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The Pruitt-Igoe Myth

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This paper is an effort to debunk the myths associated with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project. In the seventeen years since its demise, this project has become a widely recognized symbol of architectural failure. Anyone remotely familiar with the recent history of American architecture knows to associate Pruitt-Igoe with the failure of High Modernism, and with the inadequacy of efforts to provide livable environments for the poor. It is this association of the project's demolition with the failure of modern architecture that constitutes the core of the Pruitt-Igoe myth. In place of the myth, this paper offers a brief history of Pruitt-Igoe that demonstrates how its construction and management were shaped by profoundly embedded economic and political conditions in postwar St. Louis. It then outlines how each successive retelling of the Pruitt-Igoe story in both the national and architectural press has added new distortions and misinterpretations of the original events. The paper concludes by offering an interpretation of the Pruitt-Igoe myth as mystification. By placing the responsibility for the failure of public housing on designers, the myth shifts attention from the institutional or structural sources of public housing problems.



1. Pruitt-Igoe demolition. (Courtesy St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

FEW ARCHITECTURAL IMAGES ARE MORE POWERFUL THAN THE SPECTACLE of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project crashing to the ground (Figure 1). Since the trial demolition of three of its buildings in 1972, Pruitt-Igoe has attained an iconic significance by virtue of its continuous use and reuse as a symbol within a series of debates in architecture. In these discussions there is virtual unanimity that the project's demise demonstrated an *architectural* failure. When Charles Jencks announced in 1977 that the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe represented the death of modern architecture, he invoked an interpretation of the project that has today gained widespread acceptance. Anyone remotely familiar with the recent history of American architecture automatically associates Pruitt-Igoe with the failure of High Modernism, and with the inadequacy of efforts to provide livable environments for the poor.

This version of the Pruitt-Igoe story is a myth. At the core of the myth is the idea that architectural design was responsible for the demise of Pruitt-Igoe. In the first section of this essay I debunk the myth by offering a brief history of Pruitt-Igoe from the perspective of its place within a larger history of urban redevelopment and housing policy. This history engages the profoundly embedded economic and political conditions that shaped the construction and management of Pruitt-Igoe. I then consider how the Pruitt-Igoe myth came to be created and disseminated, both by the national press and by architects and architecture critics, and how each successive retelling of the Pruitt-Igoe story has added new dimensions to the myth. I want to focus particular attention on one of the most important aspects of the myth: the alleged connection between the project's failure and the end of modern architecture. In the final section I argue for an interpretation of the Pruitt-Igoe myth as mystification. By placing the responsibility for the failure of public housing on designers, the myth shifts attention from the institutional or structural sources of public housing problems. Simultaneously it legitimates the architecture profession by implying that deeply embedded social problems are caused, and therefore solved, by architectural design.

The Pruitt-Igoe story: Public housing and urban redevelopment

Pruitt-Igoe was created under the United States Housing Act of 1949, which made funds directly available to cities for slum clearance, urban redevelopment, and public housing. Like many other cities in the postwar era, St. Louis was experiencing a massive shift of its predominantly white middle-class population towards the suburbs. At the same time, central city slums were expanding as poor households moved into units abandoned by those leaving the city.¹ Located in a ring immediately surrounding the central business district, these

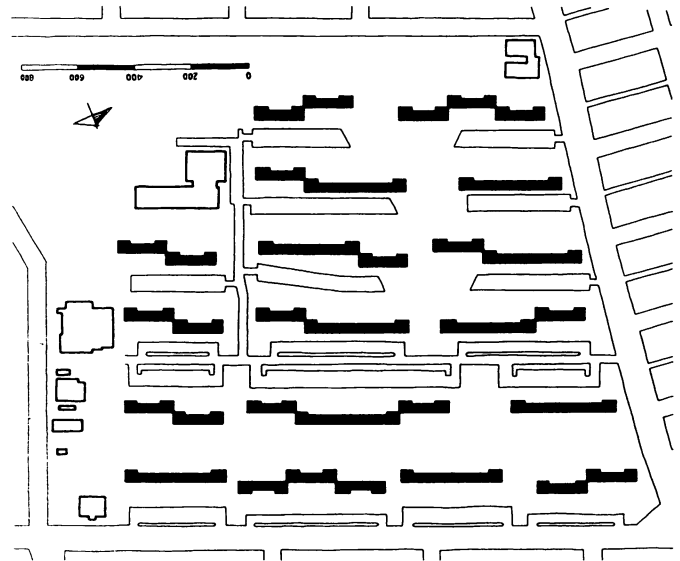
slums were racially segregated. Blacks occupied the area immediately north of downtown, while whites tended to live to the south. The black ghetto expanded particularly fast with the postwar influx of poor black population from the South. As the growing slums crept closer to the central business district, city officials and the local business community feared the accompanying decline in property values would threaten the economic health of downtown real estate. They responded by developing a comprehensive plan to redevelop the zone immediately surrounding the downtown business core.²

