

RAUMLABORBERLIN: 4562 ENRIGHT AVENUE

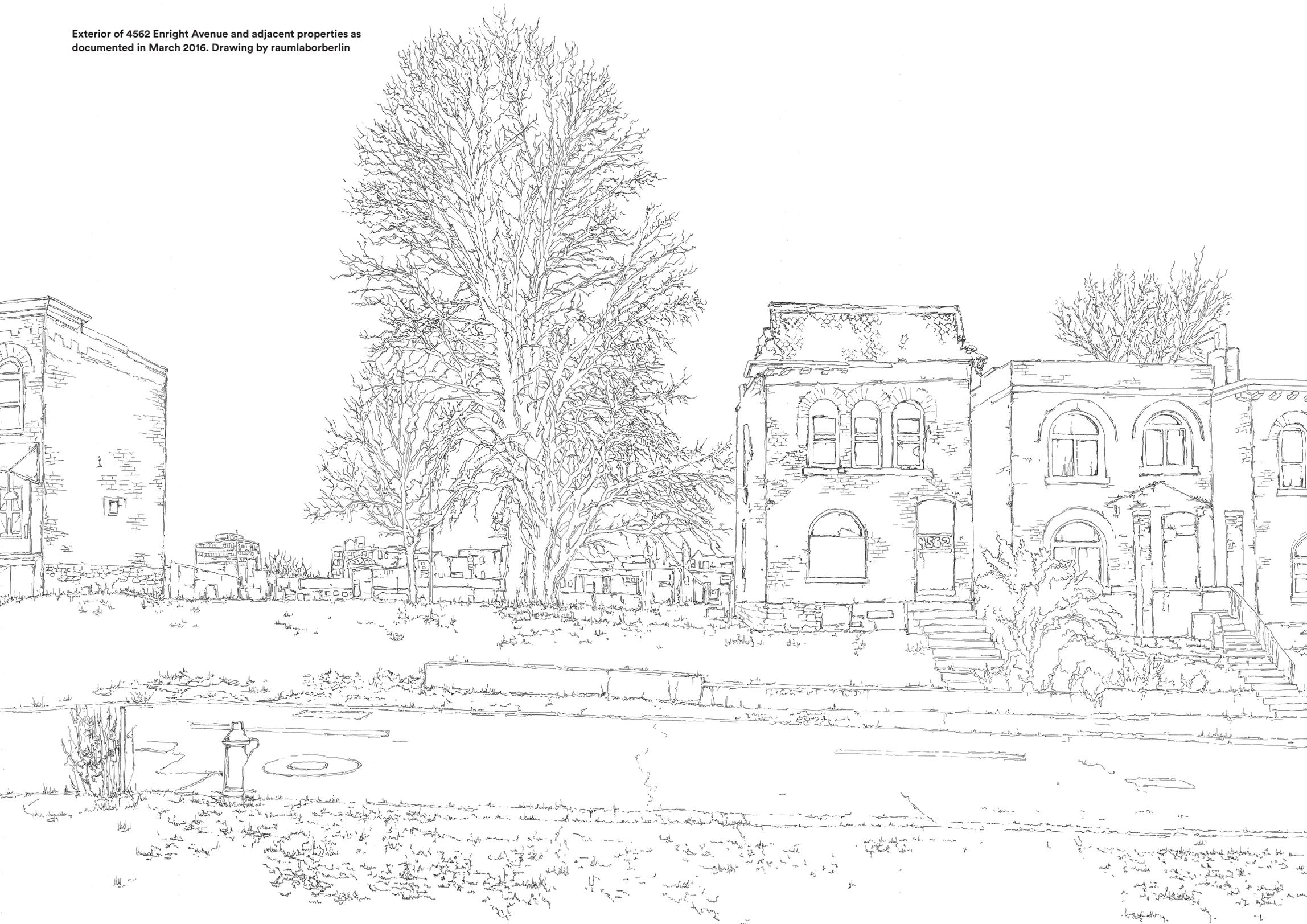
Kristin Fleischmann Brewer

At the opening of this exhibition, a house exists simultaneously at 4562 Enright Avenue, in St. Louis, where it was built over a century ago, and in the main gallery of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, where it is being reimagined and repurposed by German architecture collective raumlaborberlin. While the brick exterior of the long-abandoned house remains at the original address, its beams, windows, doors, and other materials have been salvaged, with many of them being used to create a mirror site at the Pulitzer—a two-story skeletal structure that evokes the building’s frame and interior. This structure occupies an area identical in size to that of the original house, but its interior disrupts expectations. Staircases lead to a nonexistent second floor, and walls are supplanted by studs fitted with salvaged architectural elements; objects and documents of the house’s past and present are combined with speculations for the future. By the close of the exhibition, what is left of the original Enright Avenue house will have been completely dismantled, its materials destined to be repurposed for future construction.

