic retreat with beautiful

trees, ornamental shrubs, fountains, and other amenities. The park came to define the neighborhood.

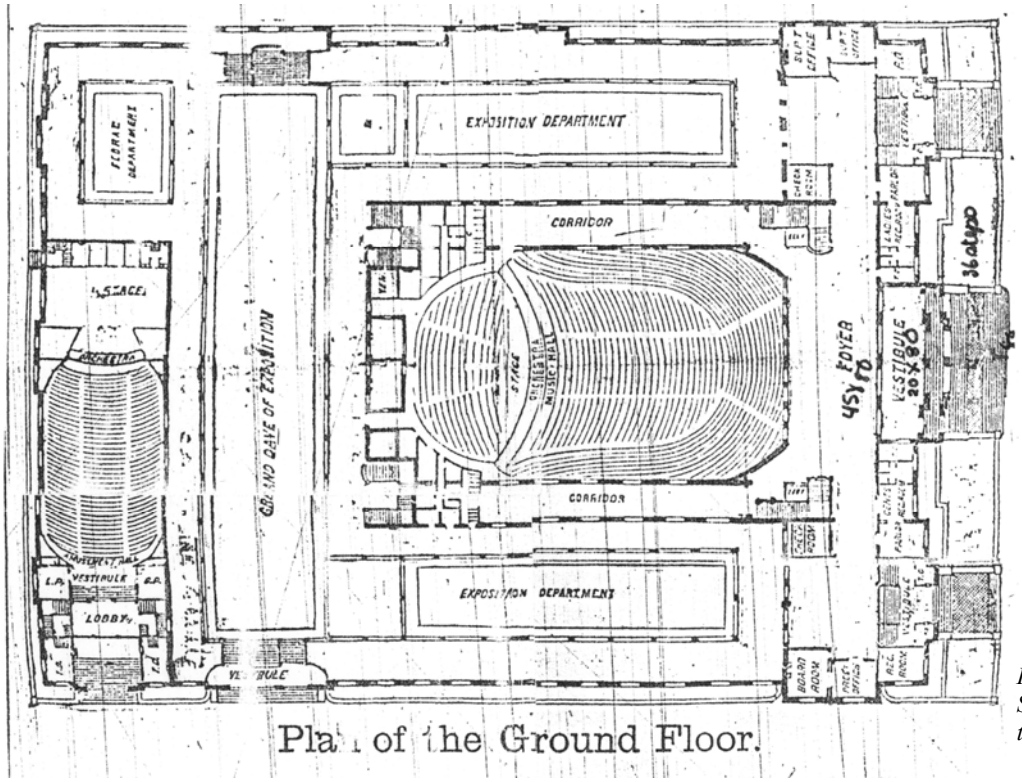
Unlike today, government entities in the 19th century seldom contributed support to private enterprises for the public good, but the proposal to erect an exhibition hall was an exception to the rule. The city willingly offered to lease Missouri Park to the Association without charge as long as the building occupied the site and secured the permission of the Lucas heirs to use the northern parcel of the park for the building site. The city administration, however, failed to consult neighborhood residents about the future of their park, and they objected to its loss and warned of catastrophic consequences. Political pundits ignored these pleas with the exception of one newspaper, the *St. Louis Republic*, which condemned the project from its inception.

Loss of the park and the noise and privacy problems generated by crowds of spectators attending expositions and entertainments at the building contributed greatly to the decline of Lucas Place. Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral fronting on the park now found its imposing façade relegated to a nondescript side street. The Episcopalians decided to remain anyway, but at 14th Street and Lucas Place, the First Presbyterian Church sold their $100,000 Gothic building, erected in 1854 to designs by Oliver Hart. A theatrical company bought the church for $40,000 and converted it into a vaudeville house, much to the chagrin of some Lucas Place residents. The congregation moved to Sarah and Washington. Most wealthy Lucas Place families looked to the stately residences of Lindell Boulevard or the palatial mansions of fabled Vandeventer Place for rescue. They packed up their households, sold their elegant homes for pennies on the dollar, and migrated west to greener pastures. The new owners of these properties transformed them into boarding houses or worse. A decade passed. One of the last Lucas Place holdouts, Second Presbyterian Church, abandoned its $160,000 Gothic edifice, built in 1867 to designs by the Randolph Brothers, for a new start at Westminster and Taylor. The exodus had almost run its course. Another urban oasis of beauty swallowed up in the name of progress.

