

A House That Isn't There

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A group in Phoenix is fighting for Frank Lloyd Wright and against a new highway. But this is a preservation battle with a twist. The house being battled over, a fine example of Wright's prairie style and built in 1939, is no longer there.

What stands, if that is the right word, is the ruins. A fire long ago burned everything except the foundation and the stonework of chimneys and parts of walls. Like all really good ruins, these are romantic and evocative and architecture buffs like to visit them. Now there is a move to put the remains on the National Register of Historic Places, and to stop the road.

To its nearest neighbors, the place is more of a nuisance than a landmark. Popular for beer and pot parties, the remains are covered with spray-painted graffiti and broken bottles.

Preservationists do not generally love new roads, of course, and whether this one is needed is a subject of debate. But aside from that dispute, the campaign to list these shards and stones on the National Register seems curiously misplaced. The ruins may be a nice place to go scouting, or for orgies, or to study Wright's beloved desert rock, but the architecture is gone.

Too many of Wright's structures have already been lost, pulverized by bulldozers or submitted to that particular form of scholarly vandalism that assuages conscience by dismantling tokens and sending them to museums. The "preservation" effort in Phoenix is a sad one, not so much for the genuine sentiment involved as for the skewed priorities. There are Wright buildings still in existence that need the attention far more than one that isn't.

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