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Building a Dream with Charles Guggenheim

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Charles Guggenheim (1924-2002) was a master of the documentary form. Celebrated for such notable films as *Robert Kennedy Remembered* and *Nine from Little Rock*, the scope of his prolific career stands as a testament to his deep interest in committing the American experience to film.

Starting in 1962, Guggenheim focused his attention on the American landscape, producing several documentaries that demonstrated the deftness of his touch and the inherent humanity in his work.

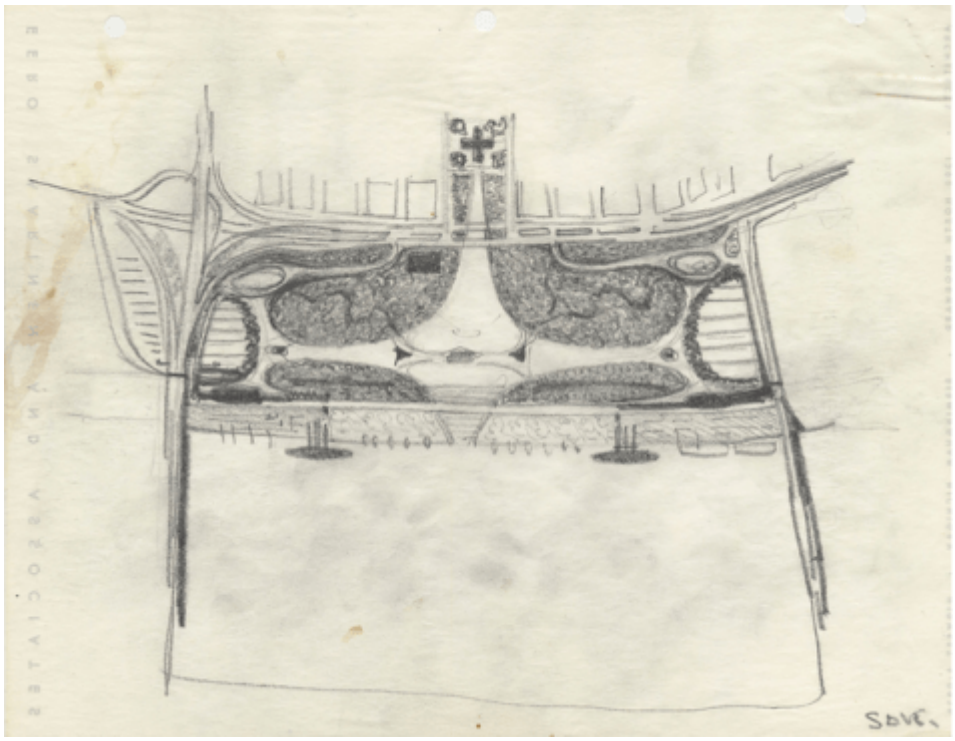
In these productions â?? *Monument to the Dream (1967), A Place to Be (1979)* and *America by Design* (1987) â?? Guggenheim documents more than just architectural significance. Instead, he deliberately turns the attention to the workers, separating man from monolith and weaving surprisingly intimate narratives throughout each film.

Originally from Cincinnati, Guggenheim relocated to St. Louis, Missouri, where he founded Guggenheim Productions on the eve of his thirtieth birthday. It was there that he received an important early commission from the National Park Service to document the construction of the Gateway Arch at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial site.

The resulting film, *Monument to the Dream*, would be nominated for an Academy Award.

During production, Guggenheim made an editorial decision to parallel the drama of the construction process with the westward expansion of the pioneers. Construction of the 630-foot-tall steel-clad structure spanned more than two and a half years (1963-1965), and Guggenheimâ??s cameras followed the raw steel from its Pennsylvania origins where it was shaped on the factory floor to its journey by rail â??moving westward at a pace the pioneers could not imagine, but on a path they had carved themselves.â?•

The iconic design by architect Eero Saarinen was a marvel of modern engineering, but for Guggenheim, it was the ironmen and welders who made this story an extension of an earlier American saga: â??â?¦men who were closer kin to the trappers and pioneers than they knew â?? they, too, were a mixed and scattered breed â?? men given to roaming and reshaping the face of the land.



