

AMST 207: American Cultural Landscapes
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Evan Frondorf

Pruitt-Igoe: Utopic Expectations Meet Tenement-Infused Realities

by Evan Frondorf

For nearly five haunting minutes in Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance*, cameras ominously sweep over the abandoned Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in North St. Louis. Identical towers rise from a bleak landscape of crushed playgrounds and overgrown sidewalks. Almost every window is broken and torn cloth blows in a gentle breeze. The instrumental score is cacophonous, driving, eerie, perhaps admonishing of this monumental failure. Quick jump cuts display one shot of dilapidation after another, followed by a shocking sequence of events: explosive charges detonate and three of Pruitt-Igoe's towers crumble to the ground. Their presence vanishes immediately as the broken buildings disintegrate behind explosive plumes of smoke. On March 16, 1972, the first of the 33 towers that made up the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex did indeed come crashing to the ground, less than 20 years after it was completed. It was this media spectacle that inspired the production of *Koyaanisqatsi*, an avant-garde documentary from 1983 that juxtaposed images of Pruitt-Igoe and other housing projects with rapid time-lapse images of methodical factory work, cars racing down highways, and pedestrians cluttering the streets. The message is clear: our technological innovation and growth as a society can be incredibly impressive, but this fast-paced growth can also lead to catastrophe and mismanaged chaos, exemplified by the brief history of Pruitt-Igoe.



Figure 1 — Signs of decay surrounding the collapsing building are present everywhere: the pavement is buckled and cracked, the grass is littered with debris and garbage, and other buildings are in various stages of demolition in this infamous photograph. Credit: State Historical Society of Missouri, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pruitt-igoe/5472095321/>

But just how did Pruitt-Igoe become a symbol for all the ills of society? Clearly the media attention to both its construction and demolition contributed, but most directly, Pruitt-Igoe truly was a massive disaster in many respects. Architectural, societal, and political reasons are frequently advanced by scholars to best explain how Pruitt-Igoe appeared and then vanished from the St. Louis skyline in just two decades. All of these arguments have merit, but there is an underlying, broader issue to be examined. Pruitt-Igoe represents a failure to learn from past problems in urban housing; namely, the dense, ubiquitous tenements that rose throughout New York City and other major metropolitan areas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These tenements are perfect examples of the pratfalls of high-density, high-rise

housing for low-income residents: vandalism ran rampant, conditions became squalid, and crime and disease spread throughout tenement neighborhoods. Yet the same societal breakdown occurred at Pruitt-Igoe, and for many similar reasons—infrequent government involvement, poor construction quality, and misguided social policies.

In both cases, there were major incongruities between expectations and reality. Some tenements were once adequate row houses for a fashionable middle class—surely their original developers did not expect multiple families to be crammed on one floor. Yet, ruthless landlords took advantage of impermanent floor plans to divide the row houses into smaller and smaller dwellings while also quickly constructing new tenements explicitly designed to exploit the poor, often by demolishing row houses of better construction quality. Similarly, architects and designers jumped into the planning process for Pruitt-Igoe with optimism and naïve aspirations of utopia, but through a series of government manipulations, coupled with societal pressures, the imposing towers that resulted were mere shadows of the initial intent. By comparing the saga of Pruitt-Igoe to the plight of past tenements, unnerving parallels will be uncovered that allow for a greater understanding of how Pruitt-Igoe deteriorated so quickly. The comparison begs the question, “Why did this happen *again*?” A fair question, and likely one that Reggio, in the tradition of documentarians such as Jacob Riis, considered as he chose to include Pruitt-Igoe as an iconic image of modern “life out of balance.”

The saga of Pruitt-Igoe begins in the late 1930s in the midst of the Great Depression. With the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Act in 1937, which provided for federally funded public housing, city planners began to look to slum clearance and public housing as ways to revitalize slumping city centers. Shortly after the passage of the bill, St. Louis planning engineer Harland Bartholomew analyzed the current conditions within the city limits and marked

particular slums for clearance and redevelopment as public housing (Figure 2).¹ Housing shortages were a considerable issue in St. Louis, and public housing seemed necessary to control the growing problem and quell mounting public concern. At the time, Montgomery's ideas for housing were considered "contemporary." They included all of the features suggested by scholars of the time, such as low-rise structures and "provisions...made to minimize street traffic, maximize open space and parks, insure sun and air, and provide buildings for community activities."² However, few federal subsidies were actually available, and until the end of World War II, the majority of his projects were relegated to the backburner.

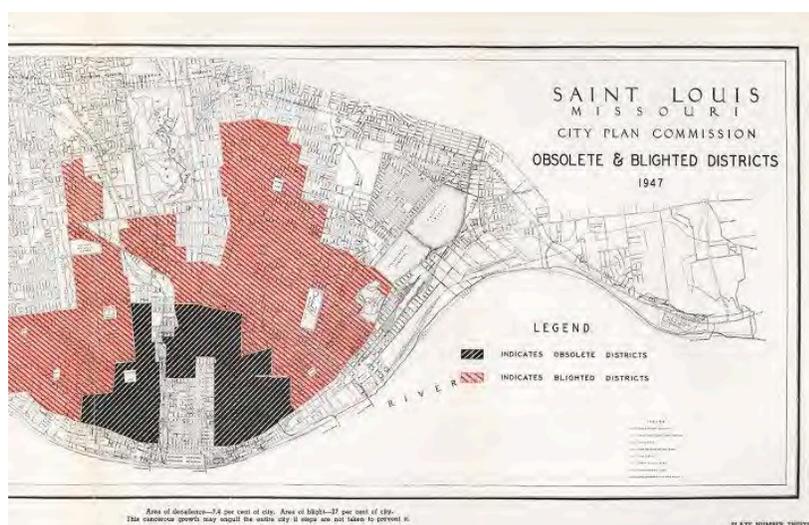


Figure 2—Bartholomew marked slums for clearance based on socioeconomic status, crime rates, and other statistics. Credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pruitt-igoe/3842713373/>.

Postwar, the composition of St. Louis was far different than when Bartholomew drew up the initial plans. There was still a housing deficit, especially with the influx of returning soldiers from overseas, but the issues with scarcity mainly applied to the St. Louis metropolitan area. In

¹ Roger Montgomery, "Pruitt-Igoe: Policy Failure or Societal Symptom," in *The Metropolitan Midwest: Policy Problems and Prospects for Change*, ed. Barry Checkoway and Carl V. Patton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 230.

