

SUBVERTED HISTORICAL NARRATIVES BEHIND THE CREATION OF CHICAGO HOUSE MUSEUMS

Abstract

The creation of the institution of the house museum in America has been tailored by many authors, reformed by politicians, and codified by a variety of establishments. This dissertation examined six homes in Chicago that, at various points in time, were accessible to the public, offering exhibits and programming to illuminate about the epitome in residential living, which was made possible through capitalist models of wealth generation and centralization. Domestic architecture hence functioned as a prime totem for supreme capitalist accomplishment. Architectural expression was quick to follow suit, conveying its arrival in the upper echelons of society, exclusionary belonging, and celebration of dynastic achievement.

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Introduction

Of the six homes, four still stand today and are largely accessible to the general public. Educational outreach programs vary, as do the focus of each inhabiting institution. The methodology employed to seek a better understanding of these homes, and what led to their success or failure (demolition) rested upon primary-source interviews with living persons involved in the attempts to save or rescue these homes in their greatest hour of need, when their general popularity was in nadir. The question posed from the outset of this investigation centered around asking if there were any unifying characteristics, trends, patterns, or people that contributed to the success of the founding and sustainment of the model of the house museum in Chicago. The answer to this initial question, as the research progressed, diverged, and eventually yielded new history for each home and neighborhood, was told by the surviving activists living today.

A summary of new findings and new histories has been condensed in this paper, revealing previously unrecorded narratives about each of the buildings and the people involved in ensuring their survival. Obscure political motivations, institutional jealousies, and financial swaps pervade these new narratives, which have largely not entered into the public domain and certainly not into institutional “official history.” Alternative new histories, verified through separate participant parties, shed light on the difficult task historians are charged with: the notion that one must condense complex narratives for easy public consumption, whether in the classroom or on a wall placard within the house museum. Capturing vignettes of very complex relations have never been easy or clearly compressible.



Figure 1: Palmer Castle postcard, post-1915.
(Source: Author's collection.)

1. The Palmer Castle

A free-market capitalist narrative accompanies the destructive fate of what was once Chicago's ne plus ultra Gilded Age residential estate. The shift in values, political processes, and societal events which led to the demolition of the Potter and Bertha Honoré Palmer home provides multiple insights into how the creation, sustainment, and promotion of a house museum becomes a near impossibility when the founding family's premiere art collection is purposefully removed from its initial residential habitation. In the absence of art, the Palmer castle became architecture's sans raison d'être. This, however, was not the sole factor contributing to the decline and disassembly of the home, which on a few rare occasions, was open to the public as a house museum.

One federal legislative act predicated the decoupling of the art collection from the family's mansion: the 1916 Federal Inheritance Tax law provided immediate financial motivation to the Palmers. In order to avoid a hefty levy upon the adult Palmer children, who were the eventual inheritors of the estate, supplementary high-value assets such as art, were shed. A second contributing monetary motivator was a neighborhood zoning district change which made a significant increase in the maximum allowable buildable height upon the land fronting Lake Michigan. Perhaps surprisingly, this local urban land-use change was the direct result of influence by the Palmer sons, one of whom had been an alderman earlier in his career. His sons wasted no time utilizing similar methods in exploring various opportunities to redevelop the prime land upon which their parent's estate was located. While the castle largely sat empty and unused after the death of Bertha in 1918 (figure 1), over the course of an entire generation, multiple high-density redevelopment plan proposals were publicized, lingered, and went unexecuted. Research indicates free-market real estate development currents provided the energy and capital necessary to formulate proposals—as well as conversely pulling capital away from potential redevelopment projects, leaving the estate empty, closed, and with very little public engagement.



Figure 2: George F. Harding museum photograph, circa 1960.
(Source: Glessner House Museum archives.)

2. The George F. Harding, Jr. Home

The Harding home demolition demonstrates an unfortunate phenomenon in the urban setting of Chicago: the scourge of under-represented and voiceless groups succumbing to projects promoting larger corporate financial and political gain. The original Harding museum was a well-established, publicly accessible, private collection that over a decade on Chicago's South Side became a steady cultural, educational, and architectural institution that citizens embraced (figure 2). Collected archival evidence reveals the Harding museum's arms and armor captivated the hearts and minds of visiting guests and community patrons for over two decades after the death of the founder. However the institution still lacked the political power to remain an autonomous museum within a unique architectural enclosure when the estate was deemed to be in the way of urban renewal projects. The city was easily able to condemn the museum buildings and adjacent areas of former privately owned residential land to facilitate the construction of both federally subsidized road projects and out-of-state financed high-rises, which were promoted as socially and architecturally

progressive. The collection, however, miraculously persists to this day, due to the efforts of a few dedicated professionals, fascinatingly outside the traditional realm of art and architectural preservationists.

The case study of the demolished Harding home gave five insights about the notion of the house museum in Chicago: First, the nature of the collection—if seen as fashionable and part of what the art establishment has decided qualifies as acceptable art within the canon, the collection assists in preservation. Second, the market value of the collection of art and antiquities does not guarantee ease in saving the building. Third, strange design or styling, coupled with the lack of significant architectural pedigree, does not aid or guarantee preservation of the building. Fourth, previous urban planning methods in the 1960s did not allocate sufficient professional expertise, time, or financial resources to evaluate fully the significance of a community's architectural resources. Lastly, federal funds and federal loan subsidies for high-density housing projects oftentimes preempted local community objectives for medium- or low-density redevelopment. Opportunities for federal funds for high-speed automobile transit projects and new mass-housing projects reigned supreme above most other local neighborhood improvement initiatives.



