

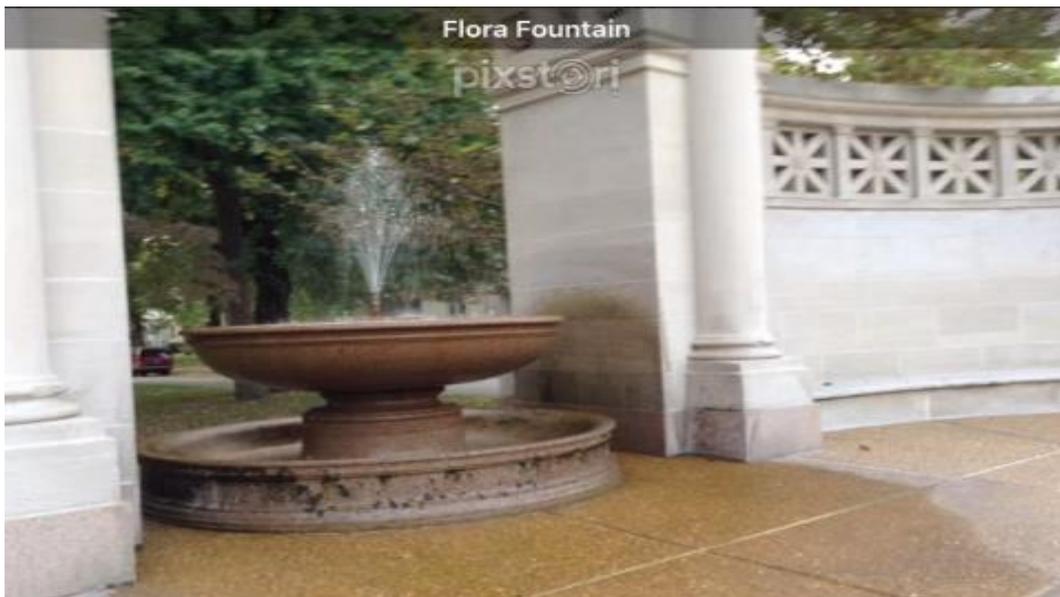


## The Missouri Place Stories Project: Shaw and Botanical Heights

*By Andrew Hurley and Maris Gillette*

### **The Challenge: Reconciling Historic Preservation and Urban Greening**

Maris Gillette and Andrew Hurley, Professors of History at University of Missouri-St. Louis, launched the Missouri Place Stories Project in the Summer of 2015 with funding from Creating Whole Communities. The project was established to promote a holistic approach to community planning through historical and ethnographic research that examined the relationship between social behavior, cultural perceptions, and a changing urban landscape in two inner-city St. Louis neighborhoods. The subjects of the study, the Shaw and Botanical Heights Neighborhoods, are adjacent communities located near the Missouri Botanical Garden. Both neighborhoods have struggled to reconcile two powerful urban revitalization impulses: historic preservation and urban greening.



Since the 1980s, these two neighborhoods have sought to leverage their status as historic districts to attract new investment and rehabilitate older properties. These efforts proved more successful in Shaw than in Botanical Heights. More recently, grass-roots organizations in both areas have mobilized residents to create parks, gardens, and native prairie plantings on underutilized land. While these two strategies of historic preservation and urban greening have complemented one another as counterforces against urban blight, they have tended to represent divergent visions of neighborhood redevelopment and have given rise to disagreements over the construction of neighborhood identity and the disposition of abandoned and vacant properties.

## An Integrated Approach to Nature and History

Our project aimed to bring these divergent agendas closer together by encouraging residents to view local places as parts of a cultural landscape, a hybrid environment composed of integrated cultural and natural features. We thought that an integrated approach to nature and history might prove beneficial to residents involved in stewarding and planning for their neighborhoods. In particular, we hoped to harness qualities associated with heritage and history, including empathy, a strong sense of identification, and valorization of the local.