² Eugenie Birch, "Woman-made America: The Case of Early Public Housing," in *The American Planner*, ed. Donald A. Krueckeberg (Methuen, 1983), 165.

the city, extreme decentralization was underway. Between 1940 and 1980, over half of the population within the city limits fled from worsening conditions and high taxes to the postwar suburbs.³ In their place, an impoverished population of blacks moved into existing structures. With vacancy rates increasing and incomes within the city limits falling drastically, tax revenues and services declined, turning urban neighborhoods into dangerous slums and ghettos. By 1960, the population of St. Louis was 90.5 percent segregated and one of the poorest areas in the country.⁴ The social apathy of the public exacerbated the problem. The boundaries of the city were tight compared to other large metropolitan areas and had not been changed since 1876; when the city fought for incorporation into the greater St. Louis County, the proposal was twice rejected by suburban, middle-class voters unwilling to tolerate an increase in tax rates.^{5,6}

City leaders began to see that St. Louis would quickly become a “ghost town” without intervention.⁷ Hope came with the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, which “gave authority for the construction of public and private housing for low and middle income families, respectively, on sites occupied by slum dwellings.”⁸ Bartholomew’s outdated plan could now be put into action, led by city leaders. Successful, wealthy businessmen such as August Busch and Ewing Kauffman wanted to save the central business district. While they thought that urban renewal would benefit all residents, they had some clear business interests at stake, including a desire to increase labor productivity and reduce “the reproductive costs of labor” by providing a

³ Montgomery, “Pruitt-Igoe: Policy Failure or Societal Symptom,” 236.

⁴ Robert E. Mendelson and Michael A. Quinn, “Residential Patterns in a Midwestern City: The St. Louis Experience,” in *The Metropolitan Midwest: Policy Problems and Prospects for Change*, ed. Barry Checkoway and Carl V. Patton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 158.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶ Chris Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited* (Sheffield: Department of Town and Regional Planning, The University of Sheffield, 1985), 1.

⁷ Shirk, quoted in Mendelson and Quinn, “Residential Patterns in a Midwestern City: The St. Louis Experience,” 154.

⁸ Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 5.

steady stream of cheap housing near major plants and factories.⁹ Public housing was seen as a panacea for low tax revenue and the decline of services, and the clearing of slums would allow for new development and transportation programs. With other projects concurrently changing the landscape, such as the Jefferson Gateway Memorial Arch and Busch Stadium, the denizens of St. Louis were sold on the idea of federally subsidized public housing by 1950. Despite low tax revenues, a failing inner core, and a massively shifting population, the city of St. Louis chose to embark on the construction of more than seven thousand units of public housing, and Pruitt-Igoe was to stand as a national precedent for the power of public housing on urban renewal.

Riding this wave of optimism, the St. Louis Housing Authority wished to distinguish Pruitt-Igoe from other conventional public housing designs by choosing Minoru Yamasaki as the architect of the complex in the early stages of the design process. The newly elected mayor of St. Louis, Joseph Darst, had been in discussions with Yamasaki's firm since 1949, after Darst had traveled to New York to observe new developments in high-rise public housing.¹⁰ Yamasaki had previous experience working with governmental organizations in St. Louis and was a rising star in the construction of public space. He would later go on to design landmark buildings throughout the world, including the Lambert-St. Louis International Airport terminal in 1956 and, most notably, the World Trade Center towers in New York City in 1976. Yamasaki considered Bartholomew's vision but blended it with his modernist principles of simplicity and restraint to create a plan that originally resembled the first attempts at "model" tenements. For example, the apartments at William Field's Riverside project in 1890s Brooklyn surrounded a private courtyard with space for recreation and laundry, while Jacob Schmidlapp's Washington

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Alexander von Hoffman, "Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe," in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. John F. Bauman et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 195.

Terrace, constructed in Cincinnati in 1911, provided a small but private row house for each family (Figure 3).¹¹



Figure 3—Designers of public housing considered early “model” tenements such as Jacob Schmidlapp’s Washington Terrace, built in Cincinnati in 1911. Each family lived in a private two or three-story row house. Reproduced from Wright, 130.

In the initial plans, unveiled in May 1950, Yamasaki appeared to learn from past mistakes in tenement construction by considering these progressive designs. The original sketches called for both high and low-rise housing for single families, playgrounds, recreational space, “a river of open space” through the central campus, and a density of only 30-35 dwellings per acre. Yamasaki optimistically thought that nine-tenths of the campus could be public, open space.¹² He furthermore had three specific aims in the construction of Pruitt-Igoe: “individuality and variety between buildings,” “some device...to achieve that essential smallness of scale within the huge context of the project which alone will preserve conditions in which human beings can live

¹¹ Gwendolyn Wright, “Americanization and Ethnicity in Urban Tenements,” in *Building the Dream* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 130.

¹² Minoru Yamasaki, “High Buildings for Public Housing? A necessity, says architect Minoru Yamasaki,” *Journal of Housing* 9 (1952): 230.