Using the urban redevelopment provisions of the 1949 Housing Act, St. Louis' Land Clearance and Redevelopment Authority planned to acquire and clear extensive tracts within the slums and to sell them at reduced cost to private developers. These redevelopment projects were slated to accommodate mainly middle-income housing and commercial development in an effort to lure the middle class back to the central city. At the same time, the St. Louis Housing Authority would clear land for the construction of public housing. These projects were intended to provide large numbers of low-rent units to the poor in order to stem ghetto expansion, and also to accommodate households displaced by redevelopment and other slum clearance projects.³

Pruitt-Igoe was one of these public housing projects. Located on a 57-acre site on the north side black ghetto, it was one of several tracts that had been targeted for slum clearance under the postwar redevelopment plan. In 1950 St. Louis received a federal commitment for 5800 public housing units, about half of which were allocated by the St. Louis Housing Authority to Pruitt-Igoe. The 2700-unit project would house 15,000 tenants at densities higher than the original slum dwellings. The high density resulted from housing and rede-



2. Aerial view of Pruitt-Igoe. (Courtesy Missouri Historical Society)

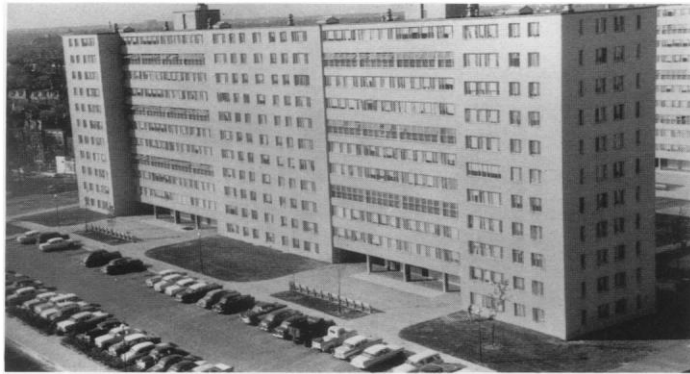


3. Site plan. (Courtesy Roger Montgomery)

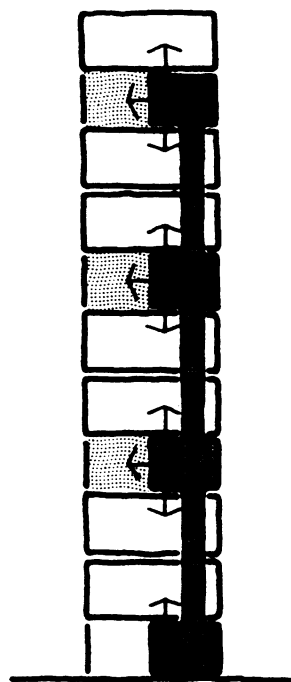
velopment officials' expectations that these projects would eventually come to house not only those displaced by slum clearance for Pruitt-Igoe, but also by demolition for redevelopment projects and for future public housing.

In 1950 the St. Louis Housing Authority commissioned the firm of Leinweber, Yamasaki & Hellmuth to design Pruitt-Igoe. The architects' task was constrained by the size and location of the site, the number of units, and the project density, all of which had been predetermined by the St. Louis Housing Authority. Their first design proposals called for a mixture of high-rise, mid-rise, and walk-up structures. Though this arrangement was acceptable to the local authority, it exceeded the federal government's maximum allowable cost per unit. At this point a field officer of the federal Public Housing Administration (P.H.A.) intervened and insisted on a scheme using 33 identical eleven-story elevator buildings (Figures 2 and 3).⁴ These design changes took place in the context of a strict economy and efficiency drive within the P.H.A. Political opposition to the public housing program was particularly intense in the conservative political climate of the early 1950s. In addition, the outbreak of the Korean war had created inflation and materials shortages, and the P.H.A. found itself in the position of having to justify public housing expenditures to an unsympathetic Congress.⁵

Despite the intense pressure for economical design, the architects devoted a great deal of attention to improving livability in the high-rise units. One of their strategies was to use two popular new de-