In April 1883 the Association announced an architectural competition to select a plan and architect for the new building. All architectural entries had to be submitted by July 3, 1883. Design specifications dictated the building cover an area 480 feet by 320 feet and to cost no more than $400,000, excluding power plant, heating apparatus, lighting system, and other necessary machinery. In addition, competition rules outlined certain details about the music hall, theater, and exposition space. Twenty-seven local and nine out-of-state architects submitted plans. After examining all the plans, the Association conferred merit status on seven local plans and five out-of-town entries. Only local architects were considered in the final selection process, however. These seven were George I. Barnett & Son, Ernst Janssen, Edward Jungenfeld, Jerome B. Legg, Charles K. Ramsey, Isaac Taylor, and Thomas Walsh. In accordance with the competition rules, the Association awarded $500 to each merited entry except the final winner, who would receive the commission itself. During the final phase of the selection process, each architect appeared before the Board of Directors to explain his design and report its total cost. All the interviewed architects except Thomas Walsh indicated the total cost of their designs would be between $450,000 and $500,000. Mr. Walsh promised to build his design for $400,000 and not a penny more. To guarantee the cost of the structure, Walsh wanted to obtain a $50,000 bond to cover cost overruns. Gothic in detailing, his design was bold and contemporary in concept, filled with glass and iron reminiscent of an updated Crystal Palace The Board of Directors liked the Walsh plan and declared him the winner of the competition.

Competition rules required that Walsh, as winner of the competition, be named architect of the building. All he had to do was to sign a contract, but this proved to be a major stumbling block. Some directors of the Association questioned the veracity of Walsh's building cost estimates. What made his plan less expensive than the other designs? In addition, Walsh's character and reputation remained an issue. Although a capable, energetic, and talented architect, Walsh was known to have employed manipulation, deception, and prevarication to obtain and complete architectural commissions in the past. The directors remembered the numerous improprieties and scandals surrounding Walsh's tenure as local architectural superintendent for the second St. Louis customs house (the Old Post Office) between 1873 and 1877. To resolve this crisis of trust, the association hired a panel of building experts to examine Walsh's plan and to recommend improvements if needed. To insure the building's safety, the experts demanded additional foundation support and increased thickness of iron columns at an extra cost of $14,000. Association directors expected Walsh to incorporate these changes into the project without additional cost, but he refused and demanded extra funds to make these changes. The Association refused his request, and President Kennard dismissed him from the project.

Outraged, Walsh claimed the Association had treated him unfairly. He filed a lawsuit in circuit court, seeking damages from the Association. The Association prevailed in the lower court ruling, but undaunted, Walsh appealed. His lawyers argued that the Association's failure to appoint Walsh as the building's architect violated their competition rules, according to which the winning architect had to be appointed the building architect. In Febru-



In this plan, the Olive Street entrance is on the right.