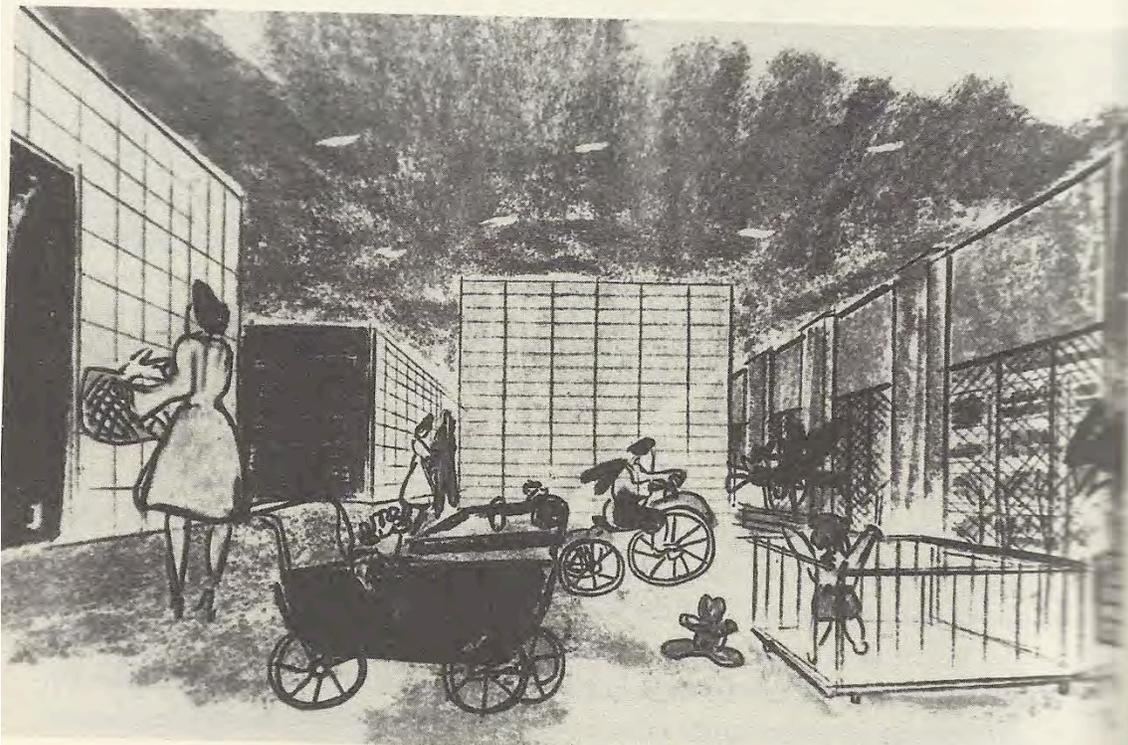


Figure 4—The public “galleries,” as sketched by Yamasaki, were intended to serve as both play and recreation spaces for children, with the added benefit of adult supervision. Reproduced from von Hoffman, 196.

comfortably,” and “the use of varying colors and buildings materials to prevent an overwhelming monolithic character.”¹³

Two more features made the plans for Pruitt-Igoe unique: the open galleries on certain floors of the high-rise buildings, and skip-stop elevators. The skip-stop elevators would only stop at every third floor of the eight-story structures, saving costs and simplifying the design of the buildings. The Pruitt-Igoe towers were one of the first buildings in the United States to contain skip-stop elevators, creating a supposedly efficient straight-line “slab” design different from previous cross-shaped constructions.¹⁴ The real architectural draw, however, were the open galleries on the floors with elevator stops, which measured 11 feet wide and 85 feet long and were designed to be a social space for parents and children. Figure 4 provides Yamasaki’s

¹³ Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 21.

¹⁴ von Hoffman, “Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe,” 195.

utopian view of these open corridors—one child rides his bike through the wide hallway, a mother finishes laundry, and a couple strolls down the hallway toward their dwelling, all in the comfort of a well-lit, futuristically paneled space. Along with public toilets and play spaces on the first floor of every building, Pruitt-Igoe appeared to display how large-scale projects could be designed with the social needs of its residents in mind.

However, the plans for Pruitt-Igoe changed dramatically in the following months, influenced by both social and political factors. The government had become involved early, unlike the chaos of the tenement homes, where comprehensive tenement reform was not passed in New York until 1901. Previously, the lack of laws and standards had allowed unscrupulous speculators to build both dense and poorly constructed tenement structures that lacked basic services as well as divide existing row houses into cramped tenements, often with two to three families on one floor. In comparison, the high level of involvement of the government and special interest lobbies such as Busch and Kaufman dramatically changed the Pruitt-Igoe proposals for the worse, contributing to its quick failure. Pruitt-Igoe was destined for disaster through policy similar to the action of speculators in New York—a failure to put social costs and needs above politics and monetary expenses.¹⁵ The goal of business owners and the St. Louis Housing Authority was to clear the slums as fast as possible to allow for highway construction and other renewal programs. Thousands of residents were displaced without relocation assistance when entire blocks of slums were quickly razed to make way for interstate and housing construction.¹⁶ In the rough reality of postwar St. Louis, Bartholomew's vision and Yamasaki's plan were not economically feasible—city leaders and the federal government simply wished to

¹⁵ John F. Bauman, "Introduction: The Eternal War on the Slums," in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. John F. Bauman et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 7.

¹⁶ Montgomery, "Pruitt-Igoe: Policy Failure or Societal Symptom," 235.

place as many people in public housing as soon as possible without regard for what could actually make a large-scale project successful.

The final plans do not accurately reflect Yamasaki's hopes. Yamasaki's initial design was sent to the federal Public Housing Authority in early 1951 for approval, but the blueprints that returned after debate between the designer and the source of the funding left Pruitt-Igoe stripped of much of its initial character.¹⁷ In an article in the *Journal of Housing*, he laments the changes made to his vision: "...because of the insistence of the Public Housing Administration, we were forced to a density of 55-60 families per acre, almost double the 35 per acre that we were trying to attain."¹⁸ In all, 272.5 people per acre were packed into Pruitt-Igoe. The size of the project was cut in half, much of the open space was removed, and public toilets, playgrounds, and landscaping vanished from the final design, which still came at a final cost of more than \$30 million.¹⁹ The dwindling federal aid did not permit the construction of recreation space, churches, commercial space, and other public facilities.²⁰

Bulldozing began in late 1951, with actual construction of the Pruitt complex commencing shortly afterward in 1952. When Igoe was completed in 1956 (though tenants occupied buildings in Pruitt as early as 1954), Pruitt-Igoe had been rapidly realized as 33 identical, monolithic 11-story structures, each three stories higher than planned. At first, Pruitt-Igoe technically existed as two separate, segregated complexes —Pruitt was built for whites and Igoe for blacks, though the entire campus was essentially uniform. Unsurprisingly, Yamasaki became disillusioned with public housing work, and Bacon notes that in public, Yamasaki had to adopt "anti-utopianism...in the belief that the high cost of urban land dictated a high rise

¹⁷ von Hoffman, "Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe," 196.

¹⁸ Yamasaki, "High Buildings for Public Housing?," 230.

¹⁹ Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 25.