A specter-like reflection of the original house, *4562 Enright Avenue* is more than its physical presence: it is an invitation to reflect on how houses, neighborhoods, and cities are built, sustained, and transformed. It creates a pause in the demolition process and a filter for inquiry, as we are asked to consider a home, in its many forms, as a marker of identity and a site of memory—a space to reconsider what buildings become, and what they leave behind, when they are taken down. While many will experience this artwork in the gallery, it is one part of a trajectory that began with a series of dialogues and culminates in the transformation of the house in the Pulitzer before the materials return to local partners for reuse. What follows is the story of this process.

Raumlaborberlin is a collective of nine architects working at the intersection of architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, and art. Witnesses to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the founding members of the collective became interested in transitional urban spaces. For them, this reunited city represented a place of possibility, and architecture offered a way to look at, reimagine, and redefine the urban experience. With a name that combines the German words *raum* (space) and *labor* (laboratory), they espouse the use of experimentation and collaboration

Exterior of 4562 Enright Avenue and adjacent properties as documented in March 2016. Drawing by raumlaborberlin



to address urban transformation in cities divided by conflicting planning ideologies, diverging cultural values, and changing conditions. In the words of collective member Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, “We do not solve problems. We initiate processes that enable citizens to gain insight into a city and its dynamics... to understand them and make use of them.”¹

As both architects and outsiders, raumlabor was drawn to the rich architectural texture of St. Louis and the character of the people they encountered during the nine-month research period that preceded the creation of *4562 Enright Avenue*. The derelict buildings and large plots of empty space that make up a part of the city’s landscape became a focus for the architects, who were particularly interested in examining the role and latent possibility of these contemporary ruins in the lives of residents. After visiting and learning about St. Louis, Foerster-Baldenius, Markus Bader, Jan Liesegang, and Christof Mayer decided to work with a house that was slated for demolition, and to use the building materials for an installation in the Pulitzer galleries.

In order to determine the feasibility of this proposal, the Pulitzer team initiated dialogues with Frank Oswald, City of St. Louis Building Commissioner, and other members of the Buildings Department to learn more about the demolition process and to develop criteria for prospective houses for the project. Simultaneously, raumlabor and the Pulitzer team began assessing neighborhoods and meeting the neighbors who might be interested in collaborating on the project. Early in this process, the team met with Pamela Talley, President of Lewis Place Historical Preservation, Inc., a nonprofit organization whose goal, in Talley’s words, is “to save a neighborhood,” an objective that often entails action beyond preservation. Talley made introductions to neighbors, some—veterans, builders, civil service workers, and educators—who have lived there for generations, and a series of conversations ensued about shared goals and outcomes, including the need to not only record important personal and social history related to the house and neighborhood, but also invest in the neighborhood’s future. Together with these various constituents, several guiding questions were developed for the selection of a home, among them: *Was there any potential for rehabilitation?* If so, it was off the list. *Was it a danger to residents, or did the neighbors want it to be taken down?* If so, it was high on the list.

After several visits to the neighborhood and with the recommendation of both Talley and the residents, raumlabor and the Pulitzer selected 4562 Enright Avenue for the project. The house had been