Community partnerships proved vital to the successful execution of the Missouri Place Stories Project. Sustainable in St. Louis, a grass-roots organization interested in leveraging collective memories to support the installation of green infrastructure, became our first community partner and helped us conceptualize the project, prepare historical materials, and analyze collected data. Partnerships with the two largest neighborhood organizations in the area, the Shaw Neighborhood Improvement Association and the Botanical Heights Neighborhood Association, facilitated our wide outreach to the community in terms of both recruitment and the dissemination of research results. Collaboration with the Compton Heights Christian Community Church was invaluable for reaching segments of the community who were not associated with the more prominent neighborhood organizations.

The Missouri Place Stories Project proceeded through three overlapping phases. Beginning in June 2015, faculty and graduate students at the University of Missouri-St. Louis prepared historical information packets that highlighted long-term changes in the area's built and natural landscapes. In the second phase, stretching from August 2015 to April 2016, we invited residents to read the historical information packets and then record photo-narrations about meaningful places in their neighborhood using the Pixstori mobile app. This exercise constituted the core of our research efforts. Overall, we collected 136 photo-narrations from 26 people: 12 from Botanical Heights and 14 from Shaw. Contributors photographed 78 distinct places, of which 44 were in Botanical Heights and 34 in Shaw.

## Findings: What the Community Values

Among the most frequently discussed places were Tower Grove Park, the I-44 Underpass/Viaduct at Thurman, the Botanical Heights Community Garden, the Vonderrit Myers Memorial, the Missouri Botanical Garden, the playground at Blaine and Thurman, and St Margaret of Scotland Church. Participants also selected many less widely recognized sites, such as the streetcar tracks poking above the roadway near Thurman and Botanical Place, a small prairie planting in an alley, an old tree on Russell Avenue, and many more.

The following themes emerged from the assemblage of place stories:

- Walkability is an important neighborhood attribute -- people like being able to walk to cafes, restaurants, stores.
- Old trees contributed to community identity, and the provision of shade is highly valued.
- Manicured green spaces are preferred over wild ones.
- Green spaces are most appreciated when they also serve as social spaces.
- Historical architecture and remnants of the past (e.g., old signs) are important to local identity, but many dilapidated structures warrant demolition.
- Vonderrit Myers' death should be marked and mourned.
- Street barricades are positive for pedestrians and cyclists, but also reflect an unwelcoming bunker mentality.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the photo-narrations reflected a persistent tendency to put nature and history in separate domains. Residents tended to locate history in buildings, civic institutions (such as the Missouri Botanical Garden), and old signs. Interestingly, green spaces acquired meaning as places where relatives and neighbors gathered to work the land, play with their children, or enjoy reunions and picnics. Yet some of the stories, memories, and commentaries about trees, gardens, streets, and buildings revealed nuanced and holistic thinking. Some residents explicitly linked green spaces to history through Henry Shaw, local personages, or historic ideals about people and nature.

## Engaging the Community

The third and final phase of the project included collaborative analysis of the photo-narrations and community discussions focused on the implications for local planning. The collected place stories were posted on a project website (<http://placestories.missouriepscor.org>) where they could be accessed through geo-located markers on a map. Beginning in December 2015, we held meetings with community leaders and residents, sharing our observations and inviting discussion about community practices. Participants at a community forum in May 2016 were eager to learn from the place stories. The incoming president of the Shaw Neighborhood Improvement Association suggested keeping the place stories up for eight years and asking residents to continue adding photo-narrations. Another neighborhood organizer spoke about hosting community conversations to discuss the social concerns that residents identified. A leader of Sustainable in St Louis explained that he had changed his measure of success for the prairie restoration to include people walking through and enjoying the site. Other plans included taking an inventory of all the trees on private property, and producing materials to educate residents about the emerald ash borer and help them identify trees at risk.



The Missouri Place Stories Project did not revolutionize popular attitudes about place or planning practice in Shaw or Botanical Heights. By the end of the pilot, however, some residents had joined us in seeing the tremendous potential that tapping into the humanized and historical dimensions of urbanized nature offers for cultivating broader support for local sustainability planning.