Eero Saarinen sketch of Jefferson National Expansion Memorial site



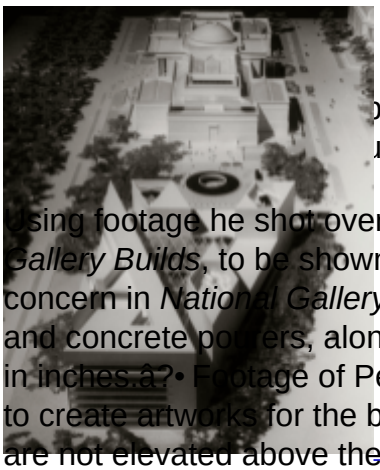
Monument to the Dream production photograph by Don Matthews

This approach to humanizing larger-than-life subjects would serve Guggenheim throughout his career. And while he would soon move his production offices to Washington, D.C., his early experiences in St. Louis would continue to impact his future work.

More than a decade after *Monument to the Dream*, Guggenheim was commissioned to make *A Place to Be*, a film documenting the design and construction of the National Gallery of Artâ??s East Building. In transcripts of interviews conducted with architect I.M. Pei, Guggenheim compared the challenges of this narrative to his experience with *Monument*: â??Our struggle is going to be to try to find some kind

of concept in this picture. Weâ??re more inclined to feel that maybe itâ??s based on our experience in very dramatic.â?•





photograph of
uction site

Using footage he shot over six years for *A Place to Be*, Guggenheim crafted a short film called *National Gallery Builds*, to be shown at the opening of the East Building. Workers are once again the central concern in *National Gallery Builds*; the majority of the film features shots of quarrymen, cabinetmakers and concrete pourers, along with montages of their faces and hands â??working in tonnages, crafting in inches.â?• Footage of Pei and artists Henry Moore and Alexander Calder, who were commissioned to create artworks for the building, appear alongside the workers, but their contributions to the project are not elevated above them. The clink of a stone carverâ??s chisel etching the name of the building aptly echoes over the final credits.

Watch a video of the building process here.

Photograph of National Gallery of Art East Building architectural model

In the 1980s, Guggenheim Productions was awarded an unprecedented grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to produce *America by Design*, a five-part educational series that aired on PBS. This series, hosted and written by architectural historian Spiro Kostof, was approached as an opportunity to engage Americans to think proactively about their relationship to the built environment by explaining its evolution in a socio-historical context.





PBS announcement card for *America by Design*, front and back.