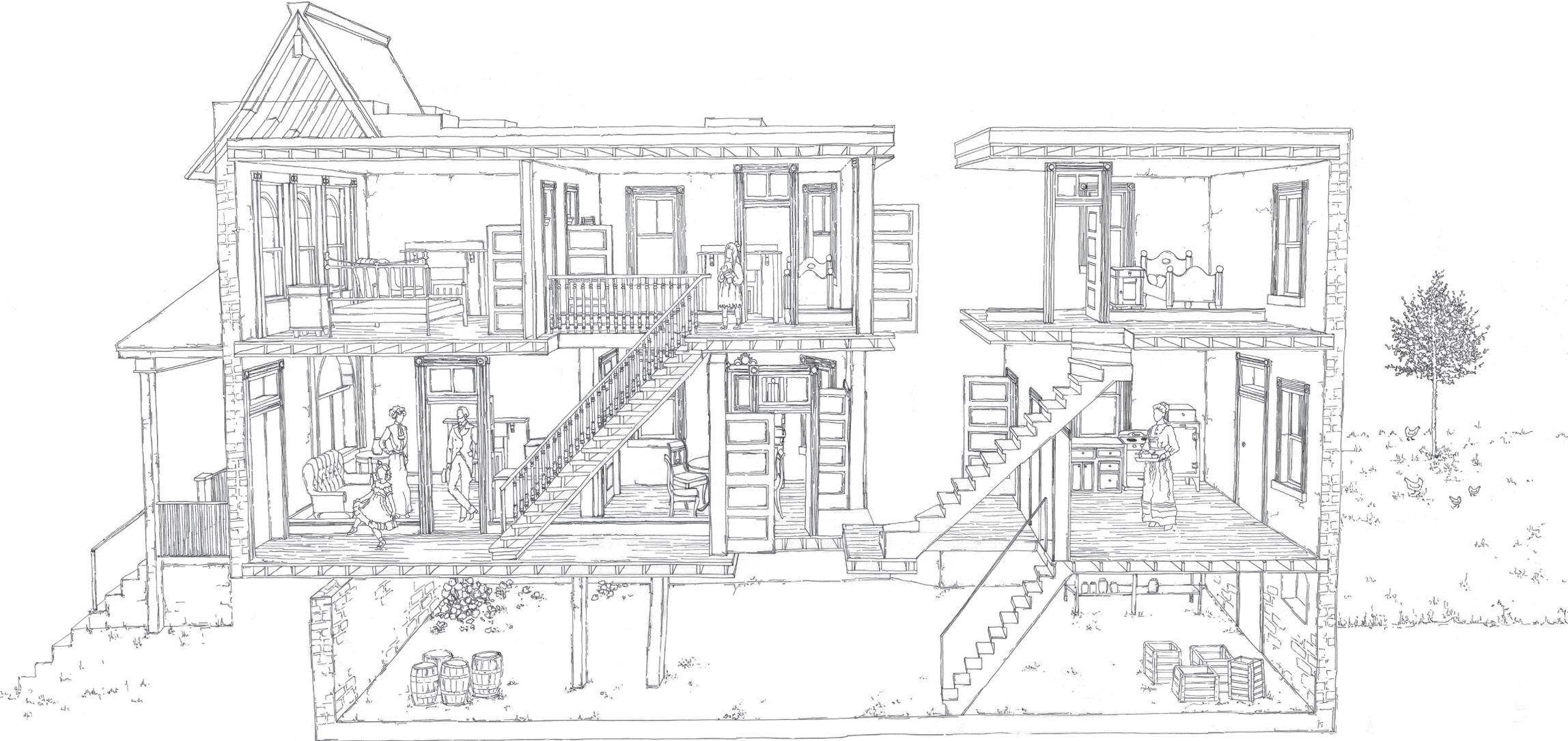
uninhabited for more than twenty-five years, was deemed structurally unsafe, and was fated for eventual demolition. For two decades after the last owner moved away, it had been cared for by a next-door neighbor, lovingly referred to as Ms. Sophie, and her family. When Ms. Sophie's own house was taken down after irreparable damage caused by a tornado in 2011, the family moved away and 4562 Enright Avenue fell into further disrepair.

The house resides on a double-long block on the edge of a neighborhood in transition. A majority of the forty-five homes on the street are occupied, and nearly a dozen are in various states of vacancy. The street is dotted with green land where homes once stood—4562 Enright Avenue is adjacent to a vacant lot with two large oak trees—and an abandoned urban farm sits across an alley that runs behind the house. A new brick gate at the end of the block creates a cul-de-sac. Many residents, like Ola Fort, a neighbor and key advisor to the project, have been caring for their homes while also purchasing and developing nearby properties and empty land. Concurrently, houses are being demolished, and neglected properties accumulate trash and increase the vermin population. When discussing 4562 Enright Avenue, Fort said, “take it down, and can you take down the other one across the street, too?”

The stretch of Enright Avenue that is home to 4562 is one block north of Delmar Boulevard, a street known as a dividing line in the city. The Pulitzer is located a mile and a half east and sits two blocks south of Delmar Boulevard, and over this short distance there are stark contrasts.² According to census data, 98% of residents in the neighborhood directly north of Delmar identify as black, while 73% of people living in the neighborhood south of Delmar identify as white. Other statistics also capture the differences across the divide, including median home values of \$73,000 versus \$335,000; median annual incomes of \$18,000 versus \$50,000; and percentage of residents with Bachelor's degrees at 10% versus 70%.³ Standing on the grass lot that sits adjacent to 4562 Enright Avenue, where Ms. Sophie's home and another used to be, one can look north and south to see the disparity in the treatment of land and, by extension, people. To the north, swaths of green trace a path of disinvestment exaggerated by the path of the tornado. To the south, the glitter of stained-glass church windows and dense neighborhood blocks testify to the public and private investment in that part of the neighborhood.