²⁰ Montgomery, "Pruitt-Igoe: Policy Failure or Societal Symptom," 233.

replacement for the slums.”²¹ Yamasaki noticeably leaves Pruitt-Igoe out of his pictorial biography, but poignantly notes that his “poor buildings” act “as forceful reminders that we must do more carefully thought-out work on succeeding commissions.”²²

Photographs, models, and drawing show how Pruitt-Igoe was morphed and twisted during the turbulent planning process. A stunning blueprint from the early stages of development, probably around the time of the Public Housing Authority revisions, includes the majority of Yamasaki’s initial design (Figure 5). The towers are arranged variably even though they all appear to be the same size. The land is heavily landscaped and the complex is dotted with “community centers.” Schools, churches, parks, and stores, and even a library line the boundaries of the development. Within the complex, plans are made for a quaint central plaza, numerous playgrounds and barbecue areas, daycare centers, skating areas, an ice cream parlor, and even an enigmatic communal space listed as “Everybody’s Club.” A later architectural model (Figure 6), likely from the midpoint of design, shows the evolution of the space—there are organically flowing pathways and ample green space, but the towers are identically designed and many of the communal features are removed. Finally, a USGS aerial photo from 1968 reveals the true Pruitt-Igoe (Figure 7)—green space is replaced by larger parking lots and dusty tracts of unkempt grass. Unmaintained baseball fields are relegated to the side of the complex, and only one school was completed out of all the community facilities originally provisioned. Identical shadows hang bleakly over the pavement. Through a public and private drive for high-rise housing, limiting government and economic constraints, and quick building timetables, Pruitt-Igoe’s utopic expectations had met harsh realities.

²¹ Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 26.

²² Minoru Yamasaki, *A Life in Architecture* (Trumbull: Weatherhill, 1979), 36.

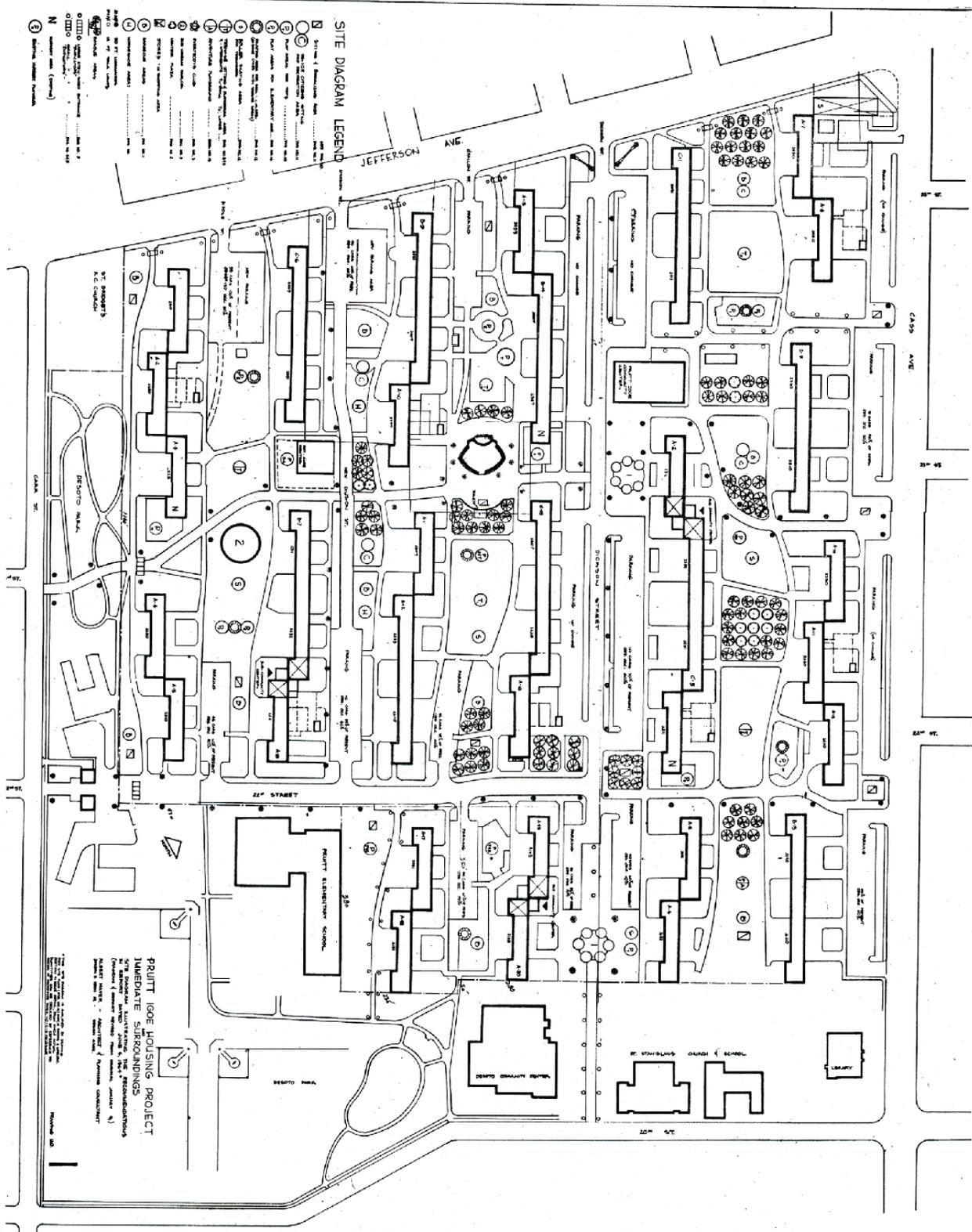


Figure 5—Original plans for Pruitt-Igoe called for ample community space and landscaping, along with community centers and libraries. Credit: St. Louis Housing Authority, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pruitt-igoe/5472067207/>.



Figure 6 — An architectural model shows the evolution of Pruitt-Igoe from initial idea to final conception. Credit: State Historical Society of Missouri, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pruitt-igoe/5472659910/>.



Figure 7—The reality of Pruitt-Igoe was far bleaker than Yamasaki’s initial vision, with the majority of the community features noticeably removed in this aerial photo. Credit: USGS, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pruitt-igoe/5472664956/>.

Figure 8 exhibits the bleak skyline created by Pruitt-Igoe. Identical buildings, differing only in color, multiply down parallel lines to a point of convergence at the horizon. Chain-link fences separate thin sidewalks from soggy, dirty green space. This was not utopia. When Yamasaki’s main considerations for the development are considered, all three were left broken and unfulfilled. There was no individuality to define each tower, almost all social elements were removed, and varying building materials were not utilized. Unfortunately, Pruitt-Igoe exemplified a dark side of modernism—the simple stone buildings resemble crude office

skyscrapers arranged in ominously straight lines. The “monolithic” character that Yamasaki tried so hard to prevent had instead been fully realized.



