

An interview with Chad Freidrichs, director of *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*

By Fred Mazelis
17 February 2012

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth (2011), a documentary film directed by Chad Freidrichs, explores the history of the St. Louis, Missouri housing project that became best known for its demolition in the early 1970s, and is often referred to as proof of the futility of public housing programs and of high rise public housing in particular. (See "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: A serious look at public housing and the fate of US cities," 01/02/2012)

Fred Mazelis of the WSWS conducted the following interview with Pruitt-Igoe director Chad Freidrichs:

FM: How did you come to make the documentary?

Chad Freidrichs: *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* is my third documentary. My first two documentaries, *Jandek on Corwood* and *First Impersonator*, were about a reclusive musician and presidential impersonators, respectively. Both are what might be classed as art documentaries, focusing on mood and subjective experience.

I first heard of Pruitt-Igoe while doing research for the decoration of our home. I was listening to an audio lecture about modernism and the city. The lecturer mentioned Pruitt-Igoe as an example of the failure of Corbusian modernism, suggesting that the design was the main culprit in its failure. This was a very interesting idea—that the built environment could dictate the behavior of its residents. So, like many, I first approached Pruitt-Igoe from an architectural perspective. After several months of research, however, my focus began to broaden and, thanks to the scholarly research of many academics, including Katharine Bristol's article "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth," I began to see Pruitt-Igoe in the context of the postwar urban decline that gripped St. Louis.

I grew up in the St. Louis area, so I felt a personal connection to the project. Over the four years spent making *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, I became a lot closer to a city I identified with in high school.

FM: Can you tell us something about how you found your interview subjects? Where are they living now?

CF: We were very fortunate to find the residents we did. They are the heart of the film. To get such quality testimony from a limited number of interviews speaks a lot about the experience of Pruitt-Igoe—it brings back vivid memories, good and bad.

We discovered the residents in a variety of places. For instance, we found Ruby [Russell] in archival news footage from the 1970s. An onscreen graphic identified her, so we searched the phone book for Ruby Russells in St. Louis. We discovered Valerie [Sills] through her sister's comments on a YouTube video featuring one of the Pruitt-Igoe implosions—she reflected on all the fun they used to have as kids with an extended and wonderfully vivid description of childhood life in the projects. It was one of the more poetic YouTube comments I've ever read. Brian [King] read that we were seeking former residents in a local newspaper, and came forth because he wanted to tell his story.

FM: What about the evolution of St. Louis, which parallels that of many other industrial cities in the US? What was the pattern of suburbanization? What is St. Louis like today?

CF: The St. Louis area's suburbanization was very rapid, and its decline

was ahead of the curve of most "rust belt" cities. This has a lot to do with St. Louis' particular history. In 1876, for local political reasons, the city of St. Louis separated itself from St. Louis County. That meant that St. Louis could not expand its borders through annexation—it had the County on the west and the [Mississippi] River on the east.

While St. Louis city had plenty of unused land in 1876, by the 1940s, the city itself was almost entirely built up—nearly all available land inside city limits was utilized. This meant that St. Louis could not build the large suburban tract developments that were increasingly popular in the postwar years. Population, industry and tax dollars all flooded to the outlying areas, while St. Louis, restricted to its 1876 borders, could not expand into the premium greenfield sites.

While the St. Louis metro area boomed, St. Louis city lost half of its population in the years of Pruitt-Igoe (1954-1976). This process of decline has slowed, but continued. There are huge swaths of vacant land in St. Louis today. And while there are certainly pockets of vibrancy, the massive population and economic decline has had a deep impact on the city.

FM: As you point out, there was always big opposition within the political establishment to public housing. Do you have any opinions on why this has been the case, and why the construction of public housing stopped at a certain point? Why was so much of public housing left to decay?

CF: You have to remember that the main objectives for the urban renewal/public housing program (the two were intimately linked) were threefold: stimulation of the construction industry, clearance of slums desired by downtown business interests and, finally, suitable housing for the urban population.

In 1949, conditions were right for these three issues to align. But public housing would have never gone through had the powerful business, union and political interests not wanted to meet these other objectives. If you look at where the generous federal subsidies went, it was for the purchase of land, clearance of slums and construction of the buildings. However, once the slum clearance and construction pieces of public housing were complete, that powerful support ended. Essentially, the political will dried up as soon as people moved into the buildings.

In addition to the political maneuverings, there's a class element that determines public perceptions of the program. I feel that when public housing first entered the American landscape, via the 1937 Housing Act, there was a fair amount of political will for housing the denizens of the city. This was because it was a Depression-era program intended for what was termed the "submerged middle class," who couldn't find affordable housing near their jobs in the city.

By the mid-1950s and 1960s, the situation had changed. Public housing was no longer desperately needed to house the lower middle-class; many were moving to the suburbs or to city homes vacated by the new suburbanites. Public housing's demographics shifted and it became associated with the poor.

