

*Offprint From*

# **Preservation Education & Research**

Volume Five, 2012



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Cover: *Kenilworth Castle Ruins, England: Great Arched Passage leading to the Great Hall (Photographs by Rumiko Handa). (See p. 33)*

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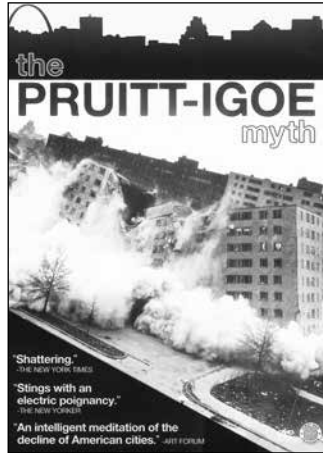
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Chad Freidrichs (director). *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*. 83 min. First Run Features, 2012.

Chad Freidrichs's documentary film, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, begins and ends not with scenes of buildings but with views of gnarled woods. Such imagery is not typically associated with St. Louis's infamous mid-century housing project. This urban forest, the narrator explains, has grown up on much of the fifty-seven acres formerly occupied by the thirty-three, eleven-story buildings of the Wendell Pruitt and William Igoe homes. Left vacant and used as a dumping ground for city waste, the site is now eerily quiet, occupied by trees, building fragments, and scattered piles of garbage.

Pruitt-Igoe's current state belies not only the urban complexities that plagued the site beginning in 1954 but also the dramatic footage of its implosion in 1972. This footage, the film explains, has played a large part in the creation and perpetuation of a series of myths about the rise and fall of Pruitt-Igoe. *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* unpacks these tales, questioning their roots and their validity, thereby complicating the site's popular narrative.

The documentary begins by establishing the three major components of Pruitt-Igoe's history. First is the critical acclaim to which the Pruitt-Igoe housing

project opened: it was celebrated for its architectural design and its promise of better living through public housing. Second is the complex's rapid physical and social decline, which ultimately led to the decision to close and demolish the buildings. And third is the shocking footage of the implosion of three Pruitt-Igoe buildings, which was used by the media to herald the presumed failures of both modern architecture and public housing. Katharine G. Bristol first explored the validity and legacy of these issues in an article in *The Journal of Architectural Education* in May 1991 (*JAE* 44: 163-171), and Freidrichs's film expands and enlivens Bristol's analysis, highlighting the laws, changing economy, segregation, and shifting urban context that contributed to Pruitt-Igoe's downfall.

*The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* tells this complicated story in nine thematic sections. Each showcases vintage photographs and video, as well as recent interviews with former residents. With titles including "A Modern City," "Poor Man's Penthouse," "Control," "Ghetto," and "Fear," the segments navigate a path from the project's positive beginnings to its violent end. The earliest sections focus on the promise and community of Pruitt-Igoe. Still photographs highlight the minutiae of daily life: families in living rooms, bright bedrooms, a voting station, and Christmas lights. Film clips show Pruitt-Igoe in its early years as well maintained and dotted with children playing outside. Former residents recount the excitement they felt upon moving into their apartments, the fun they had playing with other children, and the sense of family that united residents. These stories paint life at Pruitt-Igoe as positive and vibrant, a far cry from the more typical depictions of the complex.

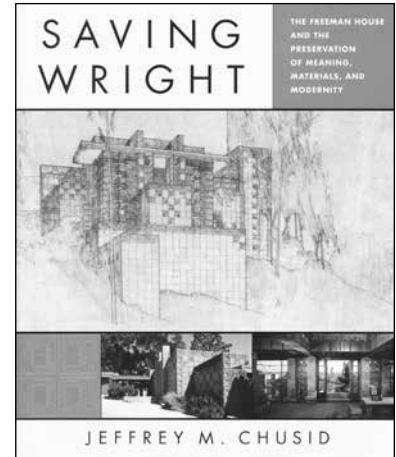
Subsequent accounts turn more ominous, describing the laws and policies that shifted fortunes for Pruitt-Igoe's residents and buildings. The film highlights one of the Welfare Department's most destructive policies, which stipulated that an able-bodied man could not live in the same home with a mother who received

welfare assistance. Since the Welfare Department also controlled access to public housing, many husbands opted to leave their wives and children so that their families could live at Pruitt-Igoe. The policy broke up families and created financial insecurity, which led to resentment, faltering rental payments, and then to vandalism and lagging maintenance. This discussion typifies the film's strongest moments, weaving together personal stories and historical evidence. It also reveals the complex mix of factors responsible for Pruitt-Igoe's decline.

The documentary has some minor flaws. Certain vignettes of still and video images are unnecessarily long, and the narrator's monotone sometimes grows tiresome. Also, the film's final minutes suggest the universality of the lessons from Pruitt-Igoe, which, though true, seems too large a generalization to insert at the end of such a specialized study. Overall, though, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* is a deft telling of a story that many presume to already understand and provides insightful visual and personal evidence of the multiple interpretations of the life of, and at, Pruitt-Igoe.