In 1890, when the house at 4562 Enright Avenue was built, it was in a middle-class neighborhood largely occupied by German immigrants.⁴

Cross section of 4562 Enright Avenue, depicted at an imagined moment early in its history.
Drawing by raumlaborberlin



The architectural styles of the homes on Enright Avenue—rectangular brick structures with decorative details like arched windows and parapet walls—were inspired by Georgian Revival and French Renaissance styles, and were showcased during the 1904 World’s Fair for their innovative brickwork. With a set of pocket doors, multiple fireplaces, and two staircases, among other features of the era, the building was home to an estimated ten families and thirty-five individual residents over the course of its history. In the early twentieth century, as the neighborhood became a hub for emerging middle-class families, residents of 4562 Enright Avenue included Irish and Canadian shoemakers, a dressmaker, a bookkeeper, a German carpenter, an electrician, and an English photographer. In the 1940s, African American families began moving to the area, looking to build a life away from harsh conditions of overcrowded, segregated neighborhoods. Yet racially restrictive covenants had been written into the house deeds in some middle-class neighborhoods, including that of 4562 Enright Avenue, preventing people of color from purchasing a house. According to records on file with the City of St. Louis, in 1944, a woman bought 4562 Enright Avenue for only five days before selling it to the next occupant and owner, an African American woman who taught math at a local high school. The sociohistorical context suggests that the woman who bought the home was likely white, having purchased it from a white family, and then sold it to an African American individual, who otherwise could have been prevented from purchasing the house due to restrictive covenants in the neighborhood (which became unenforceable by law across the state of Missouri in 1948).⁵ In a testament to the character of its residents, Enright Avenue was purportedly called “Striver’s Row” throughout the mid-twentieth century. Residents were active in the desegregation of public facilities and founded such landmark institutions in the greater St. Louis area as Homer G. Phillips Hospital and the New Age Federal Savings and Loan Association, the first African American-owned bank in the city.

As St. Louis’s population began to decline in the middle of the twentieth century, like that of many other post-industrial cities, abandoned buildings became increasingly pervasive. With the city burdened by deteriorating structures and empty land parcels, the Land Reutilization Authority (LRA), the current owners of 4562 Enright Avenue, was formed as a state entity in 1971 and became the first land-bank in the country.⁶ The vision and legislation for the LRA was written by Margaret Bush Wilson, a former chairperson of the NAACP, civil rights activist and

attorney, and resident of the neighborhood where 4562 Enright Avenue is located. Her vision was to create a system that would get the property into the hands of neighbors and back on the tax rolls more quickly. However, the LRA's complex legacy has seen both positive traction and criticism of its effectiveness. According to data provided by the City of St. Louis, there are currently 7,000 vacant buildings and 10,000 vacant land parcels in St. Louis.⁷ Recent years have seen increased development, and while the population of the city has begun to stabilize, demolition remains essential to the maintenance of land occupied by vacant, unsound, and neglected buildings. Between 1999 and 2015, a total of 11,463 buildings were demolished by the City, LRA, federal government, and private entities.⁸

As part of *4562 Enright Avenue's* research phase, raumlabor and the Pulitzer initiated relationships with a variety of partners to gain perspective on housing policy, the intricacies of demolition, and sustainable neighborhood revitalization. Potluck meals, conversations, and block meetings were hosted to gather local residents and engage them and other stakeholders, including those involved in urban planning and policy, demolition, and refabrication. Many of these people became key advisors.⁹ Raumlabor also interviewed people across the city, creating video documentation that shares the personal stories of city residents and their perspectives on home. These videos are exhibited at the Pulitzer, where they contribute to the project's goal of considering demolition and the people it affects, thus repositioning neglected narratives.

Discussions with neighbors about the short- and long-term outcomes for the site will continue to take place throughout the project and beyond. Respecting the wishes of residents, the plot of land at 4562 Enright Avenue will be graded for maintenance and the trees trimmed until future development. Neighbors also identified infrastructure improvements, including street trees and sidewalk repairs, which are being addressed collaboratively by the Pulitzer, raumlabor, and the City of St. Louis. Trees were planted this spring, and other improvements are being planned. Continued discussion with the neighbors and broader public, as well as programming throughout the course of the exhibition, will explore opportunities for this site and other land parcels. Ideas have ranged from parks and playgrounds to a proposal by raumlabor in which the facade of the house would be laid flat on the ground, with window holes used as spaces to grow plants and the brick surface as a gathering place, thereby preserving history and reusing materials in a poetic but practical application.