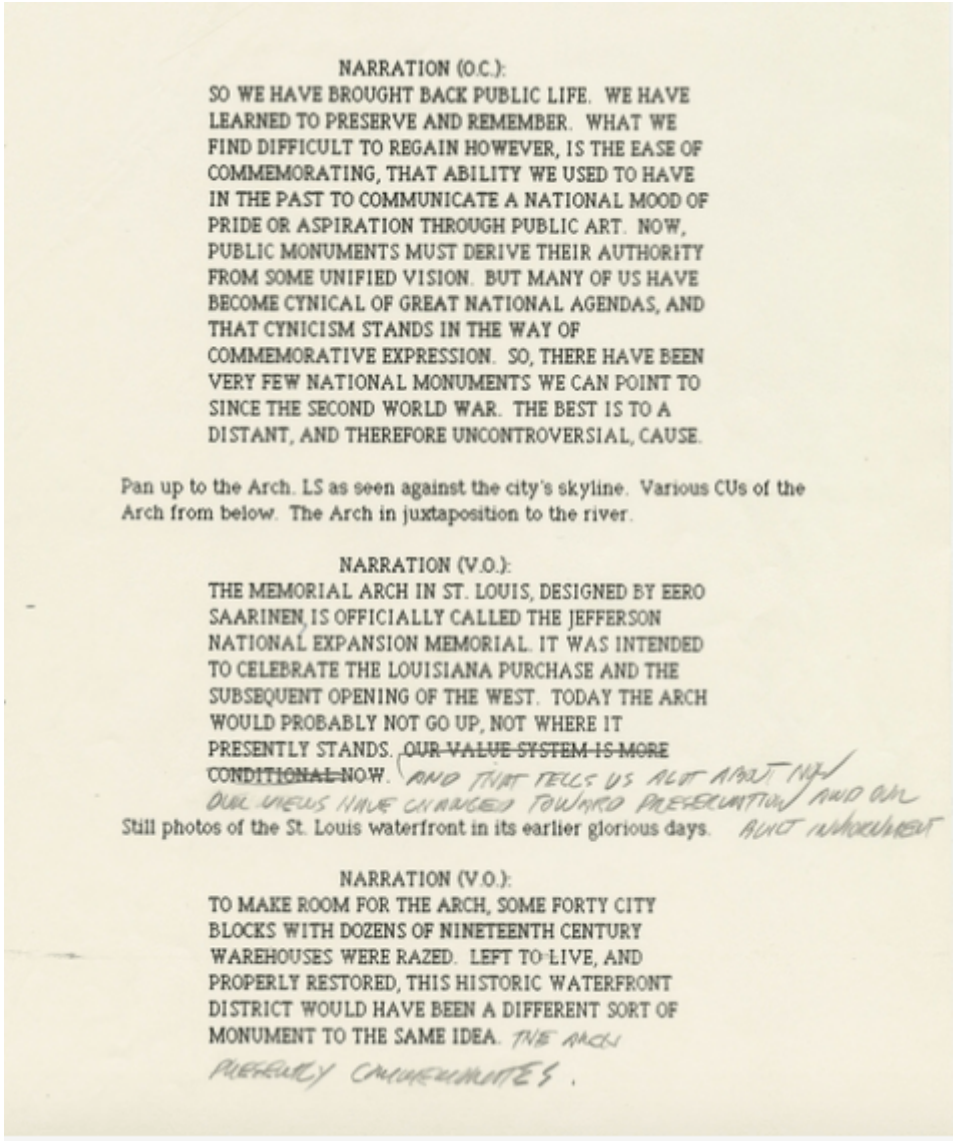
Each episode featured a different aspect of our landscape: â??The House,â?• â??The Workplace,â?• â??The Street,â?• â??Public Places and Public Monumentsâ?• and â??The Shape of the Land.â?• Civic responsibility is evident in the concluding on-camera narration script for â??The Street,â?• which reads:

â??Weâ??re the ones who fill buildings and roads with life and so give value to these abstractions of architects and engineers. In the ways we use what is built and designed, in the demands we make and the changes we bring about, weâ??re all designers of America. On all of us falls the blame for what is ugly in our surroundings, what is inhumane and derelict. To us all belongs the credit for the beauty we fashion and the love, the excitement, the grace we put inside.â?•



Contact sheet of *America by Design* production photographs with selected images circled

The script of â??Public Places and Public Monumentsâ?• called Guggenheim back to St. Louis again. This time, two decades after *Monument to the Dream*, the Gateway Arch was used as an example of how times had changed to the extent that drew into question whether such a memorial would still be constructed.



NARRATION (O.C.):
SO WE HAVE BROUGHT BACK PUBLIC LIFE. WE HAVE LEARNED TO PRESERVE AND REMEMBER. WHAT WE FIND DIFFICULT TO REGAIN HOWEVER, IS THE EASE OF COMMEMORATING, THAT ABILITY WE USED TO HAVE IN THE PAST TO COMMUNICATE A NATIONAL MOOD OF PRIDE OR ASPIRATION THROUGH PUBLIC ART. NOW, PUBLIC MONUMENTS MUST DERIVE THEIR AUTHORITY FROM SOME UNIFIED VISION. BUT MANY OF US HAVE BECOME CYNICAL OF GREAT NATIONAL AGENDAS, AND THAT CYNICISM STANDS IN THE WAY OF COMMEMORATIVE EXPRESSION. SO, THERE HAVE BEEN VERY FEW NATIONAL MONUMENTS WE CAN POINT TO SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR. THE BEST IS TO A DISTANT, AND THEREFORE UNCONTROVERSIAL, CAUSE.