4. View of a Pruitt-Igoe building. (Courtesy Missouri Historical Society)



5. Diagrammatic section. (Courtesy Roger Montgomery)

sign features: skip-stop elevators and glazed internal galleries (Figures 4 and 5). These were intended to create “individual neighborhoods” within each building. The galleries, located on every third floor, were conceived as “vertical hallways.” Skip-stop elevators transported residents to the gallery level, from which they would walk to their apartments. Laundry and storage rooms also opened off the galleries. When Pruitt-Igoe was published in the *Architectural Forum* and *Architectural Record*,⁶ it was these specific design features that received the most attention. The *Architectural Record* praised the skip-stop elevators and galleries as innovative compensations for the shortcomings of the high-rise housing form:

Since all of these are, under federal legislation, combined low-rent housing and slum-clearance projects, located near the heart of the city, a high-rise, high-density solution was inescapable, and the problem was how to plan a high-rise project on a huge scale, and still provide, to the greatest extent possible under present legislation, communities with individual scale and character which would avoid the “project” atmosphere so often criticized.⁷

Even after the architects had switched to an all high-rise scheme, they faced continued pressure from the Public Housing Administration to keep costs to a bare minimum. In a 1975 study of the St. Louis Housing Authority’s expenditures on Pruitt-Igoe, political scientist Eugene Meehan analyzed the extent to which these budget constraints affected the final design. In addition to the elimination of amenities, such as children’s play areas, landscaping, and ground-floor bathrooms, the cost cutting targeted points of contact between the tenants and the living units. “The quality of the hardware was so poor that doorknobs and locks were broken on initial use. ... Windowpanes were blown from inadequate frames by wind pressure. In the kitchens, cabinets were made of the thinnest plywood possible.”⁸

Pruitt-Igoe was completed in 1954. Though originally conceived as two segregated sections (Pruitt for blacks and Igoe for whites), a Supreme Court decision handed down that same year forced desegregation. Attempts at integration failed, however, and Pruitt-Igoe was an exclusively black project virtually from inception. Overall Pruitt-Igoe’s first tenants appeared pleased with their new housing. Despite the relatively cheap construction quality, the units still represented a much higher level of amenity than the dilapidated units they had vacated or been forced to leave.

By 1958, however, conditions had begun to deteriorate. One of the first signals was a steadily declining occupancy rate. As Roger Montgomery has persuasively argued, St. Louis’ housing officials failed to anticipate changing postwar demographic trends that dra-

matically affected the inner-city housing market and threatened the viability of public housing projects.⁹ Pruitt-Igoe was conceived at a time when the demand for low-income housing units in the inner city had never been higher, due to widespread dislocation caused by slum clearance, urban renewal, and the federal highway program. However, by the time the project opened in 1954, this demand had tapered off. Slow overall metropolitan population growth and the overproduction of inexpensive suburban dwellings helped open up the previously tight inner-city rental market to blacks. Many chose to live in inexpensive private dwellings rather than in public housing. Pruitt-Igoe's occupancy rate peaked in 1957 at 91% and immediately began to decline.

This decline in occupancy directly impacted the St. Louis Housing Authority's ability to maintain the project, as Eugene Meehan has amply demonstrated.¹⁰ Under the 1949 Housing Act, local housing authorities were expected to fund their operations and maintenance out of rents collected from tenants. In a period of rising costs and declining occupancy, the Housing Authority was placed in a cost-income squeeze that impeded its ability to conduct basic repairs. In addition, average tenant income was declining. The project came increasingly to be inhabited by the poorest segment of the black population: primarily female heads of households dependent on public assistance. These demographic shifts and economic pressures resulted in chronic neglect of maintenance and mechanical breakdowns. Elevators failed to work and vandalism went unrepaired. In a project increasingly inhabited by the poorest and most demoralized segment of the population, the vandalism came also to be accompanied by increasing rates of violent crime.

The ongoing problems of vandalism, violence, and fiscal instability prompted a number of efforts to salvage Pruitt-Igoe. In 1965 the first of several federal grants arrived to provide physical rejuvenation and the establishment of social programs to benefit the residents and to combat further rent arrearages. The programs had little effect: Occupancy rates continued to decline, crime rates climbed, and routine management and maintenance were neglected. In 1969 Pruitt-Igoe tenants joined residents of two other St. Louis public housing projects in a massive nine-month rent strike. This further depleted the Housing Authority's limited financial reserves and aggravated the vacancy problem, prompting H.U.D. to consider closing the project.¹¹ In an effort to determine whether explosion or traditional headacheball demolition would be cheaper, all the remaining tenants were moved to 11 buildings, and on March 16, 1972 a demolition experiment levelled three buildings in the center of the project. Despite some last-minute rehabilitation plans, in 1973 H.U.D. decided to demolish the rest of the project, and finally finished it off in 1976.