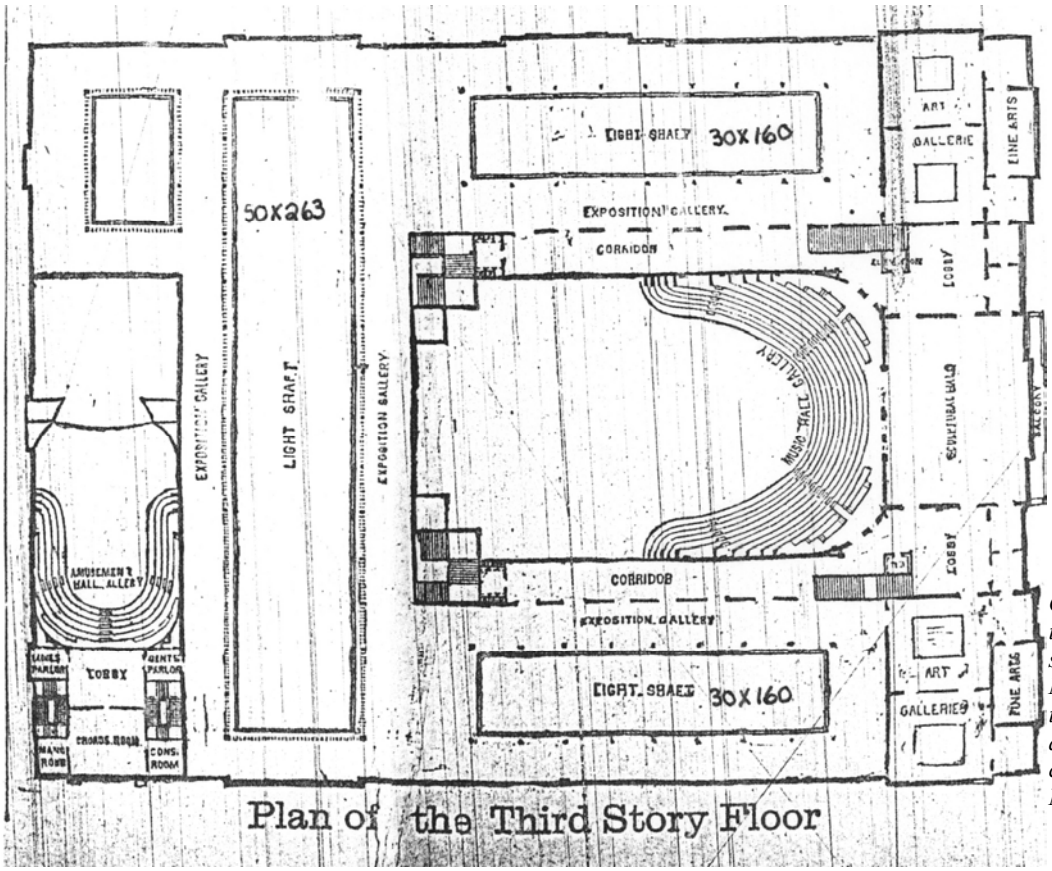
ary 1885 the Court of Appeals reversed the lower court's decision. The competition circular represented a binding contract, the court ruled, and the Association could not terminate Walsh from the project without just cause. As a result, the court awarded Walsh $20,000 in damages and ordered the Association to pay his legal fees and court costs amounting to another $2,000. Almost two years later, the Missouri Supreme Court sustained the appeals verdict. The irony of this decision was the Walsh earned three times more for not designing the building than the architectural team received which actually did the work.

The St. Louis Exposition Hall, looking northwest from 13th and Olive. Apparently the building in this early view is a photo, while the people in front are drawings.

Several days following Walsh's termination, the Association appointed Jerome Bibb Legg as his successor. They instructed him to prepare a new plan for the project predicated on the best features from the competition's merit designs. His mandate did not extend to supervising construction. Legg's selection came as no surprise to the St. Louis architectural community. Subsequent to the architectural competition, rumors had circulated about Legg being favored by at least four members of the Board of Directors, including President Kennard. To assist in formulating the new design, Legg engaged the talents of two other architects, Thomas Annan and John Bailey McElfatrick.

Having trained in the offices of both Barnett and Walsh, Annan had associated himself as the junior partner in the firm of Lee and Annan between 1873 and 1876. This firm designed and built some of the most important business blocks of the period, including the Second Merchants Exchange. Later Annan practiced architecture alone except for a two-year period in the office of Thomas Furlong, during Furlong's term as school board architect. Working together, Legg and Annan created the look of the exhibition building's principal façade on Olive Street.

J. B. McElfatrick designed almost all of the "houses of Thespis" (theaters) erected locally between 1875 and 1893. Although he designed a wide range of building types, his entertainment venues remained his most celebrated achievements both locally and across America. For this reason, Legg assigned him the task of giving



