

the Pruitt- Igoe myth

A film by
Chad Freidrichs

83 minutes, English, Digital, 2011, Documentary



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Synopsis

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth tells the story of the transformation of the American city in the decades after World War II, through the lens of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing development and the St. Louis residents who called it home.

It began as a housing marvel. Built in 1956, Pruitt-Igoe was heralded as the model public housing project of the future, "the poor man's penthouse." Two decades later, it ended in rubble - its razing an iconic event that the architectural theorist Charles Jencks famously called the death of modernism. The footage and images of its implosion have helped to perpetuate a myth of failure, a failure that has been used to critique Modernist architecture, attack public assistance programs, and stigmatize public housing residents.

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth seeks to set the historical record straight. To examine the interests involved in Pruitt-Igoe's creation. To re-evaluate the rumors and the stigma. To implode the myth.

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth has played at dozens of festivals around the world including Los Angeles, True/False, Full Frame, Big Sky and SilverDocs. It won Best Documentary Feature at the Oxford Film Festival and at Kansas City FilmFest and was recently awarded the International Documentary Association's ABCNews Videosource Award for best use of archival footage. It is slated to receive the American Historical Association's prestigious John E. O'Connor Film Award for outstanding interpretation of history.

About Public Housing and the Importance of Understanding Pruitt-Igoe

Public housing has a bad name.

While the reasons for this are complex, a few widely publicized projects have created a lasting impression in the minds of many Americans. One such project is the Pruitt-Igoe public housing development in St. Louis, Missouri. A famous image, circulated worldwide, of the implosion of one Pruitt-Igoe's buildings has come to symbolize to many the failure of government-sponsored housing and, more broadly, government-sponsored anything.

Completed in 1954, the thirty-three eleven story buildings of Pruitt-Igoe were billed as the solution to the overcrowding and deterioration that was plaguing the inner city of St. Louis. Twenty years later, the buildings were leveled, declared unfit for habitation.

What happened in Pruitt-Igoe has fueled a mythology repeated in discussions of many urban high-rise projects. Violence, crime and drugs, so the story goes, plagued the housing project from nearly the beginning as it became a "dumping ground" for the poorest city residents. According to one standard account, it was quickly torn up by its rural residents who could not adapt to high-rise city life.

A brief online image search of "Pruitt-Igoe" reveals this legacy. A building imploded. Vandalized hallways. Acres of broken windows. These images of destruction are periodically interrupted by images of a different kind: hopeful images of a massive newly-built housing complex in the mid-fifties, the scale and grandeur of the buildings reflecting the optimistic spirit out of which Pruitt-Igoe came.

The quick, unexamined transition from hope to disillusionment is the standard structure of the Pruitt-Igoe narrative. But there is another Pruitt-Igoe story, another approach, one simultaneously larger and smaller in focus.

It is a story of a city and its residents. The city is St. Louis, a city in many ways at the forefront of postwar urban decline. In the years of Pruitt-Igoe, St. Louis' decline rivaled the fall of Rome in its abruptness and impact on the city, losing half its population and enormous prestige in a generation. An analysis of Pruitt-Igoe has to begin in this milieu, and yet it so rarely does.

A proper analysis of Pruitt-Igoe would take into account the ways in which public housing was used as a tool of racial segregation or as a justification for the clearance of poor and working-class neighborhoods. This analysis would look at the dominant culture of the time, which stressed uniformity and "hygiene" in the domestic sphere, political life, and neighborhood composition. And the priorities of the legislation that created large-scale public housing would come up for analysis as well.

The individual stories of the residents' struggles and successes have almost universally been ignored; the texture of life in the projects too often reduced to melodrama. The

Pruitt-Igoe documentary has, at its heart, the experiences of its residents, adding a human face to a subject that has become so depersonalized.

The Pruitt-Igoe documentary tells of a declining city, a suburbanizing nation, a changing urban economy, a hope for the future and residents who fought back in their own ways, refusing to be passive victims of these larger forces aligned against them.

The documentary has two convergent goals. One is to inform and enhance the ongoing debate over public housing and government welfare programs. The film will use Pruitt-Igoe story as a lens through which a larger story about affordable housing and the changing American city can be viewed. It will untangle the various arguments about what went wrong in Pruitt-Igoe and dispel the conclusions based on simplification and stereotype that turned Pruitt-Igoe into a symbol of failure. Second, the film will illustrate how conclusions are dangerously and erroneously drawn when powerful interests control debate.