Rise of the Pruitt-Igoe myth

Clearly there were a number of powerful social and economic factors at play in the rise and fall of Pruitt-Igoe. Yet for most architects the entire story can be reduced to a one-line explanation: The design was to blame. This interpretation gained its greatest acceptance in the aftermath of the project's demolition. The roots of the Pruitt-Igoe myth, however, go back to the first years of the project's history.

The deterioration of Pruitt-Igoe became evident only a few years after its completion in 1954, and the local press noted as early as 1960 that certain design features exacerbated the project's problems.¹² The skip-stop elevators and galleries, far from promoting community association, had proved to be opportune environments for violent crime. Forced to walk through the galleries to reach their apartments, residents were threatened and attacked by gangs, who used these spaces as hangouts. Residents were also frequently attacked in the elevators.

This connection between imputed design flaws and Pruitt-Igoe's deterioration first came to the attention of a wide audience of design professionals in 1965, when the growing notoriety of the project prompted *Architectural Forum* to publish a second article on Pruitt-Igoe. In "The Case History of a Failure," James Bailey retracted virtually all of *Forum's* earlier statements about the project, acknowledging that many of the features praised in their 1951 article had proved to be hazards, rather than improvements to the quality of life:

The undersized elevators are brutally battered, and they reek of urine from children who misjudged the time it takes to reach their apartments. By stopping only on every third floor, the elevators offer convenient settings for crime. ... The galleries are anything but cheerful social enclaves. The tenants call them "gauntlets" through which they must pass to reach their doors. ... Heavy metal grilles now shield the windows, but they were installed too late to prevent three children from falling out. The steam pipes remain exposed both in the galleries and the apartments, frequently inflicting severe burns. The adjoining laundry rooms are unsafe and little used. ... The storage rooms are also locked—and empty. They have been robbed of their contents so often that tenants refuse to use them.¹³

To his credit, Bailey tempered his criticism of the architecture by pointing out that the problems at Pruitt-Igoe went deeper than physical design. He mentioned, in particular, the absence of adult males as heads of households, the project's notoriety, and the deficient management and maintenance. Nonetheless, Bailey's article laid the founda-

dation for a continuous rearticulation of the Pruitt-Igoe story throughout the late sixties and early seventies as the situation at Pruitt-Igoe continued to deteriorate.

The trial demolition of 1972 brought Pruitt-Igoe unprecedented attention in the architectural and the national press. *Architectural Forum*, *ALA Journal*, *Architecture Plus*, and *The Architect's Journal* all published articles on the failure of the supposedly innovative design features.¹⁴ *Life*, *Time*, *The Washington Post*, and *The National Observer*, among others, reported on the demolition experiment and pointed to the architecture as one of the contributing causes.¹⁵ These articles represent the first appearance of the Pruitt-Igoe myth. No longer confining their criticism to particular architectural features, such as the open galleries, the critics now began to relate the project's failure to flaws in the overall approach or design philosophy. The general theme that emerged was that the architects were insensitive to the needs of the lower class population and were trying to use the design to force a middle-class, white, lifestyle on Pruitt-Igoe residents. For example, an article in *Architecture Plus* argued that the design was simply inappropriate for the social structures of the people who were going to live there. George Kassabaum, one of the project architects, was quoted as saying, "You had middle class whites like myself designing for an entirely different group."¹⁶ The implication was that low-income urban blacks constituted a tenant group with special needs: They were not instilled with the middle class value of taking pride in the upkeep of their environment, and they also brought with them certain destructive behaviors. As the *Washington Post* put it, there was an "incompatibility between the high-rise structure and the large poor families who came to inhabit it, only a generation removed from the farm."¹⁷

This interpretation of the demise of Pruitt-Igoe received strong reinforcement when it appeared in Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space* in the same year as the trial demolition. This seminal text of the then emerging discipline of environment and behavior argued that there was a direct relationship between physical environments and human behavior. According to Newman, the widespread vandalism and violence at Pruitt-Igoe resulted from the presence of excessive "indefensible" public space.¹⁸ Corridors were too long and not visible from the apartments. The residents did not feel that these spaces "belonged" to them and so made no effort to maintain or police them. The entryways, located in large, unprotected open plazas, did not allow tenants any control over who entered the buildings. Newman further argued that by designing public housing in such a way as to provide an appropriate amount of private, semiprivate, and public space, architects could reduce violence and vandalism in the environment.