Pan up to the Arch. LS as seen against the city's skyline. Various CUs of the Arch from below. The Arch in juxtaposition to the river.

NARRATION (V.O.):
THE MEMORIAL ARCH IN ST. LOUIS, DESIGNED BY EERO SAARINEN, IS OFFICIALLY CALLED THE JEFFERSON NATIONAL EXPANSION MEMORIAL. IT WAS INTENDED TO CELEBRATE THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE AND THE SUBSEQUENT OPENING OF THE WEST. TODAY THE ARCH WOULD PROBABLY NOT GO UP, NOT WHERE IT PRESENTLY STANDS. ~~OUR VALUE SYSTEM IS MORE CONDITIONAL~~ NOW. AND THAT TELLS US ALOT ABOUT HOW OUR VALUES HAVE CHANGED TOWARD PRESERVATION AND OUR ABILITY WHICHWHERE

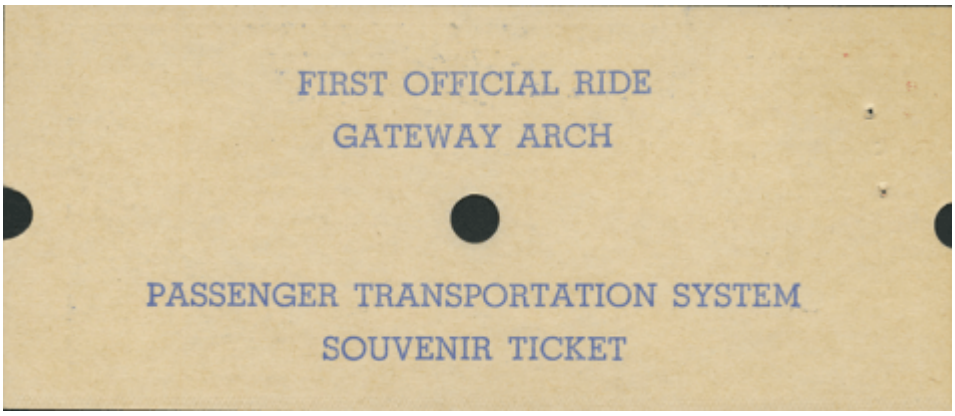
Still photos of the St. Louis waterfront in its earlier glorious days.

NARRATION (V.O.):
TO MAKE ROOM FOR THE ARCH, SOME FORTY CITY BLOCKS WITH DOZENS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY WAREHOUSES WERE RAZED. LEFT TO LIVE, AND PROPERLY RESTORED, THIS HISTORIC WATERFRONT DISTRICT WOULD HAVE BEEN A DIFFERENT SORT OF MONUMENT TO THE SAME IDEA. THE ARCH PRESENTLY COMMEMORATES.

America by Design: â??Public Places and Public Monumentsâ?• script page annotated by Charles Guggenheim

But the Arch *was* built and now stands as an indelible part of the American story. *Monument to the Dream* made it possible for every American to share in the love, excitement and grace of its construction. The film was recently digitally restored and continues to be screened daily at the Gateway Arch.





The Margaret Herrick Libraryâ??s Special Collections is proud to house the Charles Guggenheim papers, currently being processed under the auspices of a two-year grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. This manuscript collection documents works for film, television and other media that were directed and produced by Guggenheim Productions between 1954 and 2003. The files encompass more than 400 linear feet and consist largely of scripts, research materials, production materials and correspondence.



Charles Guggenheim

In 2004, the Academy Film Archive acquired the vast majority of Guggenheimâ??s collection, including prints of most of his films, as well as original negatives, outtakes and production materials. **Read â??**

The Charles Guggenheim and Robert F. Kennedy Storyâ?• to learn more about the Charles Guggenheim papers.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciencesâ?? preservation efforts are made possible in part by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

(Source: oscars.org)

Category

1. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

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