# STREETS: Homeowners Take Over

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## They Buy Them

# *Residents Take to the Streets*

By BOB SECTER,
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ST. LOUIS—For Lucy and Fred Hale, it was a dream house at a dream price: 8,000 square feet, three floors, 15 rooms, ivy-covered brick walls, big yard, carriage house, marble tile bathrooms, ornate plaster moldings.

All for $25,000. Even in 1970, that was a bargain.

There were drawbacks, however. More than 6,000 cars a day whizzed past the house. Buildings on neighboring blocks were crumbling, victims of neglect and "white-flight." Crime was rampant. Prostitutes, pimps and drug addicts patrolled nearby streets.

The Hales bought the house and then joined in a most unusual effort to save the neighborhood. Along with 28 other homeowners, the Hales convinced the city to deed them the 5300 block of Waterman Boulevard—streets, streetlights, sidewalks and all.

### A Booming Block

The new owners rechristened the block Waterman Place, built gates to bar through traffic, tacked up "no trespassing" signs and turned their street into a fortress which effectively stemmed the tide of creeping blight. They pay extra for services once provided by the city, but, in return, they enjoy a lower crime rate and booming property values.

Today, Waterman Place and a few dozen private streets like it in St. Louis stand as oases of prosperity in what the Brookings Institution last year called the nation's most distressed big city. Most have been private for decades, but a few have only recently switched.

Private streets are not a new concept, either to St. Louis or to many other cities in the United States. In general, the streets have been the preserve of the wealthy who choose to live in exclusivity. That was certainly the original idea in St. Louis when most of the private streets—with names like Windermere and Kingsbury—were formed.

### Not Just for the Wealthy

The residents now are a more eclectic group, mostly young professionals attracted by housing values and the convenience of living closer to their offices. On Waterman, for example, there are small businessmen, lawyers, doctors, professors, a school teacher, a nurse, a fast-food restaurant owner and an ex-pro football player. Nine of the 29 homes are owned by blacks.

Some urban planners are evaluating the private street concept as a solution to one of the nation's most perplexing problems—how to check the decline of the cities. And a top Reagan Administration housing official is studying the possibility of using federal funds to promote the conversion of some city streets from public to private.

St. Louis, once a place of great grace and charm—"The Gateway to the West" it was called—has fallen on hard times. Suffering from a classic case of white flight, the city has lost half its population in only 25 years. Employment has nose-dived as industries have fled to the more affluent and spacious suburbs, taking with them the middle-class citizens and tax base that form the bulwark of a stable urban environment.

Decay has rippled through the city, even touching the fashionable Central West End district of turn-of-the-century mansions and streets lined with stately sycamores, oaks and box elders. Delmar Boulevard, the northern boundary of the district, is a montage of boarded-up storefronts and abandoned apartment houses.

While somewhat scarred, the district has survived and is undergoing something of a renaissance. Officials and residents alike credit private streets with saving the area.

"The private streets insulated themselves from the blight all around them," explained Joe Balcer, a West End resident who served as chief of staff to former Mayor James Conway. "Were these streets not private, the whole area would have self-destructed."

Housing values have jumped dramatically in the last 10 years. Grand old homes like the Hales' now command $150,000 or more. But since even those price tags make the homes seem like steals compared to those in the St. Louis suburbs and much of the rest of the country, the private street houses are a great deal for those with a moderate income.

### Homeowners' Restrictions

The key to the success of the private streets is the restrictions that associations of homeowners on the blocks have been able to impose on themselves. Because residents own their block, they determine its fate. They can have the police run strangers out of the neighborhood. They can bar new construction or stop the conversion of existing large homes into apartment houses.

Most of the West End streets have been private since the early 1900s, when many of the local social, business and civic leaders moved into what were, in effect, fancy subdivisions developed on the outskirts of the city near Forest Park where St. Louis was hosting a World's Fair.

It was an area that reeked of the good life, and it stayed that way until long after World War II, when the city's general decline set in. By the time the Hales got around to buying their house, many of the public streets in the West End area were considered among St. Louis' hottest crime spots.

### Prostitute Spurs Action

The Hales bought into the neighborhood for a simple reason—for the money, the house was a great buy. "For the house we have and the money we paid, you couldn't touch it anywhere," explained Hale, a marketing professor at the St. Louis campus of the University of Missouri.

Though the neighborhood had a multitude of problems, it was not until a streetwalker started plying her trade up and down the block that the effort to make the block private caught fire.

Even then, it took over three years to make the switch. Every homeowner on the block had to sign a petition agreeing to the change. The plan then had to be approved by several city agencies, most importantly the fire and street departments, which would be directly affected by any street closures. After that, the St. Louis Board of Aldermen had to pass an ordinance vacating the street.

### Paying for Services

The city finally transferred title to the block to the Waterman Place Assn., the residents' group, in 1975. The association assesses each household approximately $50 per year to pay for services formerly provided by the city, such as street, light and sidewalk maintenance, leaf sweeping and snow plowing.

In addition, there is a $300 annual assessment per household to pay off a $65,000 loan the association took out to erect decorative brick columns on the east end of the street and a wrought-iron gate which blocks access to the street on the west. Any major project, such as repaving the street, would require a special assessment.