With all the attention being paid to the project's design in the early 1970s, a strong associative link was forged between architectural flaws and Pruitt-Igoe's deterioration. In 1965 James Bailey had taken care to point out that two of the major causes of the deterioration of Pruitt-Igoe were chronically inadequate maintenance and the increasing poverty of tenants. By 1972 these crucial elements of the story had been all but forgotten in the rush to condemn the architecture. It is the privileging of these design problems over the much more deeply embedded economic and social ones that constitutes the core of the Pruitt-Igoe myth.

The myth ignores the connection between Pruitt-Igoe's problems and the fiscal crisis of the St. Louis Housing Authority, or what Eugene Meehan has called the "programmed failure" of American public housing.¹⁹ Political and social ambivalence to public housing had resulted in a token housing program burdened by impossible fiscal management constraints. The federal Public Housing Administration also impeded public housing efforts by insisting on unrealistically low construction costs. The myth also omits the subordination of public housing to postwar urban redevelopment programs. Federal dollars helped cities clear unsightly slums and assisted private interests in developing valuable inner city land. Public housing projects were confined to the unwanted sites in the heart of the slums, and developed at high densities to accommodate those displaced by the wholesale clearance of poor neighborhoods.

The myth also ignores the connection between social indifference to the poverty of inner city blacks and the decline of Pruitt-Igoe. In 1970 sociologist Lee Rainwater wrote *Behind Ghetto Walls*, based on the findings of a massive participant observer study conducted during the mid-1960s at Pruitt-Igoe.²⁰ Rainwater argued that the violence and vandalism that occurred at the project were an understandable response by its residents to poverty and racial discrimination. In his view architectural design was neither the cause nor the cure for these problems. Improved housing conditions and other efforts directed at changing the behavior of the poor were, in his opinion, useless if not accompanied by efforts to raise their income level.

This evidence directly contradicts the Pruitt-Igoe myth by demonstrating the significance of the political and economic sources of Pruitt-Igoe's decline. In addition, it reveals that the type of argument proposed in *Defensible Space* is a subtle form of blaming the victim. The idea of defensible space is based on the assumption that certain "populations" unavoidably bring with them behavioral problems that have to be designed against. This kind of argument does not question why public housing projects tend to be plagued by violent crime in the first place. It naturalizes the presence of crime among

low-income populations rather than seeing it as a product of institutionalized economic and racial oppression.

Pruitt-Igoe and the end of Modernism

Despite the extensive evidence of multiple social and economic causes of Pruitt-Igoe's deterioration, the Pruitt-Igoe myth has also become a truism of the environment and behavior literature. For example, John Pipkin's *Urban Social Space*, a standard social-factors textbook, uses Pruitt-Igoe as an example of indefensible space and of the lack of fit between high-rise buildings and lower class social structure. "In social terms, public housing has been a failure. Social structures have disintegrated in the desolate high-rise settings....Many projects are ripe for demolition. One of the most notorious...was Pruitt-Igoe. When built, it won an architectural prize, but...it epitomized the ills of public housing."²¹

This passage is notable because it illustrates one particular example of how the Pruitt-Igoe myth has grown by incorporating misinformation. Though it is commonly accorded the epithet "award-winning," Pruitt-Igoe never won any kind of architectural prize. An earlier St. Louis housing project by the same team of architects, the John Cochran Garden Apartments, did win two architectural awards. At some point this prize seems to have been incorrectly attributed to Pruitt-Igoe. This strange memory lapse on the part of architects in their discussions of Pruitt-Igoe is extremely significant. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Pruitt-Igoe began increasingly to be used as an illustration of the argument that the International Style was responsible for the failure of Pruitt-Igoe. The fictitious prize is essential to this dimension of the myth, because it paints Pruitt-Igoe as the iconic modernist monument.

The association of Pruitt-Igoe's demise with the perceived failures of the Modern movement had begun as early as 1972. In the aftermath of the project's demolition, several writers suggested that insensitivity to residents' needs was typical of modern architecture. The *Architect's Journal* called the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe "the modern movement's most grandiloquent failure."²² With the critique of Modernism emerging in the 1970s, it was not surprising that a number of critics and theorists, who can be loosely termed Postmodern, began to use the project in their writing to represent the Modern movement.

