

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: A serious look at public housing and the fate of US cities

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A powerful documentary film on the fate of a well-known St. Louis housing project, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, raises crucial questions about the history of public housing in the United States, as well as the fate of older industrial cities that have been left to decay.

Using archival footage and extensive interviews, filmmaker Chad Freidrichs examines the history of the St. Louis public housing complex that was erected in 1954 and was featured on the national television news when it was demolished 18 years later.

Pruitt-Igoe consisted of 33 11-story buildings containing nearly 3,000 apartments. Its architect was Japanese-American Minoru Yamasaki, who later became famous for New York's World Trade Center. When first opened, Pruitt-Igoe was advertised as a big step forward for thousands of families. For the first few years it was.

Within a short time, however, the complex became an example of the urban crisis that was overtaking many US cities. Starved of funds for maintenance and home for many who found jobs and decent wages increasingly difficult to find, by the mid-1960s Pruitt-Igoe was beset by growing crime and was increasingly deserted by its residents. By 1971 state and federal authorities decided to demolish several of the project's buildings.

It was these building implosions that were caught in a well-known 1972 photo and also screened on television. The film shows Walter Cronkite, longtime CBS News anchorman, announcing the event with his trademark solemnity. The moment effectively captures what this documentary aptly calls the "Pruitt-Igoe myth." The decision to demolish the complex was transformed into a semi-official narrative, allegedly proving the impossibility of dealing with the problems of poverty, crime and other social ills through public housing or other government programs. It is not an exaggeration to say that two generations of city planners, architects and middle class liberals have been brought up on this version of events.

Freidrichs shows that this is far from the truth. He examines Pruitt-Igoe, not through the eyes of complacent and privileged representatives of the status quo, but through some of the residents themselves. We hear, for example, from Ruby Russell, one of the early residents of the project, who called her

11th floor apartment a "poor man's penthouse." Ms. Russell explains that she formed friendships and bonds there that lasted a lifetime.

Jacquelyn Williams, who had previously lived with her mother and 11 siblings in a three-room shack in which her mother slept on a rollaway bed in a kitchen next to a pot-bellied stove, has similarly fond memories, although she readily explains that there were also many problems.

Other witnesses testify to the rapid decline of the complex. One resident describes the isolation of many who lived there, explaining the constant restrictions facing residents and calling it a "prison environment." Crime and gang violence accompanied unemployment and hopelessness. A tenant describes the fear he felt as a young man, adding pointedly, "maybe Baghdad was worse than the projects."

The film goes on to show some of the official policies behind the decay of Pruitt-Igoe, thus debunking the myth that it was the tenants' fault, or the nature of public housing itself.

Entrenched hostility to public housing programs within the corporate and political establishment continued after the passage in 1949 of the federal Housing Act, with its limited provisions for housing construction. No federal funds were made available for operations or maintenance. At the same time, realtors carried out the notorious policy of "racial steering," directing white and black families to segregated neighborhoods. Discriminatory mortgage lending and countless other techniques were used to victimize minority workers and their families, acting to drive a wedge between different sections of the working class.

As the film goes on to explain, the fate of Pruitt-Igoe can't be divorced from that of the city in which it was built. A century ago, in the early decades of industrialization, St. Louis, the gateway to the west, was the fourth largest city in the United States. It reached its population peak in 1950 of 856,000, making it then the country's eighth largest. Today it has, as of the 2010 census, 319,000 residents, having fallen to 58th in size nationally. This mirrors the decline of Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo and many other former industrial centers that have lost more than half of their population over the same time period.

St. Louis was one of those cities that attracted tens of thousands of African-Americans from the South, as part of the

great migration that spanned nearly six decades in the early and mid-20th century. Some of the newcomers were able to get jobs in basic industry, in the auto, steel and rubber plants. They joined and helped to organize trade unions, and for a number of decades enjoyed living standards far better than in the South.

Even at the height of the post-World War II boom, however, at the very moment when the Pruitt-Igoe complex was completed, life remained a struggle for workers facing bouts of unemployment, steadily rising prices and a host of urban problems. The boom passed by millions who remained in poverty.

And it only got worse, as the exodus of jobs began almost as soon as they had arrived. As one of the academics interviewed in the film explains, the “urban industrial economy was about to fall off a cliff” in the 1960s. Factory jobs began to grow scarce, and better-paying jobs began to leave the major cities for the suburbs, leaving sections of workers who either did not drive or could not afford high commuting costs at a disadvantage.

Freidrichs’ film also reminds its audience of the vicious restrictions placed on welfare recipients. In order for single mothers to obtain public assistance, the father could not live with the family. The authorities consciously encouraged the breakup of families, and sent investigators to apartments in the evenings to check on the presence of able-bodied adult men, sometimes finding them hiding in closets. One resident explains that as a child she was warned to tell any official who inquired that “your father is not here.”

There are several myths contained within the overarching theme of failure symbolized by the collapsing Pruitt-Igoe high-rise buildings. One of them is the alleged failure of modernist architecture. The International Style pioneered by such figures as Le Corbusier was accused, one-sidedly, of being ill-equipped to deal with urban living. Books and essays were written suggesting that crime, isolation and decay were the inevitable product of high-rise buildings like those of Pruitt-Igoe.

Few bother to explain how, if that is the case, hundreds of thousands of middle class and wealthy New Yorkers live contentedly in such developments as Battery Park City, in lower Manhattan, as well as similar buildings in the rest of Manhattan and in other prosperous areas around the country.

In a recent article, *New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman points to the example of the Penn South cooperative in Manhattan, a 10-building development, almost exactly the size of Pruitt-Igoe, in the heart of New York. Penn South is marking its 50th anniversary as a bastion of affordable housing this year and is so widely desired that applications are not accepted for its lengthy waiting list. Kimmelman correctly explains that architecture, while it may be a factor in the fate of any housing complex, is “always hostage to larger forces.” He points out that Penn South exists within a vibrant neighborhood, literally steps from major transportation hubs and cultural activities of every description.

One might also take the example of Co-op City, however, which has few of Penn South’s advantages of location. Located in the northeast corner of the Bronx and more than five times the size of its Manhattan cousin, Co-op City, more than 40 years old, also has few if any of the problems associated with Pruitt-Igoe. One difference is that it depends not on direct government funds as in the case of public housing, but on the maintenance payments of its cooperators, who buy their apartments at fairly modest prices.

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth filmmakers explain, quite correctly, that “the film illustrates how conclusions are dangerously and erroneously drawn when powerful interests control debate. ... It’s time to get the facts straight and present the Pruitt-Igoe story in a way that will implode the myths and the stigma.”

At the same time, the film raises more questions than it can possibly answer. If the fate of Pruitt-Igoe cannot be separated from that of St. Louis, and the fate of St. Louis from that of many other cities, it is also true that none of these issues can be viewed apart from the history of American capitalism in the 20th century, including not only its brief post-World War II boom, but also its accelerating decline over the past 40 years.

The overriding fact is that little or no public housing is now built in the United States, and that built in earlier decades faces the ever-present danger of decay. American capitalism long ago turned decisively away from the policies of limited social reform that provided funds for public housing, among other programs, between the 1940s and the 1960s. This is what is symbolized by the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe complex. The hopes of all sections of workers for decent housing and other basic social rights now rest on a political struggle against the bankrupt profit system.

The film’s web site can be visited here:
<http://www.pruitt-igoe.com/>.



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