Figure 8 — Identical towers replaced low-rise housing in the final version of Pruitt-Igoe; chain-link fences and thin sidewalks took the place of landscaping and wide pathways. Credit: University of Missouri-St. Louis, Western Historical Manuscript Collection.

The unending horizon of towers are comparable to the New York City tenements, with hundreds of identical buildings built next to each other in a continual quest to provide as much housing as possible in increasingly smaller spaces (Figure 9). There are important spatial differences, however. The early tenements were small buildings of three to four stories with dimensions of 25 by 100 feet, built wall-to-wall to house 12-24 families.²³ Pruitt-Igoe, while repetitive and dense, featured imposing, freestanding towers with dimensions of 41 by 170 feet that housed hundreds of families. However, the similarities in density remain—up to eight

²³ Bauman, “Introduction: The Eternal War on the Slums,” 6.

families lived on each floor of Pruitt-Igoe, though these floors were somewhat larger than the nearly unlivable tenements. The marginal improvement over nearly a century, however, is unacceptable.

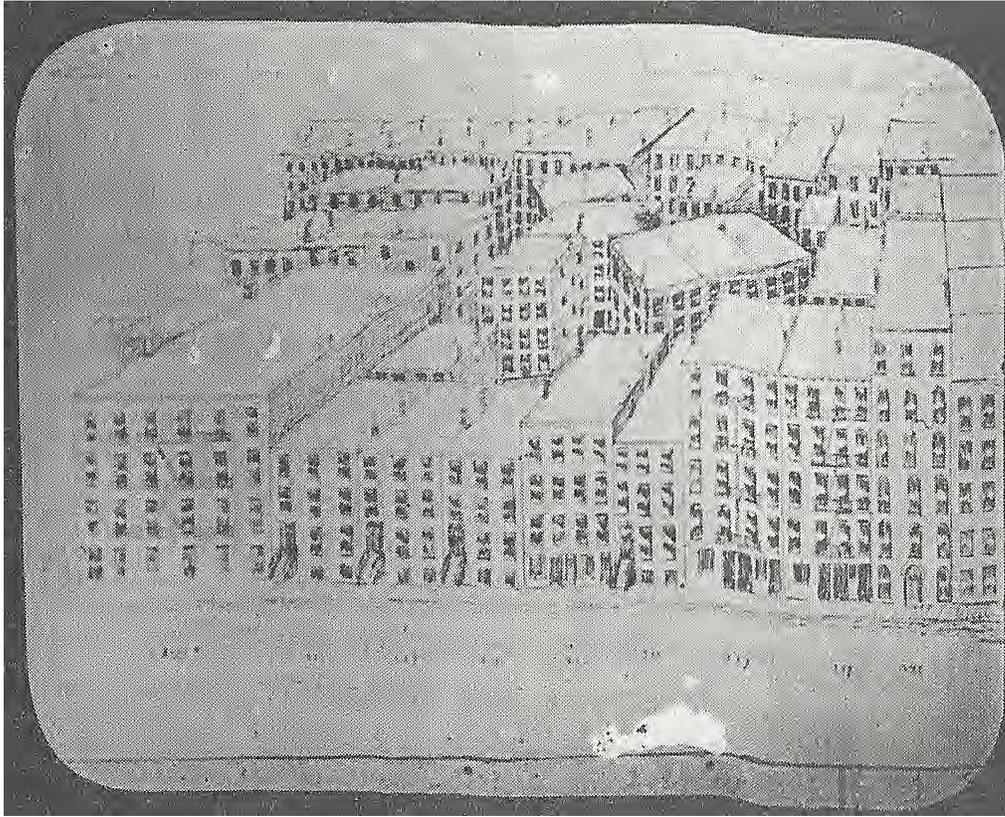


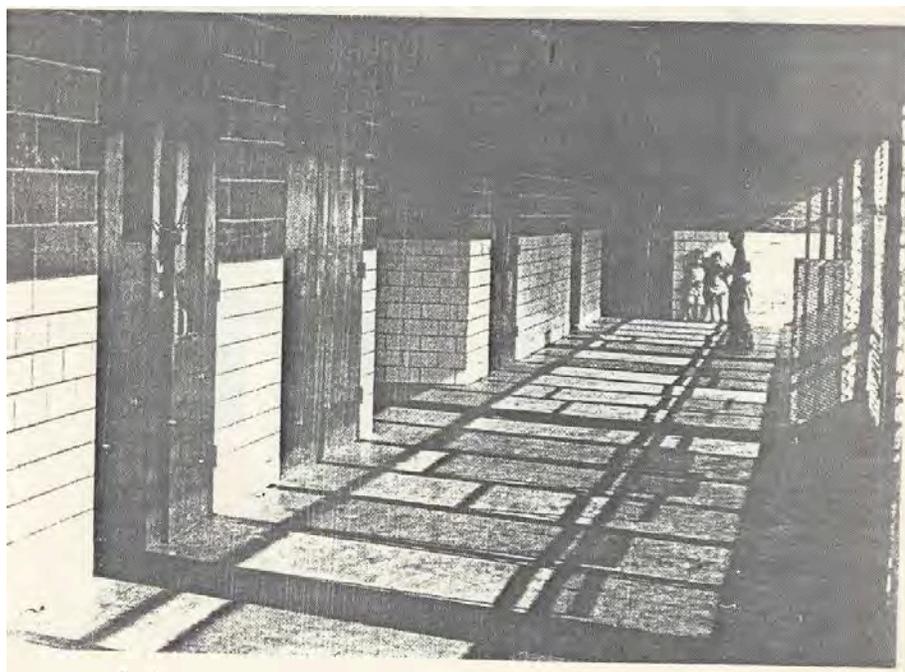
Figure 9 — Nearly identical row houses covered blocks of New York City, with haphazard placement and no regard for planning. Jacob Riis, “Birds-Eye View of an East Side Tenement Block.” Drawing by Charles I. Wingate. Reproduced from Riis, 165.