The first important appearance of Pruitt-Igoe in a critique of Modernism came in 1976 when Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter used the photograph of the demolition in their introduction to *Collage City*. This section of the book was devoted to a demonstration of the

premise that the Modern movement's architectural and social revolution had backfired. Instead of furthering the development of a new society, "the city of modern architecture, both as psychological construct and as physical model, had been rendered tragically ridiculous...the city of Ludwig Hiesheimer and Le Corbusier, the city celebrated by CIAM and advertised by the Athens Charter, the former city of deliverance is everyday found increasingly inadequate."²³ Though Rowe and Koetter do not refer to Pruitt-Igoe specifically, the implication of the photograph's inclusion is clear. Pruitt-Igoe is used as an example of this "city of modern architecture" whose revolution failed. It presents Pruitt-Igoe as a product of the ideas of Hiesheimer, Le Corbusier, and CIAM and implicates the inadequacy of their ideas in the demolition of the project.

Only one year after the publication of *Collage City*, Charles Jencks further advanced this interpretation in *The Language of Post Modern Architecture*. In the introduction to his discussion of Postmodernism, Jencks asserted that the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe represents the death of modern architecture. Like Rowe and Koetter, he associated Pruitt-Igoe with the rationalist principles of CIAM, and particularly with the urban design principles of Le Corbusier. According to Jencks, even though the project was designed with the intention of instilling good behavior in the tenants, it was incapable of accommodating their social needs:

Pruitt-Igoe was constructed according to the most progressive ideas of CIAM...and it won an award from the American Institute of Architects when it was designed in 1951. It consisted of elegant slab blocks fourteen storeys high, with rational "streets in the air" (which were safe from cars, but, as it turned out, not safe from crime); "sun, space and greenery", which Le Corbusier called the "three essential joys of urbanism" (instead of conventional streets, gardens and semi-private space, which he banished). It had a separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, the provision of play space, and local amenities such as laundries, crèches and gossip centers—all rational substitutes for traditional patterns.²⁴

These uses of the Pruitt-Igoe symbol added significantly to the Pruitt-Igoe myth. Like the defensible space argument popularized by Oscar Newman, these accounts failed to locate Pruitt-Igoe in its historical context and thereby ignored evidence that economic crisis and racial discrimination played the largest role in the project's demise. Now, they added a set of ideas about the architects' intentions in designing the project. Both accounts presented the project as the canonical modernist monument (Jencks in particular perpetuating the

mistaken idea that it was an award-winning design). They described the project as Modernist not only in formal terms, but in political and social terms as well, as reflecting an agenda for social engineering.

These uses of Pruitt-Igoe misrepresented the designers' intentions and the extent to which the architects controlled the project's design. As the summary of Pruitt-Igoe's history demonstrates, much of the project's design was determined by the St. Louis Housing Authority and the federal Public Housing Administration. The architects had no control over the project's isolated location, its excessive densities, the elimination of amenities, or the use of high-rise elevator buildings. Their task was limited to providing the form of the individual buildings and incorporating as much amenity as possible, given the restricted budget.

In carrying out this task, the architects did follow the formal conventions of modern architecture. Pruitt-Igoe was one of Leinweber, Yamasaki & Hellmuth's first major commissions, so it is certain that they wished to make an impression on their architectural peers. The glazed galleries combined with skip-stop elevators, the extensive open spaces between the slabs, and the minimalist surface treatment certainly reflected the prevailing interest in Modernism as elaborated by CIAM. However, the use of these formal conventions does not demonstrate that the architects had particular intentions for social reform. In fact, in published statements Minoru Yamasaki expressed doubt that the high-rise form would have a beneficial effect on public housing tenants.

These statements appeared in a series of articles in the *Journal of Housing* in which Yamasaki engaged in a debate with the progressive housing reformer Catherine Bauer.²⁵ Yamasaki defended high-rise design, not on its architectural merits, but as the best possible response to what he perceived as the social imperative of slum clearance and the economic necessity for urban redevelopment. Given the high cost of urban land occupied by slum housing, he argued, it is most economically efficient to acquire small parcels and build at high densities. Yet despite its economic advantages, Yamasaki was skeptical of the value of the high-rise as a form for mass housing: "the low building with low density is unquestionably more satisfactory than multi-story living. ...If I had no economic or social limitations, I'd solve all my problems with one-story buildings."²⁶ He defended high-rise design as the only way to respond to external economic and policy conditions.