In the 1950s, Eisenhower's administration was less interested in constructing inner city housing than the Roosevelt and Truman administrations that pushed through public housing; but perhaps more importantly, urban housing was no longer viewed as a pressing need, at least for the middle and working classes. It's my belief that once public housing became a poor-person's program, the political will necessary to nurture the program dissipated.

As for the decay of public housing, it's always important to keep in mind the mix of interests that clustered around public housing and urban renewal. Their relationship to one another was constantly shifting. This applies to the authorities that wrote the legislation, governed public housing and distributed welfare checks as well.

I think the most obvious place for most people to find fault is at the Housing Authority itself. However, the restrictive welfare laws came from the State of Missouri, not the Housing Authority. In many ways, the Housing Authority was at the mercy of external conditions—the shifting demographics and economics of the broader city, the funding mechanism for operation and maintenance established by the federal government, the restrictive state welfare policies.

On top of this, you had federal policies that we couldn't even fit into the film, often concessions to opponents of housing: income limits for public housing, which forced out the more prosperous residents, and a provision which prohibited the Housing Authority from maintaining a reserve fund of cash for future repairs and upgrades. In the face of all of this, it was always very difficult to effectively operate a project on the scale of Pruitt-Igoe.

However, there seems to have been a greater concentration of large, single-parent families receiving welfare in Pruitt-Igoe, compared to the other housing projects in St. Louis. The answers for this can only be found at the Housing Authority level.

So, it was a mix of factors, each done for separate reasons, but I do believe that there was a commonality in what Joyce Ladner, one of our interviewees, called a "punitive" approach to the poor blacks who inhabited the project, which, in combination with the stripped-down amenities and appearance, created a prison-like atmosphere in the projects.

FM: The film discusses the issue of changes in the cities and in public housing, and learning the lessons of the past in that context. What would public housing look like today?

CF: Well, I feel that housing is only a piece of the puzzle, but a major piece. For me, the film demonstrates that housing, by itself, wasn't enough to solve these vast social issues that drove the city's transformation and decline.

That said, I am always suspicious of one-to-one "lessons" that are drawn from history. In fact, I think that's one of the issues that has so muddled past discussions of Pruitt-Igoe: people saw the images of the implosion, which clearly meant "dramatic failure," and sought a moral to the story. In the process of distilling a lesson, they oversimplified a complex history involving many factors. And, unfortunately, that led to many blanket statements about certain kinds of housing, or housing for the poor, simply not working in any context.

By taking away the context, a shallow universal was derived—a universal that often reflected the ideological bent of the observer. So, for me, an understanding of housing today, just as with Pruitt-Igoe, has to be integrated into the broader urban context—jobs, health care, education, environment, amenity-access, etc. I know that may sound vague—perhaps that's an admission that I haven't come up with a full enough understanding of our present-day city; or, that these issues are just very difficult and have to be taken on a case-by-case basis, fully acknowledging the context of each.

FM: Why do you think more documentaries like this are not made? Can you tell us what your hopes are for future distribution of *The Pruitt-Igoe*

Myth? Also, what are your own future filmmaking plans?

CF: I think part of it is the amount of research that goes into a film like this. I had to study two years—I call it my Pruitt-Igoe master's degree—to get to the point where I felt proficient enough in the subject to make an 83-minute film about it (granted, like most doc filmmakers, I have a day job, so "two years" isn't two years). Plus, you have the research that goes into the location of archival materials. It's very time-consuming.

I also think public housing, on the face of it, is an "unsexy" subject. When I told people I was making a film about a public housing complex, and that it would in some way be about the history of the public housing program, I could feel the interest level drop precipitously.

People seemed to care more if you told them it was about this iconic example of failed architecture or that the man who designed the imploded Pruitt-Igoe also designed the World Trade Center. The public housing story just wasn't as gripping as a thirty-second pitch—and, rightly or wrongly, I think a fair amount of cinematic decision-making is determined by the "sexiness" of the subject. However, I think that many who appreciate the film do so because it addresses a history that is so essential to our cities and yet has remained largely in the background, with many misconceptions attached to it.

Honestly, the film has exceeded most of my distribution goals already, at least in terms of American distribution. I'd still like to get the film out more broadly internationally. Pruitt-Igoe is very well known in architectural circles, so I feel there's a strong native interest in the subject, even if we're telling the story with a different focus than is typical.

I hope many folks worldwide are interested in how American cities got to where they are today—it's a very different structure than, say, a European city. And yet, despite the major historical differences, for me, the different structures speak to similar power relationships. A ghetto on the outskirts of Paris has similar forces creating it as one in the heart of an American city.

As I've done with prior films, I'm moving on to a completely new subject for the next one. That's one of the great things about working in storytelling—there are so many subjects to explore. Drawing on the process I've developed for Pruitt-Igoe, the next film will be composed entirely of archival films. Very generally, the subject will be the history of science. I hope it will be a comedy.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>