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Jeffrey M. Chusid. ***Saving Wright: The Freeman House and the Preservation of Meaning, Materials and Modernity.*** New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, 256 pp., color and black-and-white photographs and illustrations, hardcover, \$55.00, ISBN: 978-0393733020.

**S**aving Wright: *The Freeman House and the Preservation of Meaning, Materials and Modernity*, by Jeffrey M. Chusid, is a meticulously documented analysis of the design, construction, decline, and seismic rehabilitation of Frank Lloyd Wright's 1923 Freeman House in Los Angeles. Although there is nothing fictional about it, the book examines this singularly beautiful but fundamentally flawed house with all the drama, cast of colorful characters, and (literally) earth-shaking plot twists of a movie script.

Chusid is an architect and associate professor in the Historic Preservation Planning program at Cornell University. Between 1986 and 1997, he served as the preservation architect and director of the house, which is now owned by the University of Southern California (USC). He also lived there for a period of time. Chusid frames his riveting chronicle around two provocative preservation questions: How can a building be restored as originally designed and built when aspects of that design and its construction materials and methods were inherently flawed? And, how is a building's significance, in this case as a design by Wright, impacted by immediate and ongoing interventions by other architects? Despite Chusid's thoughtful consideration of the questions, he provides no easy answers.

Nearly every aspect of the project was troubled from the start. The story begins with Sam and Harriet Freeman, a progressive and artistically inclined couple. Initially, they were the perfect clients for the iconoclastic Wright. They embraced his vision for an experimental “textile block” house for their Hollywood Hills residence. But Wright, whose private and professional life was in turmoil, provided little in the way of project management. He instead relied on his son, architect Lloyd Wright, to negotiate a morass of architectural, technical, financial, and legal issues.

One of these, which has had serious ramifications for the structural integrity of the house -- and with which the restoration team continues to grapple -- was the composition and fabrication of the roughly 10,000 blocks used in construction. Chusid details their defective manufacturing process, which resulted in blocks that began to crack and deteriorate almost as soon as they were unmolded. Water infiltration, described by Sam Freeman as “a 17-bucket” problem, was another early issue. Soon after they moved in – and for the next twenty-five years – the Freemans employed architect Rudolph Schindler to retrofit spaces, design furniture, and mitigate myriad problems.

Chusid became involved with the house in the mid-1980s, after Harriet Freeman donated it to USC. Early hopes of a timely and affordable stabilization evaporated as quickly as did the Freeman’s \$200,000 repair fund. In the ensuing years, two earthquakes damaged the structure. According to Chusid, the 1994 Northridge quake was “a major attack” that “nearly destroyed” the house. Analysis of the damage revealed significant structural inadequacies and vulnerabilities and resulted in a major seismic rehabilitation, which was completed in 2005. Although the house has been stabilized, restoration is far from complete.

At its core, this richly illustrated preservation case study is of particular interest to educators and professionals in the field. Abundant photographs, drawings, and computer models enhance one’s comprehension of the enormous efforts undertaken to save the compromised house. Original Wright drawings and evocative historic photographs of the Freemans, Hollywood, and the house in the 1920s provide the human and historic counterpoint and convey why

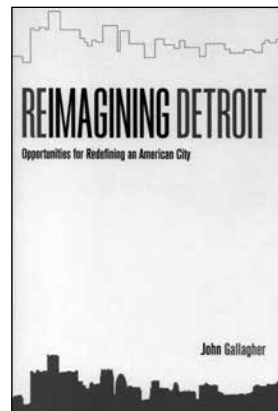
Chusid cares so deeply about the survival of the house. In a revealing omission, not a single image of Wright appears in the book.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this book is that Chusid writes as both an architect and a preservationist. As the former, he understands the artistry and architectural daring at the heart of Wright’s design for the house, while firmly grasping the technological blind spots and engineering shortfalls that very nearly resulted in its self-destruction. As a preservationist, he grapples with the challenging conundrum of saving an important historic structure that was never quite what it was intended to be. This duality will forever remain at the heart of the Freeman House’s history.

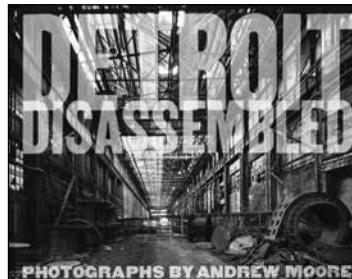
*JANE KING HESSION*  
*Edina, Minnesota*



Dan Austin and Sean Doerr. *Lost Detroit: Stories Behind the Motor City's Majestic Ruins*. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010, 176 pp., color and black-and-white illustrations, paperback, \$24.99, ISBN 978-1596299405.



John Gallagher. *Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010, 166 pp., black-and-white illustrations, paperback, \$19.95, ISBN 978-0814334690.