In her defense of low-rise housing, Catherine Bauer suggested that the policy of clearing slums and then rehousing low-income populations in high-density central city projects is not necessarily the result of economic imperatives but a conscious choice on the part of policy-makers. High-density inner city projects are the result of making public housing subordinate to urban redevelopment schemes: If

business interests and city officials were willing to locate projects on the urban periphery then the high-density, high-rise projects would be unnecessary. Bauer criticized Yamasaki less for his architectural views than for his politics; he was too willing to give in to prevailing profit-motivated redevelopment and housing policy.

In his statements in this debate, Yamasaki hardly fits the image of the radical social reformer depicted by the Pruitt-Igoe myth. His firm did indeed adopt particular design features in order to conform to the latest trends and was insensitive to the potential effects of those features. The architects also incorrectly assumed that the galleries would help promote community interaction in what was bound to be a harsh environment. Yet before making any of these decisions, they had agreed to work within the framework of the large-scale, high-rise, high-density project mandated by urban redevelopment practices. Rather than social reformers destroying the public housing program with their megalomaniac designs, the architects were essentially passive in their acceptance of the dominant practices of their society.

Despite its dubious authenticity or historical accuracy, the Pruitt-Igoe myth had achieved the status of architectural dogma by the late 1970s. The idea that Pruitt-Igoe's failure resulted from the insensitivity of orthodox modernist design found a receptive audience and became an illustration for many Postmodern and anti-Modern texts. Peter Blake, in *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked*, echoed the assertion that Pruitt-Igoe followed "Ville-Radieuse" design ideas. As a result, he argued, there was "no way this depressing project could be made humanly habitable" and communities of high-rises are inherently doomed.²⁷ It also became a convenient symbol for Tom Wolfe to include in his attack on the importing of German-inspired 1930s architecture to the United States after World War II.²⁸ In *From Bauhaus to Our House* Wolfe repeated the by now generally accepted fiction that the project was an award winner, and then added a fabrication of his own, asserting that in 1971 a general meeting was held at which the residents called for blowing up the buildings.²⁹

The Pruitt-Igoe myth as mystification

Why is the Pruitt-Igoe myth so powerful? There is clearly ample evidence that architectural design was but one, and probably the least important, of several factors in the demise of the project. Why then has the architecture community been so insistent that the failure of Pruitt-Igoe was its own fault?

At one level, the myth can be understood simply as a weapon in an ongoing conflict between different factions within the architec-

ture profession. The two most central critiques of the design of Pruitt-Igoe have come from successor movements to High Modernism: Postmodernism, and environment and behavior. For proponents of these new approaches, such as Oscar Newman or Charles Jencks, Pruitt-Igoe provides a convenient embodiment of all the alleged failings of Modernism. However, though these successors are critical of the modernist approach to the design of public housing, they do not question the fundamental notion that it is at the level of *design* that public housing succeeds or fails. They attribute the problems of public housing to architectural failure, and propose as a solution a new approach to design. They do not in any significant way acknowledge the political-economic and social context for the failure of Pruitt-Igoe. This is because the myth is more than simply the result of debate within architectural culture: It serves at a much more profound level the interests of the architecture profession as a whole.

As we have seen in tracing the rise of the Pruitt-Igoe myth, the architects' version has consistently insisted on the primary significance of the project's overall design in its demise. This interpretation denies the existence of larger problems endemic to St. Louis' public housing program. By attributing more causal power to architecture than to flawed policies, crises in the local economy, or to class oppression and racism, the myth conceals the existence of contextual factors structuring the architects' decisions and fabricates a central role for architecture in the success or failure of public housing. It places the architect in the position of authority over providing low-income housing for the poor.

This presentation of the architect as the figure of authority in the history of Pruitt-Igoe is reinforced by linking the project's failure to the defects of High Modernism. The claim that Pruitt-Igoe failed because it was based on an agenda for social reform, derived from the ideas of Le Corbusier and the CIAM, not only presupposes that physical design is central to the success or failure of public housing, but also that the design was implemented to carry out the architects' social agenda. What this obscures is the architects' passivity in the face of a much larger agenda that has its roots not in radical social reform, but in the political economy of post-World War II St. Louis and in practices of racial segregation. Pruitt-Igoe was shaped by the strategies of ghetto containment and inner city revitalization—strategies that did not emanate from the architects, but rather from the system in which they practice. The Pruitt-Igoe myth therefore not only inflates the power of the architect to effect social change, but it masks the extent to which the profession is implicated, inextricably, in structures and practices that it is powerless to change.