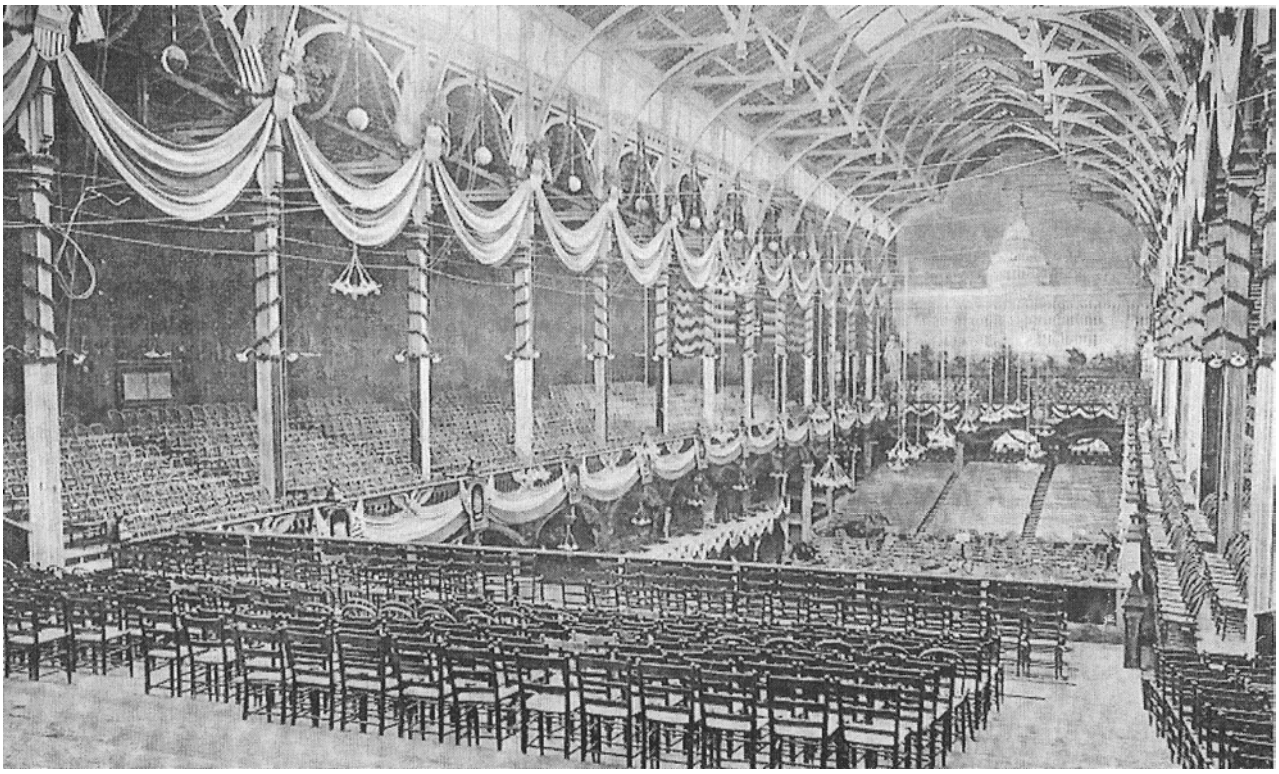
On the upper floors the long rectangular spaces around the Music Hall are open to the ground floor display spaces, including the Great Nave.

shape to the small theater and music hall. In addition to these two spaces, McElfatrick designed ten theaters here, of which seven were built. They included Pope's Theater (1879); Heavelen's Theater (1881); the Grand Opera House (with Chicago architect Oscar Cobb, 1881); Olympic Theater (1882); Standard Theater (1883); the rebuilt Grand Opera House (again with Cobb, 1885); and Hagan's Theater (1891). During the same period, he constructed theaters in such diverse places as Cincinnati (two); Louisville (two); Indianapolis (two); Omaha, San Antonio, Pittsburgh, Boston, and many more. Then in 1893, New York City beckoned with a commission to rebuild the fire-damaged Metropolitan Opera House. A year later he moved his firm to the great city. Before his death in 1906, he completed 16 theaters in Manhattan and 9 in Brooklyn.

Some of the restraints imposed by the Association on Walsh were not applied to Legg's efforts. His new plan was estimated to cost around $450,000, exclusive of building systems. Since Legg would not be supervising construction, he seemed less concerned about cost. At the close of October 1883 he completed the plans and sent them to the Board of Public Improvement for review. They imposed certain changes and the association incorporated them into the project. These entailed nine-inch deep buttresses added to the exterior side walls, iron stringers for all staircases, iron partitions, and widening the dress circle's aisles in the music hall.