Pruitt-Igoe was completely finished by 1956 after approximately three years of work on each complex. The final construction and quality of the buildings was incredibly lackluster and careless. Doorknobs and locks were broken “before initial occupancy began” and windowpanes were easily blown from their frames by wind—everything was of the cheapest construction possible.^{24,25} Hot water pipes were not shielded and unbounded stairwells posed a danger to both

²⁴ Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 25-26.

children and adults. In 1955, two young girls fell from broken windows at high floors of a tower, and in 1962, an adult fell to his death from the tenth floor. Even Yamasaki's "innovative" elements detracted from the experience. The skip-stop elevator became an enormous source of congestion; one elevator served more than three hundred people, and the stopping pattern led all foot traffic through the gallery floors.²⁶

The galleries themselves led to many problems. The images of the hallways in Figures 10 and 11 hardly resemble Yamasaki's original sketch. The corridors are dimly lit by outdoor light, and padlocks are clearly visible on the door to one of the dwellings in Figure 10. The space is certainly not the congregation of supervised activity that Yamasaki envisioned—three children appear unattended in the background of Figure 10. Even though Yamasaki attempted to create semi-public recreational space for children, the plan failed. The galleries were often unintentionally



²⁵ Eugene J. Meehan, *Public Housing Policy: Convention Versus Reality* (New Brunswick: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 1975), 35-36.

²⁶ Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 23.



Figures 10 and 11—Galleries, while initially conceived as an active social space, were dark, dirty, and dangerous, inviting gangs of teenagers to take over the hallways and terrorize residents. Figure 10 reproduced from Bacon, 18. Figure 11 credit: <http://www.facebook.com/thepruittigoemyth>.

“open-air” once the windows were blown out or smashed—they were also unheated and unlit, covering the gray concrete pathways with a hazardous layer of ice and snow during the winter.

Minimal security made the gallery easily accessible to outsiders and non-residents, leading to increasingly high rates of crime. Gangs of teenagers took over the galleries and robbed those who dared to walk past—the residents renamed them “gauntlets” for this reason.²⁷ These gangs hacked into the walls and shattered windows and lights, further deteriorating the condition of Pruitt-Igoe’s 33 towers. A poverty program worker described the conditions with incredulous disgust, less than ten years after Pruitt-Igoe was completed:

²⁷ von Hoffman, “Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe,” 201.

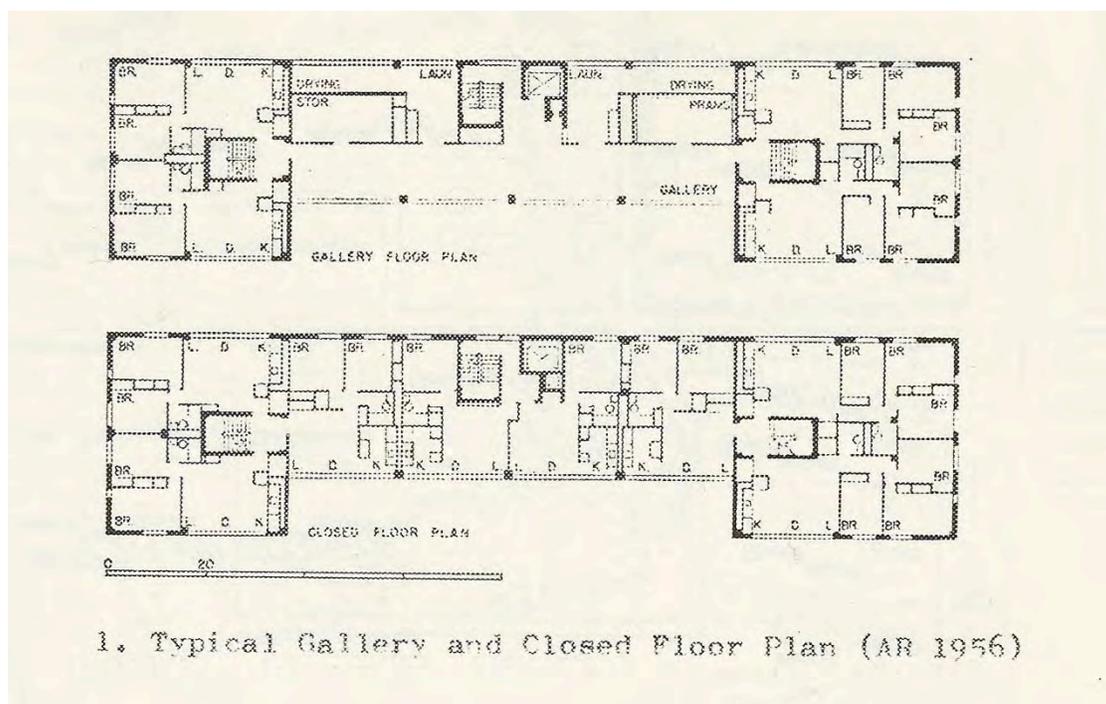
The infamous skip-stop elevator is a revelation even for those considering themselves prepared for anything. Paint has been peeled from the elevator walls. The stench of urine is overwhelming; ventilation in the elevators is nonexistent... When the visitor emerges from the dark, stench-filled elevator on to one of the building's gallery floors, he enters a grey concrete caricature of an insane asylum. Institutional grey walls give way to institutional grey floors. Rusty institutional-type screens cover windows in which no glass exists. Radiators once used to heat those public galleries have been, in many buildings, stripped from the walls. Incinerators, too small to accommodate the quantity of refuse placed into them, have spilled over—trash and garbage are heaped on the floors. Light bulbs and fixtures are out; bare hot wire often dangles from malfunctioning light sockets.²⁸

An examination of the floor plans of Pruitt-Igoe and a typical dumbbell tenement reveal striking similarities (Figures 12 and 13). As previously discussed, the floors of both designs were divided into confined multi-family arrangements, and most rooms in Pruitt-Igoe were poorly lit, though this was at least marginally better than the windowless rooms found in many tenements packed wall-to-wall in small lots. Furthermore, both plans feature comparatively narrow pathways considering the amount of foot traffic they were forced to serve, and the overall designs demonstrate little thought toward efficient movement throughout the buildings. The dumbbell plan had only one stairwell in the center of the structure, which pushed all the rooms against frequently windowless walls into two straight lines. Meanwhile, the Pruitt-Igoe buildings did have three separate stairwells, but the placement of these passages was astonishingly inflexible and dangerous for vertical movement. While the floors where the elevator stopped allowed for full travel throughout the space using the central gallery, including access to all three

²⁸ From Montgomery, "Pruitt-Igoe: Policy Failure or Societal Symptom," 238.

sets of stairs, the “closed” floors constrained residents to the space nearest their stairwell—the closed floors were actually divided by two permanent walls. The space was thus unusually separated into three separate areas, with three apartments on the left, two in the middle, and three more on the right. Therefore, residents of the closed floors could only enter and exit their residence through the single stairwell. If an emergency required evacuation of the building, the inhabitants had only one method of egress that could easily be blocked by fire or other rubble. The tenement design, with only a single stairwell, created a similarly cramped route for entrance or exit—fire escapes, while present in the specific dumbbell plan displayed in Figure 12, were only made mandatory in later decades by tenement reform laws.