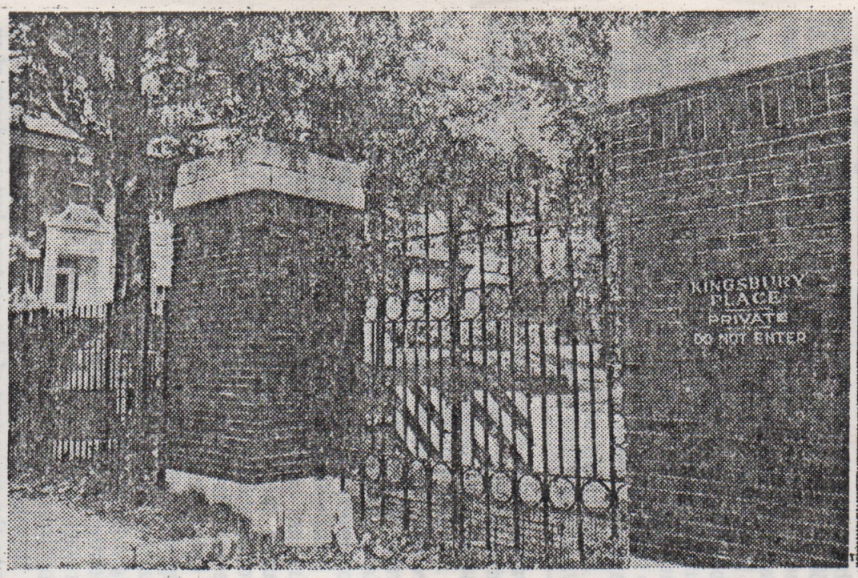
As on many of the private streets, the residents on Waterman Place have built speed bumps on the roadway to deter motorists from driving more than a few miles an hour. That and the absence of through traffic, makes it safe for children to play in the street.

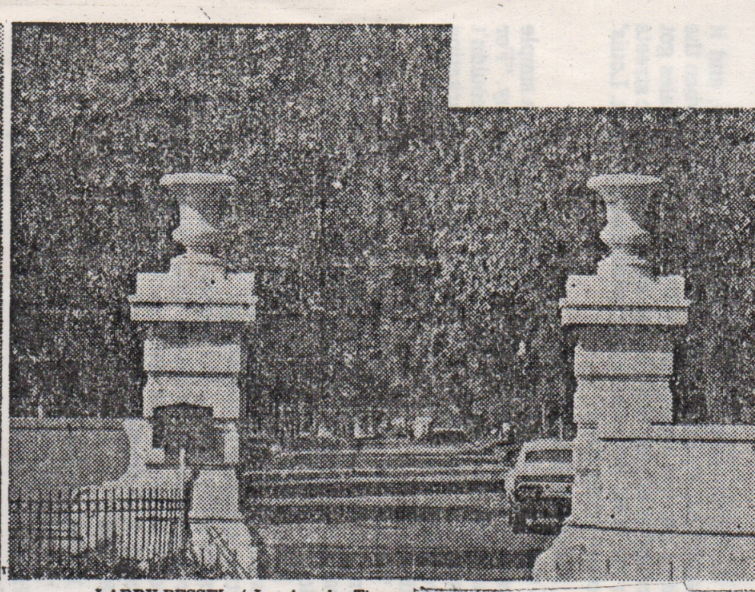
Another advantage of the private streets is that they are safer to live on. Residents, linked by their joint ownership of the street, learn to watch out for each other. Many associations have hired guards—usually off-duty policemen—to patrol the streets at staggered hours.

Residents also take advantage of their right to have a stranger arrested for trespassing if they suspect he is casing the neighborhood. On a public street, police would probably not have the authority to arrest such a person if he had not committed a crime.

Crime is appreciably lower on the private streets, especially those with security guards, than on adjoining public streets, according to the police department. During a recent three-month period, for example, one residential area on a public street had a crime rate six times greater than that of an adjoining residential neighborhood on a guarded private street.

Waterman is only one of two streets to go private since the early part of the century, but residents of an-



LARRY BESSEL / Los Angeles Times

Some ornate entrances to St. Louis private streets that were formed in city's early days.

# STREETS: New Barriers to Blight

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other nearby block, plagued by severe traffic and parking problems, have formally begun efforts to make the switch. Homeowners in at least two other blocks are also considering it.

Though they have not been promoting the idea, city officials have not discouraged it either. "That's that much less maintenance my people have to take care of," said city street commissioner James Shea. "We don't want to look a gift horse in the month."

The city has been experimenting with a quasi-private street concept, offering to erect gates and traffic barriers on many public residential streets in the West End as long as they did not interfere with public safety. So far, more than 50 such barriers have been put up at the request of neighborhood associations, giving some public streets the look and feel of privacy, without the expense.

**Other Cities Following Suit**

The concept is beginning to spread to other cities and other types of neighborhoods. In Columbus, Ohio, streets were narrowed and barriers and bumps erected in a low-income public housing project last year.

Stephen Bollinger, former executive director of the public housing authority in Columbus, said the changes brought a 50% drop in acts of vandalism.

"The closed streets provide a spirit of community for the residents that they didn't have before," said Bollinger, now the assistant secretary for community planning and development at the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Bollinger said he may propose that HUD commit federal block housing grants to assist residents in low- and middle-income neighborhoods in making their streets private.

The idea is consistent with the Reagan Administration philosophy that says citizens can often provide for their own needs better than the government can, Bollinger said.

"It would help lower the crime rate and would stimulate greater pride of ownership and thereby increase property values," he maintained. "That would increase property tax revenues for the cities and help pay for the services of those on the public streets."