In August of 1883, Patrick Sage and Son contractors commenced excavating Missouri Park, removing 42,725 cubic yards of soil to level the site at grade. While excavating another 10,000 square yards for the foundation, they discovered an unmarked sewer. It burst during the digging, flooding the site. The Association had to pump the water out of the excavation and rebuild the sewer at another location. One important change to the original building concept relocated its mechanical systems from its basement to a separate structure across the street. Fire safety issues and spiraling fire insurance costs motivated this modification. It necessitated the purchase of a separate lot and the construction of another building with connecting tunnel, adding another $60,000 to the project's cost. As the building rose from its foundations in the spring of 1884, tornado-like storms struck the area, damaging the building site. More money was need to make repairs. The purchase price of the wrought iron trusses for the music hall jumped substantially, and cost escalations continued.

Still needing some finishing touches, the St. Louis Exposition and Entertainment Hall opened its doors to the public on September 3, 1884 amid great popular acclaim. Its immense scale and fantastic appearance captivated the citizenry. Covering almost four acres, the three-story building measured 323 feet along Olive and 455 along 13th and 14th Streets. Gray limestone from the Cote Brilliante Quarry in North St. Louis was employed for the foundation and basement areas. The superstructure was



The so-called Grand Nave of the Exposition Hall, seen from the balcony on the 14th Street side. The seating and decorations are probably for the Democratic Convention of 1888. The representation of the U.S. Capitol shown on the far wall also appeared in Cleveland's campaign literature.

red pressed brick laid in red mortar, accented with limestone, copper, and red terra cotta from the Winkle Terra Cotta Company.

Stylistically the exterior was an eclectic mix of classical, Romanesque, and Gothic elements. An updated version of the Northern Italian Renaissance, the design looked to the architecture of Venice and the Lombardy region for inspiration. Six entrances provided access to the building's first floor. The main entrance flanked by two auxiliary areas defined the Olive Street front. All these entrances were reached by a series of polished limestone stairways separated by tiled platforms. A stone porch 80 feet wide with polished limestone columns and topped by a balcony screened the central entrance. Inside the porch four sets of oak doors accessed a vestibule. Situated on a pedestal at the roofline over the pediment reigned Columbia, a sculpture 24 feet high made of cast zinc, or "white zinc bronze" as it was called, "calculated to defy the elements for centuries." Zinc figures 12 feet high symbolizing Art over the east entrance and Mechanics over the west entrance were intended to crown the roofline but were never erected, although the inscriptions below them were installed on the parapets. On 14th Street, the north entrance opened into the theater and the south entrance ushered visitors into the grand exhibition nave, which extended through the building to 13th Street. A total of sixty four windows lighted each floor, while slightly smaller windows illuminated the basement. The large arched windows were filled with delicate tracery and colored glass.

Sixty percent of the building space was for exhibitions, ranging from fine art and floral displays to carriages and farm machinery. All floors contained display areas, including the whole basement except below the music hall. On the first floor, the exposition arrangement consisted of the Grand Nave (100 feet by 320 feet), two auxiliary naves (each 80 feet by 212 feet), and a floral hall. On the mezzanine above these areas three skylights sent natural light into the balcony and first floor galleries. The Grand Nave skylight measured 50 by 236 feet, while each auxiliary nave light was 30 by 160. Clerestory windows running the length of the Grand Nave must have made its open hammerbeam truss roof seem to float.

Extending nearly the length of a football field, the Grand Nave was the site of the Democratic Convention of 1888, which (unsuccessfully) nominated Grover Cleveland for a second term. Cleveland and Thurman Avenues in the Shaw neighborhood commemorate the event (Allen G. Thurman was Cleveland's vice-presidential running-mate).