Figure 3: Henry B. and Caroline P. Clarke house, contemporary view.
(Source: Photo by the author.)

3. The Widow Clarke House

The locally famous Widow Clarke home provides several insights into how a village banker's fairly pedestrian residence, typical of an upper-middle class Midwest pioneer residential settlement, can be catapulted into the rarefied realm of a celebrated house museum, almost solely through the virtue of its age. The Clarke house ended up being nearly the solitary survivor through the ages, becoming a contemporary conduit for the teaching of municipal history. Before this didactic end use, multiple owners pursued a myriad of creative salvation and reuse options—some being far from the idiom of a traditional house museum, such as a house of worship. Many attempts at reuse occurred during the 1940s, preceding the building preservation movement in America which developed in the 1960s. Several decades later in the 1980s, the concept of full public access and complete building restoration (to a specific point in time) ultimately came to fruition upon the agreement by historians who declared absolute establishment of the home's civic alpha status. Architectural fabric was thus found to provide necessary credence to proclaim past ephemeral history once again tangible, augmenting the declaration of a municipal

authoritarian power. Savvy politicians eventually discovered the house provided patriotic providence for the celebration of the birth and establishment of their Midwestern American metropolis, as well as helped their reelection efforts in Chicago (figure 3).



Figure 4: John J. Glessner house, contemporary view.
(Source: Photo by author.)

4. The Glessner House

The Glessner house provides a successful final preservation narrative after proceeding through much historical difficulty in achieving these goals (figure 4). The home's early history, following the death of its original owner John Jacob Glessner, is fraught with several impediments which limited the implementation of the owner's will. The history of the Glessner home's difficult decades (1936–1966) illustrates multiple stories of unfruitful gifts, alliances, partnerships, leases, and sales—which did not yield the desired results of a creative, community-engaging institution, promoting the civic appreciation of architecture, as wished by the founding patron. The complete absence of a firm financial footing (as in the case of no initial supporting endowment) did not aid in the quick transformation of the home into a bona fide house museum. In fact, the Glessner family history is illustrative of a case where a descendant (a solitary surviving daughter) had little interest in architectural initiatives and instead pursued philanthropic donations in alignment with her own intellectual endeavors. Through the exploration of primary-source documents and interviews with members of the preservation community, a more dynamic story has emerged revealing how social hierarchies within the nascent preservation community influenced the fruitful results Glessner house preservationists wished to obtain.



Figure 5: Albert and Elsa Madlener house, contemporary view.
(Source: Image by the author.)

5. The Madlener House

The Madlener house yielded a prime case study concerning the positive influence of a duality of neighborhood preservation forces present in the early 1960s in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood (figure 5). First, a nascent movement identifying historic architecture, coupled with a residential conservation and social movement, battled what was identified as "the enemy," which was pinpointed as dwelling in city hall. This antagonist existed in many forms, all serving the same purpose: to find methods to fill city coffers. The controlling politics of Mayor Daley's machine promoted the maximum development of property tax-generating real estate in select neighborhoods of Chicago. This counterbalanced revenue loss from an aging housing stock in other areas of the city, which were reclassified as slums and urban decay. The goal of enabling development was in opposition to the established genteel senior neighborhood residents of the Gold Coast who, at the time, sadly had minimal political clout.



Figure 6: Frederick and Lora Robie house, contemporary view.
(Source: Photo by the author.)

6. The Robie House

Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House demonstrates the alluring power and seductive abilities federal government funding has in framing urban redevelopment schemes as a panacea for local neighborhoods (figure 6). Neighborhood residents were determined to be destitute and resource-starved at a time when threats to a stable community were thought to lurk within every transient neighbor who possessed dissimilar faith or skin tone than the preexisting status quo. These demographic shifts were thought to bring further erosive danger and societal risk to long-established residential neighborhoods.

An easy solution was proposed by a long-standing institution adjacent to and enveloping the Robie house: the University of Chicago. The private educational behemoth's master plan and participation in the creation of urban renewal objectives was formulated with a broad goal of omniscient neighborhood control. Both distinctive and quotidian architectural fabric had zero merit and no value in the criterion matrix assessing the existing aging housing stock in Hyde Park. New construction was the ultimate elixir that most assumed would be a universal panacea. How the Robie house escaped near-total obliteration from reality in situ and was almost relegated to exist only in photos in history books, *twice*, proves to be a complex tale to tell. An array of celebrity architectural players (including Philip Johnson, and Ben and Harry Weese) eventually comes to the rescue. Together, their contributions illustrate a more broad and inclusive history of preservation, well beyond existing monotone narratives which dwelled in a traditional trifecta of the house, the architect, and the style. The Robie house preservation story demonstrates how committed and vigilant participants—ranging from seminary presidents to neighborhood photographers to established academics—exerted exceptional forces for good within their own respective spheres of influence (figure 7).

In conclusion, this study focused upon unearthing new narratives as told by those who participated in forming groups which enabled the rescue and saving of homes for local community reuse, fraternal architectural organizations, the exhibition of art, and the education of school children about civic pride. May the model of the house museum in Chicago long endure, and be retold to many.



Figure 7: Letters pleading to save and reuse the Robie house.
(Source: University of Chicago archives; photo by the author.)