Andrew Moore. *Detroit Disassembled*. Akron, OH, and Bologna, Italy: Akron Art Museum and Damiani Editore, 2010, 136 pp., color illustrations, hardcover, \$50.00, ISBN 978-8862081184.

Detroit's "ruins" have been studied intensively by photographers and journalists. Yet, what these spaces tell us about the city and ourselves is still open for debate. In *Lost Detroit*, *Detroit Disassembled*, and *Reimagining Detroit*, abandoned sites are made to represent threatened history, growth amid deterioration, and opportunities for sustainable urbanism. Each book aims at a public audience of readers and professionals interested in Detroit. Each also builds its narrative through specific Detroit sites but grapples with issues faced by urbanists, artists, and preservationists in many contexts. The resulting urban portrait is vivid and compelling but, unfortunately, still keeps its distance from important conflicts that have shaped the city's abandonment.

*Lost Detroit* tells stories about twelve of the city's most conspicuous vacant structures, including Michigan Central Station and the Vanity Ballroom. The chapters feature a history for each building and introduce those who have been working to protect, restore, and redevelop it in recent years. The text touches on the disciplinary concerns of urban development and historic preservation, analyzing the successes and failures of past redevelopment projects and the prospects for future ones. One of the book's greatest pleasures is its extensive photographic documentation of the buildings' difficult-to-access interiors. It presents the experiences everyday Detroiters had with these structures, depicting blue-collar rockers at the Easttown Theatre, aging veterans and cardplayers at the Grand Army of the Republic Building, and misbehaving children in the Michigan Theatre's opulent lobby. The stories juxtapose a lost city of prosperity with a threatening present, where historical architecture is left exposed to "senseless graffiti" and "vagrants and thieves." *Lost Detroit* views the city's ruins as artifacts of a positive past and advocates for their protection and restoration.

*Detroit Disassembled* contains a powerful and provocative collection of large-format photographs. The images occupy full pages, and occasionally two-page spreads, and are interspersed with identifying captions. This lack of text creates a visual immersion that draws the reader in immediately. Andrew Moore,

who spent three months exploring and documenting the city's ruins, has oriented the photographs toward collectors of art photography, as well as to a local public audience. The photographs explore many of the same landmark buildings found in *Lost Detroit* but also gaze at abandoned industrial plants and shrinking residential neighborhoods. They are rich with the colors of degradation, such as the bright green of a molding carpet and the red and blue patinas of abandoned and rusting machinery. Residents are also captured while at work as scrappers and parking lot managers, seeking shelter from homelessness, and posing in doorways and on sidewalks. The book presents these residents and the thriving flora and fauna of the city's vacant quarters as a system of complex growth amid destruction. The poet Philip Levine's concluding essay provokes reflection on the meaning of these ruins. Moore's Detroit is a modern world whose persistent change leaves us without a stable material home. In Detroit, as perhaps anywhere, "nothing stays the same."

*Reimagining Detroit* expresses the common concern that abandonment photography, like that in *Detroit Disassembled*, biases public perception by focusing on ruins at the expense of the city's vibrant urban spaces. John Gallagher, a veteran journalist and architecture critic, argues that we should think differently about Detroit, framing the city's vacant land and smaller population not as failures or losses but as opportunities for positive change. He argues that Detroit is far from being the only shrinking industrial city and has much to learn from places such as Philadelphia, Turin, and Seoul. Through research and interviews, he presents a series of success stories in urban sustainability as suggestions that Detroit pursue ideas like the greening of its oversized traffic arteries, the daylighting of its streams, and the expansion of its community gardens. He also argues for new policies to address vacant properties, such as land banking and the consolidation of municipal services. Gallagher sharply criticizes the dysfunction in Detroit's municipal government but sees many opportunities to improve the physical environment. He is also quick to critique the problems and contradictions inherent in the strategies he

suggests. For example, in his analysis of community gardening, Gallagher acknowledges roadblocks like soil contamination and the political friction between for-profit and not-for-profit growers. He also puts this compelling idea in perspective, pointing out that for all the press it receives, Detroit's present urban gardening movement accounts for only a tiny fraction of the city's vacant land. The accessibility of its language to a public audience and the inclusion of case studies that can inform professionals in urban planning and governance are two other of the book's assets.

These books suggest new meanings for Detroit's vacant spaces and structures, privileging conciliatory readings over conflictive politics. In this way, they obscure the most difficult and pressing problems that weigh upon Detroit's past, present, and future. *Lost Detroit* represents a proud past through the city's architecture rather than one shamed by racism. *Detroit Disassembled* reflects on a naturalized cycle of decay and growth without engaging the specific and exploitative history of Detroit capitalism. *Reimagining Detroit* offers hope for ecological healing and aesthetic repair, while consciously avoiding the city's deep and persistent social divides. Yet, despite these limitations, these books contribute much to our understanding of the city. They reveal Detroit's abandoned spaces to be palimpsests, living sites, crucial to what the city will become.

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