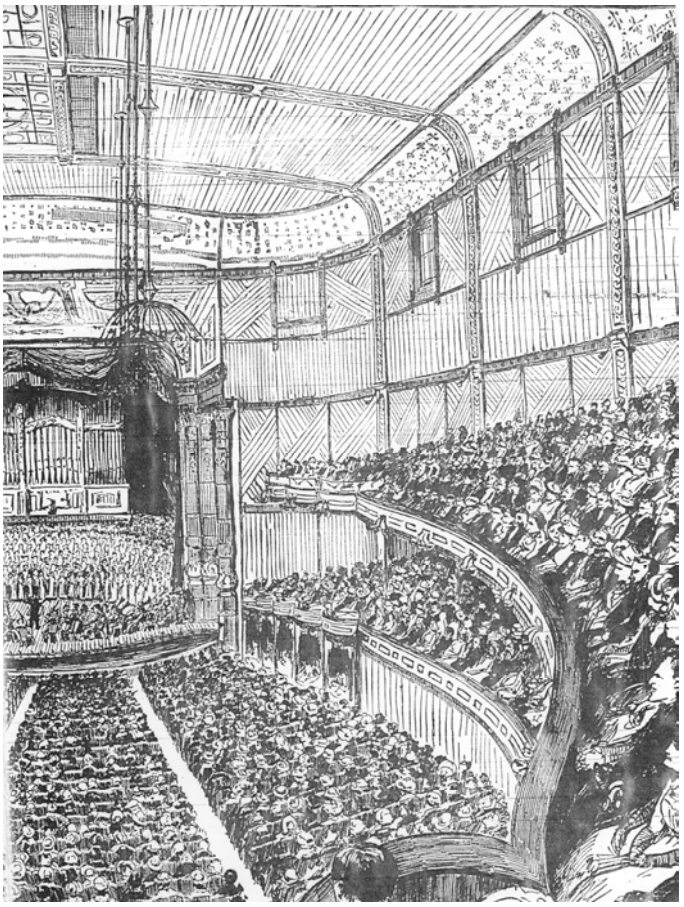
Galleries for painting and sculpture were situated at the Olive Street front of the second floor, some with skylights of their own. The sculpture gallery had a domed ceiling. Two elevators and numerous staircases facilitated movement between floors.

The Music Hall at the center of the building measured 120 by 200 feet. It seated 3,750 people in the auditorium and another 1,000 on the stage. Sixteen entry points on the first floor and eight points to the balcony allowed patrons to move in and out of the hall quickly. First-floor access to the music hall came though the east and west promenades, each 20 feet by 180 feet, and the grand foyer, 44 feet by 180 feet. Ticket offices, toilet facilities, lounges, stairways, and elevators were adjacent to the foyer. The auditorium was horseshoe-shaped, with three tiers of seating – parquet, parquet circle, and balcony. Seating on the main floor inclined 16 feet, while the parquet circle commenced 35 feet from the stage. On the walls of the music hall, carved mahogany pilasters and string courses contrasted with beaded panel boards painted chrome yellow. Electroliers dotted the coved ceiling. A skylight 20 by 80 in the center of the ceiling filled with "cathedral glass" concealed the lantern above. At night a music hall attendant switched on the electric lights installed in the lantern, creating a sparkling flow through the cathedral glass. The narrow balcony inclined 12 feet. Rising to a height of 70 feet, the stage area was 95 feet wide and 65 feet deep. At its rear, an organ gallery was placed 12 feet above the stage. Dressing rooms and a "green room" were situated behind the stage.

Seating 1,350 patrons, the entertainment hall, 64 by 160, occupied the northwest corner of the building. The space for the audience, 64 by 96, consisted of parquet, parquet circle and balcony, plus three boxes on each side. Both of the floors contained a foyer, each with three entrances into the auditorium. The manager's office, restrooms, ticket office, business office, stairs, and lounge were connected to the first floor foyer. On the balcony floor the foyer opened into restrooms, lounge, and a practice hall. The stage enveloped an area 56 by 64, with dressing rooms located at the rear.

Although equipped with gas lighting, the exposition building featured an Edison electric light system of 3,000 incandescent bulbs joined together by 4,000 pounds of copper wire and operated by a dyno-system located in the machinery building across the street. At that time, it was the largest electric light plant in the Midwest.

In 1885 the Association reported the costs of the project at about $750,000. They spent $601,000 constructing the building, $121,000 for the machinery building and its contents, and $25,000 for furniture and fixtures. To pay for the project they issued stock in the amount of $570,000, sold bonds totaling $140,000, and created a floating debt of $50,000. During the next decade the Exposition Hall experienced good business management, producing a total income of $1,330,000, minus expenses of $780,000, leaving a profit of $551,000. These funds went to pay interest on the bonds, to retire the bonds, to eliminate the floating debt, to maintain the building, and to improve its operations.

