



MIZZOU

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Around the Columns

From the dust of Pruitt-Igoe

St. Louis natives of a certain age remember haunting images of the first Pruitt-Igoe building imploding in a cloud of dust. The 1972 footage is so dramatic that it has become a national, historic icon for public housing failure. But for many residents of the notoriously troubled inner-city complex, fond memories accompany the bad, according to a film directed by Chad Freidrichs, BA '01.

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth — a documentary featured at the [True/False Film Fest](#) March 3–6, 2011 — chronicles the brief history of the complex, from its opening in 1954, through the Gateway City's population dip in the 1960s to Pruitt-Igoe's ultimate demise. Along with archival footage and TV news clips, the story is heartrendingly told from the perspective of African-American tenants who were children during the project's early days.

Freidrichs is a digital filmmaking instructor at Stephens College in Columbia, where he and his wife Jaime, BA '02, the film's co-producer, recently purchased a modern brick ranch

house. Before remodeling the home, the young couple researched mid-century architecture, which sparked interest in the infamous housing project.

“Pruitt-Igoe is very well known in architectural circles, and it’s often suggested that it represents the death of modern architecture,” says Freidrichs of the 32-building endeavor that quickly became a haven for drugs, crime and vandalism.

But the director warns against taking any single, overriding lesson from the film. “The ‘myth’ could refer to the architectural myth that modernism caused social malady, or that the tenants were to blame, or that the federal government was to blame.



Pruitt-Igoe buildings were imploded in 1972. Photo courtesy of State Historical Society of Missouri

“I like to think of this film as a questioning of the very act of thinking we can learn *this precise lesson* from history.”

Other co-producers include St. Louisans Paul Fehler, BA '02, and Brian Woodman, BA, BA '98.

“I went to New York University film school for two semesters and came back to my home state,” Freidrichs says. “Mizzou didn’t have a film department at that time, but I was much more interested in storytelling, so I became an English major. I think if I would have stayed at NYU, I wouldn’t have gotten the full-fledged, rounded education I received at MU.”

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