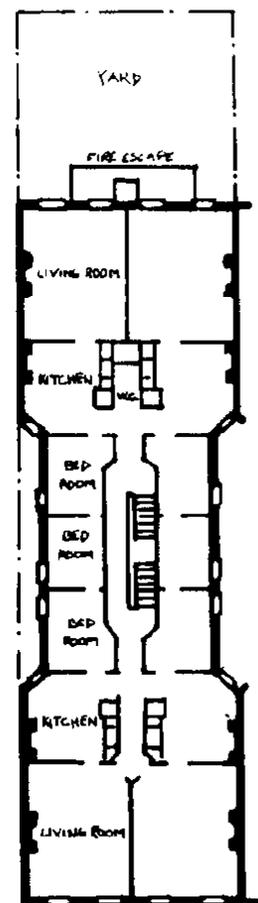
Of course, there were some improved conditions in Pruitt-Igoe, such as running water, electricity, and private toilets, but these improvements seem small considering that Pruitt-Igoe was built many decades after the first tenements. It is also important to reconsider the issue of scale mentioned earlier in this discussion—the rooms in Pruitt-Igoe were somewhat larger than the tiny tenement rooms, but still far below 1950s standards. Regardless, it is not hyperbole to suggest that the residents of the project were living in an uninvitingly modernized version of the



urban tenement.

Although architectural sloppiness and design miscues strongly contributed to the quick downfall of Pruitt-Igoe, the socioeconomic trends in St. Louis described earlier led the public housing project to its inevitable collapse. Segregation in the city continued to grow as St. Louis' population fled from the city boundaries. When the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that housing could not be denied on racial grounds, almost all white residents relocated to the suburbs and out of the desegregated Pruitt-Igoe complex —increasingly poor black families moved in to take their place. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) doubled between 1950 and 1970, but the incomes of the impoverished tenants of Pruitt-Igoe struggled to keep up with this rapid inflation. Even with most residents on public assistance, living in Pruitt-Igoe actually became *too* expensive for many tenants.

Figures 12 and 13 — The two floor plans (New York dumbbell tenement on the left, Pruitt-Igoe on the right) reveal similarities that led to poor conditions in both designs. Credits: Figure 12 reproduced from Wright, 119. Figure 13 reproduced from Bacon, 15.



C 1879-1901
DUMBBELL TENEMENT

A Housing Authority fiscal crisis fueled by disappearing federal aid caused rents to skyrocket starting in 1968, and an unprecedented nine-month rent strike by residents in 1969 only contributed to the problem. By 1969, more than 25 percent of residents were paying more than 30 percent of their income in rent.²⁹ These increasing rates drove poor residents out of Pruitt-Igoe—in 1970, the occupancy rate dipped as low as 34 percent.

Rapidly declining occupancy led to lower rent and tax revenues for the St. Louis Housing Authority, intensifying the problem through a downward-spiraling cycle. Low revenues triggered more rent increases while the condition of the project deteriorated beyond repair. The living

²⁹ Meehan, *Public Housing Policy: Convention Versus Reality*, 140.

ruins of Pruitt-Igoe became a part of local and national news cycles, creating a highly negative image of the complex throughout the country. Bailey notes that “...until recently, *the St. Louis Globe Democrat* referred to every offense committed anywhere in the general neighborhood as a “Pruitt Igoe” crime—its way of saying ‘Negro.’”³⁰ The media coverage became a self-fulfilling prophecy—mailmen would not deliver packages, cab drivers would not take passengers to the area, and “cops answering routine calls would arrive with guns drawn.”³¹

A similar cycle plagued the New York City tenement homes, as more and more immigrants arrived at Ellis Island to begin their search for the American Dream. Housing shortages drove up rent prices for even the worst tenements, forcing residents to take in boarders. This is an interesting difference from Pruitt-Igoe, where the St. Louis Housing Authority struggled to keep even a third of the complex occupied. With immigrants flooding the streets, prices fluctuated through simple supply and demand mechanisms; as demand swelled and supply remained stagnant, rent rates shot up to unaffordable levels. In Pruitt-Igoe, the low occupancy actually increased rates because the costs of operation were split among fewer and fewer individuals. However, the progression of deterioration is still comparable—as density in the tenements mushroomed even beyond the level desired by corrupt landlords, conditions in the tenements declined, escalating levels of disease, crime, and poverty in already poor neighborhoods. Five decades later, the cycle returned to afflict Pruitt-Igoe.

Surely, one major distinction between Pruitt-Igoe and the New York City tenements is the composition of its residents. The tenements in the Lower East Side were mainly composed of white European immigrants, but Pruitt-Igoe was almost entirely black by the end of the 1950s. But comparisons can be made with San Juan Hill, a poor African-American neighborhood in

³⁰ Bailey, quoted in Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 28.

³¹ McCue, quoted in Bacon, 28.

early 1900s New York, near where the Lincoln Center stands today. While conditions deteriorated in the Lower East Side because of unscrupulous landowners and irresolvable demand, the destitute conditions in San Juan Hill, which was over 90 percent black, were driven by violence and extreme poverty.³² Many residents lived in tenements constructed before the Tenement House Law was enacted, similar to those in Figure 14—few had private toilets, heating, or water. They were thrust into these buildings through racial segregation and tension with the surrounding white neighborhoods, much as impoverished black residents were left behind in Pruitt-Igoe when the complex was desegregated. While the source of the violence was



Figure 14 — The tenement houses of San Juan Hill frequently did not even meet the conditions required by the Tenement House Law of 1901. Credit: “Manhattan’s long-gone San Juan Hill,” *Ephemeral New York*.