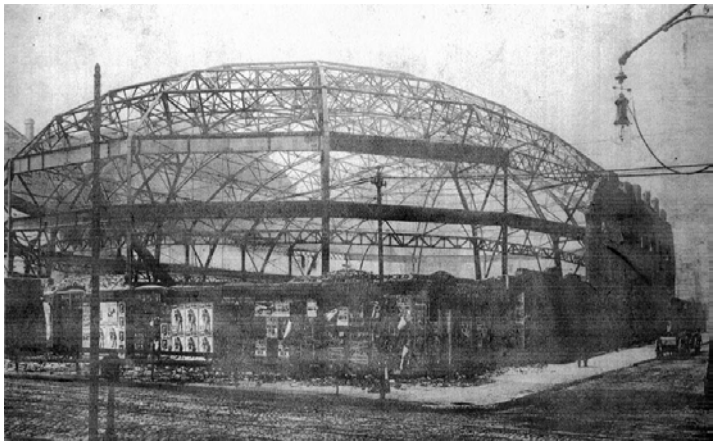


The Music Hall, seen in a detail from a newspaper illustration of the period. Note the wide, unobstructed space, the chandeliers, art glass skylight, extensive seating on the stage, and large organ.

In 1896, the Board of Directors under the guidance of President Ellis Wainwright decided to replace the area north of the music hall, including the theater, with a coliseum addition for sporting events. Wainwright hired his old associates Charles K. Ramsey (to design the building addition) and Louis Sullivan (to provide the steel frame for the amphitheater). Local newspapers, with some exaggeration, hailed the amphitheater as the Madison Square Garden of the West.

The new addition measured 313 feet wide and 189 feet deep, with a height of 72 feet. Steel truss construction guaranteed the absence of interior support columns. Permanent seating accommodated 4,300 people on the first floor and 2,400 in the balcony. The arena ring on the first floor was 112 by 232 feet. When converted to seating, this area added another 5,000 seats to the building's capacity. Entrances opened on all four sides of the building with ticket offices on 13th and 14th. Dressing rooms, storage, and horse stalls were situated underneath the first floor seating. Ramsey estimated the project cost at $150,000. Completed in 1898, the amphitheater actually cost $235,000. The Association financed the project with bonds at six percent annual return.

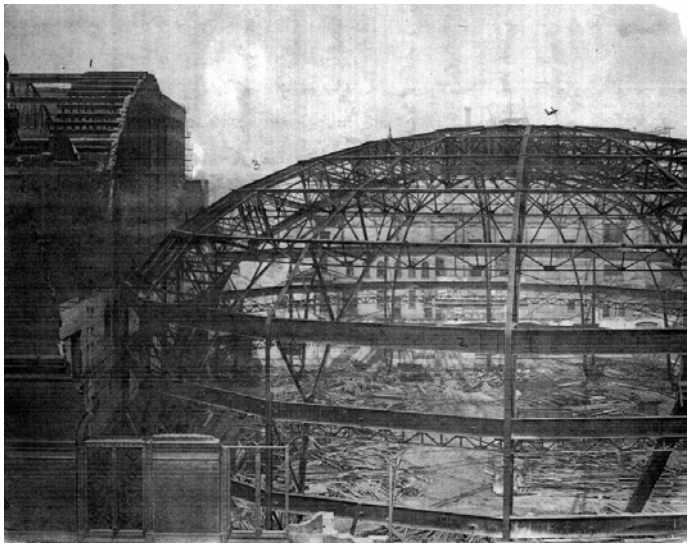
The new amphitheater accommodated new attractions – horse shows, Wild West extravaganzas, the circus, the rodeo, and other sporting activities. But the revenue generated by these events did not offset the construction costs of the addition. Declining rentals, loss of the fall festival, and poor management reduced the Association's revenue stream.



Construction of new Coliseum wing to Exhibition Hall, 1896. The construction fence in the foreground is covered with posters, and part of the original façade can be seen on the right.

As a result, the Association defaulted on the payment of bond interest and retirement for several years. To facilitate the cause of the bondholders, the city government revoked the ordinance allowing the Exposition Hall to use the site. E. O. Stanard, trustee for the bondholders, filed a lawsuit in circuit court to foreclose on the property. After seizing the property, Stanard's clients elected to sell it at auction, hoping to recoup their losses.

