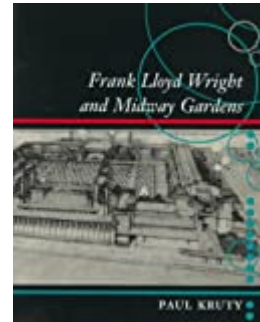


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Paul Kruty.** *Frank Lloyd Wright and Midway Gardens.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. lii + 262 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02366-8.



**Reviewed by** Peter C. Baldwin (DePaul University)

**Published on** H-Urban (January, 1999)

This impressively researched and extensively illustrated volume examines one of Frank Lloyd Wright's major pieces of public architecture, a "concert garden." In this book, Paul Kruty shows that the Midway Gardens occupied a unique place in the development of Wright's style.

The Midway Gardens was constructed in 1914 in Chicago's South Side, close to the University of Chicago and the site of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. An intricate arrangement of interconnected towers, multi-level dining areas, terraces and courtyards, Midway Garden was designed to be a center for musical performance and fine dining. It opened to enthusiastic local acclaim, but soon underwent some unfortunate alterations before being demolished in 1929.

Kruty's book is a celebration of what he calls one of the most extraordinary monuments in the history of American architecture (p. 243). The book makes good use of a range of source material, including photographs, Wright's sketches, correspondence, and published writings, as well as articles in local newspapers and architectural journals. Kruty, an associate professor of architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, lovingly examines the building from a variety of perspectives. His five chapters are organized by topic and can be read almost as free-standing essays. Nevertheless, none

of these chapters lifts the book much above its narrow focus and laudatory agenda. For this reason, despite being an admirable piece of scholarship, the book may have limited appeal to urban historians

The Introduction includes an imaginary tour of the building by a group of visitors. This description is a bit confusing because of the author's breathless rush to describe the building's many wonders, and because of the complexity of the architecture itself. Still, it is generally helpful in giving an impression of how the building might have been experienced. Most notably, it shows the peculiar pattern of crowd circulation in the building, a point to which Kruty returns later in the book.

The first chapter is a chronological narrative of the building's history. After a few brief paragraphs about Wright's career and stormy personal life in the early 1910s, Kruty discusses the ambitious hopes of the Midway Gardens' developers, the speedy design and construction of the building, and its initial success as a musical venue. The owners had overextended themselves in building such an elaborate complex, and soon found themselves in serious financial trouble. In 1916, they were forced to sell the property. The new owner, a brewery, renamed it "Edelweiss Gardens," and made revisions in both the architecture and the entertainment to cater to what Wright disparagingly called "a hearty bourgeois

taste.” Here, it would be interesting to know more about the people who came to the Gardens. Kruty indicates that Midway Gardens fell out of favor with Chicago’s upper crust once it came under new ownership, but he says little about the customers of Edelweiss Gardens or its successor, Midway Dancing Gardens. He focuses instead on making some relatively minor revisionist points about the Gardens’ continuing financial woes and ultimate demolition.

The book could have been enriched by more information about the development of commercial leisure, but the second chapter does provide at least some of this context. Kruty shows that, while the Gardens’ exuberant complexity, ornamentation and statuary suggested a new architecture of pleasure, this architecture had historical precedents. Kruty gives a general overview of pleasure gardens, and a more specific discussion of amusement parks and beer gardens in Chicago and Germany. These antecedents, as well as the presence of the high-brow Ravinia music park in the northern suburbs, prepared Chicagoans for the opening of the sophisticated concert garden that Wright designed. As it turned out, Midway Gardens came at the end of the era of commercial pleasure gardens in Chicago; the trend in the 1920s was toward opulent ballrooms, and an attempt to adapt Wright’s creation for this purpose was a failure. The influence of Midway Gardens on amusement architecture was therefore limited.

The third chapter, based on painstaking examination of Wright’s jumbled sketches and plans, recounts in great detail the evolution of his design. This chapter, though primarily of interest to architectural historians, will undoubtedly remain the definitive account of Wright’s work on this project.

The fourth chapter is an insightful analysis of the place of Midway Gardens in Wright’s *oeuvre*. Kruty argues that Midway Gardens was both the culmination of Wright’s Prairie Style work, and a major turning point toward a period of daring experimentation. The author notes similarities between Midway Gardens and Wright’s previous work: the placement of twin towers framing the central block, the long row of thin pillars, and the hovering horizontal roof slabs, for example. The design differed from Wright’s previous work in its greater use of abstract ornamentation, the greater complexity of its spaces, and the exaggerated contrast of vertical and horizontal elements. Also, in contrast to Wright’s previous work that employed distinct vocabularies for houses and public buildings, Midway Gardens synthesized the two.

“... Our understanding of the complex building gains much by seeing it as a synthesis of the twin worlds of public and private, of Unity Temple and the Robie House. With its paradoxes of large, open spaces and intimate corners, of formal plan and picturesque circulation, and with its simultaneous separation from its surroundings and unity between interior and exterior space, Midway Gardens combined public and private worlds” (p. 184).

Kruty does not explore this intriguing point as thoroughly as he might have. He demonstrates Wright’s synthesis of public and residential architecture by examining specific design features: roof forms, overhangs and so forth. However, it would have been interesting to consider the implications of this synthesis. We know that Wright’s residential architecture reflected specific views about family life,<sup>[1]</sup> but what did this semi-public building reveal about his views on commercial leisure? What kind of human interaction did he hope to promote within this space? Were Wright’s expectations in harmony with those of the initial customers of Midway Gardens? Were they at odds with those of the Edelweiss or Midway Dancing Gardens customers? If Wright did not fully answer these questions himself, then perhaps some suggestive possibilities could be developed by considering the thoughts of his contemporaries, or of those who observed the scene at the Gardens.

The book’s fifth and final chapter interprets Midway Gardens as a truly original work of architecture, influenced only tangentially by parallel designs being developed in Europe. Wright was aware of the decorated modern architecture being designed in Germany and Austria by architects such as Joseph Maria Olbrich, but this awareness only “confirmed his own growing preference for more decoration,” which, according to Kruty, he executed in his own unique style (p. 217). Despite its uniqueness, Wright’s decorative and complicated work can be placed within a general trend of “architectural Expressionism,” distinct from the stripped-down International style that later dominated the field. The emergence of the International style “meant that, by the 1930s, Midway Gardens had lost its meaning to younger architects of the modern movement and, thus, had ceased to play a role in the mainstream of twentieth-century architecture ...” (p. 233). It retained relevance, however, for a stubborn minority of American architects who continued to explore expressive decoration.

By more closely exploring the context of commercial recreation, the author could have enhanced the relevance of this book for urban historians. Nevertheless, the book

is a success on the more modest scale that Kruty has chosen. Its scrupulous scholarship, its careful examination of the building's design, and its insightful analysis of Midway Gardens' place within Western architecture make the book a valuable contribution to the study of Frank Lloyd Wright's work.

Notes:

[1]. Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright: His Life and Architecture*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Peter C. Baldwin. Review of Kruty, Paul, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Midway Gardens*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2652>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).