³² Maria Jimenez and Melissa Lopez, “Building the Amsterdam Houses: Visions and Compromises,” John Jay College, CUNY, accessed November 14, 2011, <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~history/amsterdamwebexhibit/>.

different—race riots versus uncontrolled gang violence in Pruitt-Igoe—the endless crime drove both neighborhoods to slum conditions.³³ Much of San Juan Hill was demolished in the 1950s to build the Lincoln Center as well as, ironically, a housing project known as the Amsterdam Houses, which was decidedly more successful and still stands today, perhaps because of its central location in Manhattan.

Interestingly, the plight of the tenements led to numerous attempts at reform in the Lower East Side—the public bath movement, the reform park movement, and the Children’s Aid Society, among other groups, mobilized thousands of middle-class New Yorkers to help city residents, although many of these programs had only marginal success. Pruitt-Igoe’s troubles, like those of San Juan Hill, were mainly met by social apathy and even disgust. The story of the project’s decline was widely followed by the public, but few acted to curb the chaos, instead choosing to comment on the “inescapable process of decline.”³⁴ In retrospect, St. Louis residents could have done little to prevent the failure of Pruitt-Igoe, but their ambivalence is disturbing. Likely, there was little motivation to help since most St. Louis residents actually lived outside of the city—in comparison, past tenement reformers were driven by a desire to spread Victorian, middle-class ideals and improve sanitation in neighborhoods with residents that interacted with the wealthy as cooks or clerical workers.³⁵

Even if the Pruitt-Igoe crime rate were no higher than the surrounding area before the media coverage began, it was certainly amplified in the years that followed. Rape, robbery, assault, murders, and accidental deaths soared to increasingly dangerous levels, leading

³³ wildnewyork, “Manhattan’s long-gone San Juan Hill,” *Ephemeral New York*, October 15, 2008, <http://ephemeralnewyork.wordpress.com/2008/10/15/manhattans-long-gone-san-juan-hill/>.

³⁴ Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 31.

³⁵ David Glassberg, “The Public Bath Movement in America,” *American Studies* 20 (1979): 6.

maintenance workers to cease service of the complex in 1970.³⁶ Vandalism was organized, malicious, and unending. By then, frequent power failures darkened the complex daily, accompanied by gas explosions and water supply freezes. Dramatic images such as Figures 15 and 16 portray almost every window as broken or removed in some way—at this point, the



towers shown were likely vacant and abandoned. By 1969, 23 of the 33 edifices were condemned, and Meehan remarked about the condition of the rest of the development:

Some of the buildings still had water flowing freely through the halls and down the stairs. While a few buildings remained in use, the rest made up a strange kind of contemporary nightmare: rows of buildings with their windows and doors hanging loose in their frames,

³⁶ Montgomery, “Pruitt-Igoe: Policy Failure or Societal Symptom,” 332.



Figures 15 and 16 — Broken windows, organized vandalism, and high rates of crime plagued Pruitt-Igoe until its demolition. Credits: Figures 15 and 16, University of Missouri-St. Louis, Western Historical Manuscript Collection.

rooms jammed with rubble, walls demolished in the search for valuable wire or pipe, gaping holes everywhere, roofing torn from its base, site littered with garbage and broken glass.³⁷

Various rehabilitation schemes were proposed, but all were rejected for their infeasibility or high cost. In 1972, three buildings were famously destroyed in the experimental implosion described earlier; by 1974, the last tenant had been relocated by the government. Complete demolition of Pruitt-Igoe was finished in 1976 at a cost of \$3.5 million, leaving only a vacant lot that remains unoccupied today; it serves as a reminder of the continuing issues regarding public housing and slum neighborhoods.³⁸

³⁷ Meehan, quoted in Bacon, *Pruitt Igoe Revisited*, 34.

³⁸ Montgomery, "Pruitt-Igoe: Policy Failure or Societal Symptom," 233.

Why *did* this happen again, 50 years after tenement reform? The rise and fall of Pruitt-Igoe is perhaps even more dramatic than the saga of the tenements. In fact, many tenement buildings survive today in New York City, although heavily remodeled—in contrast, much of Pruitt-Igoe was declared inhabitable less than 15 years after its completion. At first, the St. Louis Housing Authority appeared to head in a positive direction by hiring a respected architect to carefully plan a public housing project that would serve as a model for the future. But the time or place was not right for such an expensive, experimental venture. The city of St. Louis ignored the postwar trends that were shaping the city—the demographics of the city were shifting at an almost unbelievable rate during the decades that followed the war. Perhaps leaders such as Busch and Kauffman thought an influx of public housing would reverse this trend, but this idea was misguided and overly optimistic. Decentralization was inevitable, especially when coupled with strict city limits and high tax rates. Even when faced with this reality, the St. Louis Housing Authority chose to move ahead with the project, but the alterations that were made to Yamasaki's initial plans flew in the face of everything that had been learned about housing in the last half-century, destroying any chance of success that the project may have initially possessed. High-rise, high-density housing with poor construction in already afflicted neighborhoods only invited vandalism and an influx of poor residents—previous public housing projects were more successful when the surrounding neighborhood was composed of a mix of middle and lower-class residents.³⁹

As conditions approached those of the tenements, the downward cycle only continued. When the environment at Pruitt-Igoe began to falter, the government that was so involved in its construction vanished and avoided taking responsibility, letting the complex fall into bedlam and

³⁹ Dolores Hayden, “New Deal Programs (Public Housing, Greenbelt Towns) and Debates about Growth” (lecture, Yale University, New Haven, CT, October 26, 2011).

disorder in less than two decades. The history of the New York City tenement showed that government and public intervention could lead to positive change, but the city of St. Louis remained apathetic to its unfortunate creation. Looking back, the construction of Pruitt-Igoe most resembles the New York City tenements in its refusal to account for social costs—that a well-planned, properly equipped space is essential to tenants’ well-being and successful urban revival. Sustainable, thoughtful public housing may present significant costs and challenges to a city in the short-term, but valuing low cost over substance, as proved over the last two centuries, is an “imbalance” destined for ruin.

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