Flush with a gift of one million dollars from the Carnegie Library Foundation, the St. Louis Library Board cast a covetous eye on this site and envisioned their new main library rising from it. City government approved the use of the site for a library building. Rich and powerful friends supported the library board. At the St. Louis Union Trust Company, the board raised $250,000 to purchase the Exposition Building. The library board donated another $35,000. On May 7, 1902, E. O. Stanard, trustee for the bondholders, sold the property to Frederick W. Lehmann, representing St. Louis Union Trust Company, trustee for the library board. Lehmann paid $280,000 for the premises, about one quarter of its value. Then the bank donated the premises to the library board, who continued to operate the Exposition Hall until the close of the 1904 World's Fair. The Democratic National Convention of that year (which nominated Alton B. Parker for President) was the largest event to be held at the amphitheater.



Louis Sullivan's framing for the new wing to Exhibition Hall

Two years later, the board demolished the building and cleared the site in preparation for the construction of the new main library. City government reclaimed the northern part of the lot and converted it back into a public park, named Lucas Park for its original donor. Meanwhile a new but not nearly as interesting Coliseum was constructed in 1908 at the southwest corner of Washington and Jefferson to designs of Frederick C. Bonsack. It served until Kiel Auditorium opened in 1934 and remained standing until 1953.

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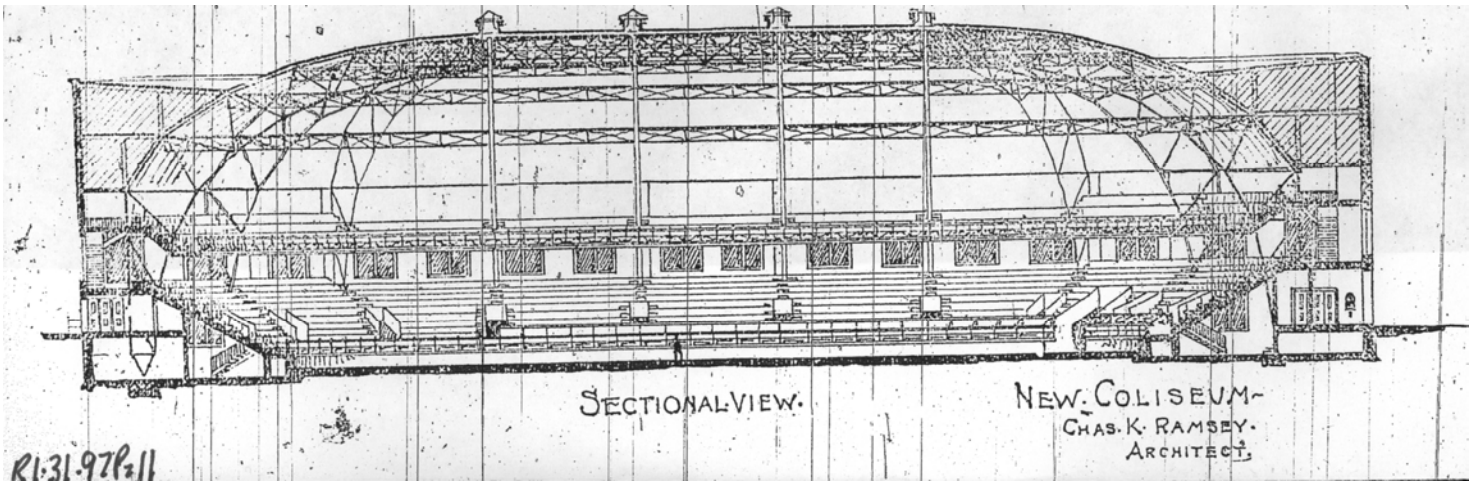

Section drawing of the new Coliseum section of the Exhibition Hall, printed at a slight tilt in The Republic*, January 31, 1897, page 11, and signed by architect Charles K. Ramsey. This would be the view from the north.*

News Letter

NewsLetter is published quarterly by the St. Louis and Missouri Chapters of Architectural Historians.

Please mail editorial correspondence and submissions for publication to: Esley Hamilton, Editor, 7346 Balson Avenue, University City, Missouri 63130 or contact him by telephone: (314) 615-0357 or by email ehamilton@stlouisco.com. Deadlines for submission of material for publication in **NewsLetter** are as follows:

Spring issue	15 February
Summer issue	15 May
Fall issue	15 August
Winter Issue	15 November

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