Throughout the project, the Pulitzer and raumlabor have sought

opportunities to reinvest in the St. Louis community, and the conscientious disposal of materials resulting from the demolition was one way to do this. Nonprofit organization and project partner Refab, for example—which assisted in the salvage of the home’s non-structural elements such as doors, windows, and flooring—helps to keep the material economy in St. Louis by selling many of their salvaged building materials locally. They also provide training and employment opportunities in construction and demolition for veterans and formerly incarcerated individuals. The salvaged bricks will be sold to another local company, Century Used Brick, with the funds invested to support the Lewis Place summer youth camp.¹⁰

A city is not only a place, but also a point in time; its physical appearance endures variation and revision, as its generations of citizens experience spatial, social, cultural, and economic flux.¹¹ Raumlabor believes that the future of our cities must be co-authored and shaped by a vision that allows for differences between stakeholders. What does a home represent, and how does it reflect our lives and dreams? How do we equitably re-envision the landscape of post-industrial American cities? How do we disrupt a system that favors economic efficiency over community? *4562 Enright Avenue* frames these questions through the reimagining of a home—one private dwelling transformed into a place to project memories, to cultivate an openness toward something new, and to hold a collective space for imagining.

- 1 Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, in conversation with Peter Arlt, March 12, 2015, Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz, Austria.
- 2 The idea of the “Delmar Divide” received international attention following a 2012 report by the BBC News, which exposed the persistence of segregation within St. Louis and outlined the disparity in the conditions on either side of the divide. Franz Strasser, “Crossing a St. Louis Street that Divides Communities,” BBC News video, March 14, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17361995>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The street name, originally 4562 Vonversen Street, was named after the daughter of a prominent developer and German landowner, Mrs. Elizabeth Clemens. The name was changed to Enright Avenue after World War I to commemorate a war hero. Gwendolyn Moore and Judith Arnold, *Meet Me On Enright* (St. Louis, 1983), 4.
- 5 For more information on the specific housing policies and legal battles to which this brief historical survey alludes—including redlining, FHA Loans, and significant court cases, such as the landmark decision of *Shelley v. Kraemer*—I recommend the following sources: Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2014; and public resources available through the Missouri History Museum at <http://mohistory.org>.
- 6 The Land Reutilization Authority receives the titles to all tax delinquent properties not sold at the Sheriff’s sale, and through donation. They work with the City of St. Louis to maintain, market, and sell these properties and assemble them for future development. City of St. Louis, Land Reutilization Authority, accessed June 24, 2016, <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/sldc/boards/Land-Reutilization-Authority.cfm>.
- 7 Properties are owned by local and federal governments, LRA, and private entities. This is a problem facing many American cities due to waning post-industrial businesses and jobs, as well as high foreclosure rates during the economic downturn of the last decade.
- 8 All statistics provided by the City of St. Louis.
- 9 This catalogue features a conversation with two of these advisors—Pamela Talley and Terry Kennedy—who share their experiences as residents of and activists in the 18th Ward of the City of St. Louis, where 4562 Enright Avenue is located.
- 10 Most bricks salvaged from demolition projects are sold to other cities for higher profit margins and shipped down the Mississippi River. For more information, see Robert Meyerowitz, “St. Louis’s Brick Thieves,” *St. Louis Magazine*, April 2011, last modified June 8, 2011, <https://www.stlmag.com/St-Louis-Brick-Thieves/>.
- 11 Raumlaborberlin collective member Markus Bader refers to the city as a “process,” with its “placement in time” as a “continuity” rather than a fixed entity. Raumlaborberlin, *Building the City Together: The Osthang Project* (Berlin: ZK/U Press, 2014), 128.

Interior of 4562 Enright Avenue as documented in March 2016.
Drawing by raumlaborberlin



This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition
raumlaborberlin: 4562 Enright Avenue, organized by Kristin Fleischmann Brewer
and presented at Pulitzer Arts Foundation, July 29–October 15, 2016.

Designed by Jonathan Hanahan, Milieu
Edited by David B. Olsen and Lucy O'Brien
Printed by The Advertisers Printing Company, Inc.

ISBN: 978-0-9976901-2-5
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All drawings courtesy of raumlaborberlin.

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For more information on the exhibition, please email your questions to
askacurator@pulitzerarts.org.