

THE GATEWAY TO THE WEST

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[Assignment: Describe a building that has left a deep and abiding impression on you. Attempt to isolate a few features--style, function, materials--that account for its appeal. Your reader must now experience this building through your writing.]

(1) True monuments are timeless. Their impressive forms capture such deep expressions of their time that they pass through time, always leaving lasting impressions on those who view them. This was what Eero Saarinen, the Finnish-American architect, had in mind when his design won the national competition in 1947. He conceived an arch, a form which would be visible for many miles. An arch was also a very appropriate form to represent the city of St. Louis, which has come to be known as the Gateway to the West. St. Louis, located along the Mississippi River, was established as a trading center. When President Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase, it was from St. Louis that the explorers set out on their journey. St. Louis was no longer just a frontier trading settlement. It became the commercial crossroad of the West. The Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Arch commemorates a time when the settlers crossed the Mississippi River on their way westward, helping to expand American boundaries.

(2) The Arch is a perfect expression of structural forces. Although it is a tribute to the past, it is really a technological wonder of the present. It has no inner frame or skeleton to hold it up. It is in the form of an inverted catenary curve, the shape a weighted chain assumes when hanging freely between two points. The basic building units of the Arch are double-walled triangular sections. The builders started with the two legs at the base and worked upward putting in place 142 sections. All of the weight of the figure is put on the center of the legs and then transferred to the sixty foot foundations. At the base, the legs have a width of fifty-four feet, and they narrow to seventeen feet at the top.

(3) For the skin of the Arch, Saarinen chose stainless steel, a material both permanent and contemporary. The shimmering quality of the stainless steel suggests the function of the Arch as a beacon. It attracts many people today just as many people flocked to the West in the 1800's. The Arch, 630 feet high, is the tallest memorial in the United States. It is plastic in form and its frame is in the shape of an equilateral triangle.

(4) Inside the legs of the Arch are egg-shaped passenger trams which take people up to the top. Once at the top, there are sixteen windows on each side for visitors to look out over the city of St. Louis. A

visitor can see for approximately thirty miles through these windows on clear days. On windy days one can often feel the slightly swaying movement of the Arch. Engineers estimate that in a 150 mph wind, the Arch will sway only eighteen inches at the top.

(5) Underneath the Arch is the Museum of Westward Expansion. It is a learning place for the large number of people who visit the Arch. Besides providing historical information, this museum provides physical support for the Arch. Interesting and unusual information can be found about the Arch and its construction in this museum. It contains exhibits, films, and artifacts to help visitors understand what it was like to go west in the 19th century. People can learn about the discoveries of Lewis and Clark, the adventures of the fur trappers and traders, and about the lifestyles of the Indians.

(6) On the grounds surrounding the Arch is a small forest. These trees are a symbol of the wilderness into which the explorers journeyed. The Arch rises elegantly out of this forest, magnificent, towering, and unforgettable.

(7) Having lived near St. Louis for most of my life, I have many memories of the Arch. I can remember touching the Arch on hot days when I was a child and being amazed at all the heat which this shiny steel building absorbed. On the Fourth of July, the fireworks reflect off of the sides of the Arch, creating a spectacular, colorful sight for thousands of viewers to enjoy. When returning from trips, the sight of the Arch assures me that I am almost home.

(8) The Gateway Arch of St. Louis has left a deep and abiding impression on me and I am thankful for the privilege of living near and seeing often this great landmark. This building is a great piece of architecture and took much careful planning to design and build. I have enjoyed its architectural beauty and learned from it about those who explored and settled our country west of the Mississippi River. The Arch commemorates the past but also pays tribute to the present.