

## Images of Kansas City

The public image of Kansas City, Missouri, brings to mind the John Huston quote in the movie *Chinatown*. The old, corrupt Noah Cross wises up Jack Nicholson's dogged detective, "Politicians, ugly buildings and whores all get respectable if they last long enough." All three categories have their Kansas City examples, starting with the last first.



ELI PAUL

A young Annie Chambers came to Kansas City in 1870, one year after a turning point in the town's development. The construction of the first bridge across the Missouri River – a monumental engineering feat – ensured the town's continued existence and growth as a commercial center and transportation hub. The subsequent network of railroads brought an inexhaustible supply of male customers for the sexual services that Chambers and her associates provided. By the time of her death in 1935, this notorious madam had become a legitimate businesswoman, found the Lord and contributed large sums to local charities. Today her memory is so well esteemed that recently she (or rather an actor) was "interviewed" on a local public-television program by Kansas City's library director. A large mirror from her house-that-wasn't-a-home can be seen on display in the National Archives of Kansas City.

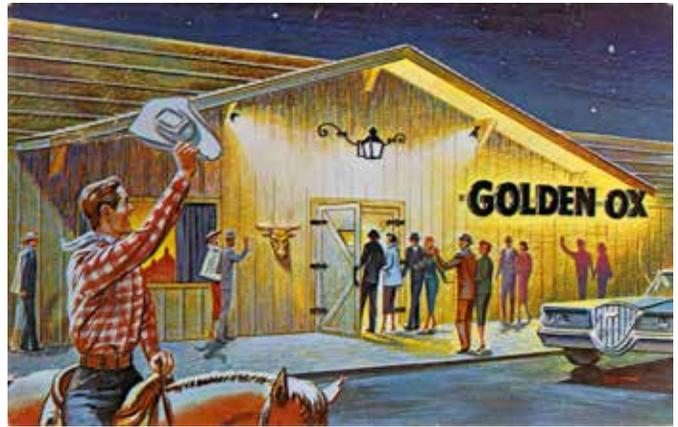
Mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> Century urban renewal initiatives ravaged Kansas City's old 19<sup>th</sup> Century architectural oddities, but ugly buildings still abound. Although of a "Modernist" vintage, the most prominent ugly building is Kemper Arena (1974). Erected in time for the 1976 Republican National Convention, the multipurpose behemoth has been host to countless concerts, livestock shows and athletic contests. One wag described it as "unimaginative, utilitarian and an eyesore." Despite

surviving indignities such as a roof collapse and the loss of a professional basketball franchise the venue's days were numbered. It was unceremoniously replaced by another civic arena in 2007 and slated for the wrecking ball, but current developers of the mothballed Kemper remain optimistic of its future prospects. The property achieved National Register of Historic Places status in 2016, somewhat surprisingly since it failed to meet the age requirement of at least 50 years and lacked architectural significance.

A less assuming but still ugly building sits at 1908 Main Street, the former site of the Jackson Democratic Club when it served as the headquarters for the Pendergast political machine. "Boss Tom" Pendergast ran Kansas City in the 1920s and '30s, and during the Prohibition era, under his guardianship, bootleg liquor ran freely. Once a city councilman, Pendergast soon realized that more power could be wielded if one controlled the council, the mayor, the city manager and a corrupt police force, which he did. His reign lasted until 1939 when he began serving time at the Federal penitentiary in nearby Leavenworth. President Harry Truman, who benefitted greatly during his political career from the Pendergast machine's huge pools of Democratic voters, suffered severe criticism when he attended the broken man's funeral in 1945.

Yet even from these depths the most corrupt historical figure may be redeemed. Pendergast's reputation now extends beyond the dives, jazz clubs and speakeasies that his associates supplied. In 2016 Tom's Town Distilling Co. opened for business in a restored Pendergast-era brick building, hawking expensive drinks for a decidedly upscale clientele.

During the interwar period, civic boosters promoted Kansas City as the



The famed Golden Ox restaurant, "Where the steak is born!", sat in the KC Stockyards Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library

"Paris of the Plains." Seriously? Was this done tongue-in-cheek? The image of Paris to post-World War I America and its returning doughboys ("How 'ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Pa-ree?") carried a dual meaning. Annie and Tom could easily have served as models for the city's rough image as a Midwest Paris of sin, vice and low life. The opposite image was far more refined, one of spacious boulevards, elegant fountains, tasteful architecture and solid institutions of high art, history and culture. City fathers preferred the emphasis be placed on that side of the coin.

Postcards of the day, a wonderful reflection of popular tastes and preferences, also emphasized the latter image. For every card that portrayed the city's rough frontier and cowtown heritage (such as the above image), several times that number boasted of its modern amenities. An anonymous author of postcard text came up with probably the best tagline of all, one that hearkened to that 1869 bridge, the city's natural geography, and our Midwestern spirit – "Kansas City, the Heart of America."

### Suggested readings

James R. Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew, 1822-2011* (University Press of Kansas, 2012).

John Simonson, *Paris of the Plains: Kansas City from Doughboys to Expressways* (History Press, 2010).

Evan S. Connell, *Mrs. Bridge* (Viking, 1958); *Mr. Bridge* (Knopf, 1969).