Simultaneously with its function of promoting the power of the architect, the myth serves to disguise the actual purpose and implication of public housing by diverting the debate to the question of

design. By continuing to promote architectural solutions to what are fundamentally problems of class and race, the myth conceals the complete inadequacy of contemporary public housing policy. It has quite usefully shifted the blame from the sources of housing policy and placed it on the design professions. By furthering this misconception, the myth disguises the causes of the failure of public housing, and also ensures the continued participation of the architecture profession in token and palliative efforts to address the problem of poverty in America. The myth is a mystification that benefits everyone involved, except those to whom public housing programs are supposedly directed.

Notes

1. St. Louis City Plan Commission, *Comprehensive City Plan* (St. Louis, 1947), pp. 27–34; James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley* (Boulder, CO: Pruett, 1981), pp. 472–473.
2. "Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose: The Sordid Housing Story," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 3, 1950, Part Four in a Series.
3. For the role played by the public housing program in St. Louis redevelopment plans, see Roger Montgomery, "Pruitt-Igoe: Policy Failure or Societal Symptom," in Barry Checkoway and Carl V. Patton, eds., *The Metropolitan Midwest: Policy Problems and Prospects for Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 230–239; and Kate Bristol and Roger Montgomery, "The Ghost of Pruitt-Igoe" (paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, Buffalo, NY, October 28, 1988). On the relationship of public housing to urban renewal more generally, see Mark Weiss, "The Origins and Legacy of Urban Renewal," in P. Clavell, J. Forester, and W. Goldsmith, eds., *Urban and Regional Planning in an Age of Austerity* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980); Richard O. Davies, *Housing Reform During the Truman Administration* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966); and Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1966* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
4. Eugene Meehan, *The Quality of Federal Policymaking: Programmed Failure in Public Housing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 71; James Bailey, "The Case History of a Failure," *Architectural Forum* 123 (December 1965): p. 23.
5. U.S. Public Housing Administration, *Annual Report* (Washington, D.C., 1951); Davies, *Housing Reform*, pp. 126–132.
6. "Slum Surgery in St. Louis," *Architectural Forum* 94 (April 1951): pp. 128–136; "Four Vast Housing Projects for St. Louis: Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, Inc.," *Architectural Record* 120 (August 1956): pp. 182–189.
7. "Four Vast Housing Projects for St. Louis," p. 185.
8. Meehan, *Quality*, p. 71.
9. Montgomery, "Pruitt-Igoe," pp. 235–239.
10. Meehan, *Quality*, pp. 60–63, 65–67, 74–83.
11. In 1965 the U.S. Public Housing Administration (P.H.A.) was incorporated into the newly created Department of Housing and Urban Development (H.U.D.).
12. "What's Wrong with High-Rise?," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 14, 1960.
13. Bailey, "Case History," pp. 22–23.

14. "St. Louis Blues," *Architectural Forum* 136 (May 1972): 18; *Architect's Journal* (July 26, 1972); Wilbur Thompson, "Problems that Sprout in the Shadow of No Growth," *ALA Journal* 60 (December 1973); "The Experiment That Failed," *Architecture Plus* (October 1973).
15. "The Tragedy of Pruitt-Igoe," *Time*, December 27, 1971, p. 38; Jerome Curry, "Collapse of a Failure," *The National Observer*, May 20, 1972, p. 24; Andrew B. Wilson, "Demolition Marks Ultimate Failure of Pruitt-Igoe Project," *Washington Post*, August 27, 1973, p. 3.
16. "The Experiment That Failed," p. 18.
17. Wilson, "Demolition," p. 3.
18. Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) pp. 56–58, 66, 77, 83, 99, 101–108, 188, 207.
19. Meehan, *Quality*, pp. 83–87, 194–198.
20. Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls; Black Families in a Federal Slum* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1970), pp. 9, 403.
21. Mark LaGory and John Pipkin, *Urban Social Space* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981), p. 263.
22. *Architect's Journal*, p. 180.
23. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), pp. 4, 6.
24. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), pp. 9–10.
25. Minoru Yamasaki, "High Buildings for Public Housing?" *Journal of Housing* 9 (1952): p. 226; Catherine Bauer, "Low Buildings? Catherine Bauer Questions Mr. Yamasaki's Arguments," *Journal of Housing* 9 (1952): p. 227.
26. Yamasaki, "High Buildings," p. 226.
27. Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1977), pp. 80–81.
28. Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), pp. 73–74.
29. Actually in the late seventies a local community redevelopment group that included former Pruitt-Igoe residents made a proposal to buy and renovate four of the buildings, but were turned down by H.U.D. Mary Comerio, "Pruitt-Igoe and Other Stories," *Journal of Architectural Education* 34 (Summer, 1981): pp. 26–31.