History is a contested space. It becomes used politically and culturally. Arguments become flattened, rather than expanded; available evidence discarded, rather than sought. Pruitt-Igoe has become a victim of this tendency, a victim of an implosion image that says, “We tried that, and here’s what happened:” the booming reports of dynamite endlessly repeated in an echo chamber of failure.

This is why Pruitt-Igoe matters – why we are making this documentary. So much of our collective understanding of cities and government and inequality are tied up in those thirty-three high-rise buildings, informed by the demolition image. Too much of the context has been overlooked, or willfully ignored, in discussions of public housing, public welfare and the state of the American city.

It’s time to get the facts straight and present a proper story for Pruitt-Igoe that will implode the myths and the stigma. Pruitt-Igoe needs to be remembered and understood – in a different way than it has been – because the city will change again.

To this day, most of the 55-acres of the Pruitt-Igoe site are vacant, overgrown with trees and bushes, a constant visual reminder in the north side of St. Louis of this infamous “failure.” It has been easy – too easy – for academics, politicians and interest groups to write off Pruitt-Igoe to bad policy, bad architecture or bad people. But those are not the whole story, or even the primary factors in what led to Pruitt-Igoe’s demise. This is why a Pruitt-Igoe documentary is needed now. This documentary’s ultimate goal is to show a wide audience that there is no easy explanation for the problems of Pruitt-Igoe and other urban public housing developments.

The city will change again, and affordable housing will continue to be an issue. When that happens, the complex lessons of Pruitt-Igoe must be remembered by society and by the architects, developers and public officials we will task with solving future housing issues.

But what sticks is the label failure

But public housing got a bad name. Large public housing projects became, to many observers, synonymous with the perceived failure of the era of progressive federal policy launched with the New Deal.

The irony

In 1972, the televised implosion of one of the 33 11-story buildings that comprised the Pruitt-Igoe public housing development created a lasting symbol of failure in the collective American memory. The word “failure” is used over and over in connection with the Wendell O. Pruitt and William L. Igoe Homes, the infamous public housing project that was leveled in 1974 after just 18 years of existence. More than 25 years later, Pruitt-Igoe continues to appear in discussions of urban planning, public policy, federal welfare funding and architectural design. It is employed to say that government doesn’t work, as an argument for personal responsibility or the benefits of the private market. The interests that use Pruitt-Igoe in this manner are grossly oversimplifying the issues surrounding its demise and ignoring many key factors.

The film examines key issues in the Pruitt-Igoe story, including its modernist inception and design, federal legislation, economic conditions of St. Louis and other industrial cities, and the post-war American housing boom. Most importantly, the film will allow the former residents to tell their Pruitt-Igoe experiences, dispelling myths about the inhabitants of urban public housing that persist even today.

Pruitt-Igoe was one of many urban high-rise public housing projects created through funds made available by the 1949 Housing Act. Its story is representative of many of these developments’ fates. Though the 1949 Housing Act had little concern for public housing, these “failures” have been pointed to continually in the past three decades by those opposed to federal welfare programs and bottom-up economic development.

Pruitt-Igoe was designed in 1951 by architect Minoru Yamasaki. Inflated construction bids combined with the perceived necessity of building high-rises to achieve requisite density levels on valuable inner-city land ultimately led to the spaced superblocks of Pruitt-Igoe’s 33 11-story buildings. Pruitt-Igoe’s failure, and the extent to which it was caused by its high-rise design, continues to be a significant debate in architecture today. Many still point to implosion of Pruitt-Igoe’s first building in 1972 as the end of modern architectural movement.

Pruitt-Igoe was also used by city planners to reinforce racial segregation. In the original plans, the Pruitt homes would be for minority residents, with the Igoe homes reserved for the white population. When the Brown v. Board decision struck down segregation in 1954, just as Pruitt and Igoe were opening, both projects had to integrate. Whites fled the city, making the occupants of the projects’ combined 2,870 units 90% African-American.

The largest factor in the demise of Pruitt-Igoe was the legislation itself, but not in the way people usually talk about the legislation as a failure. While the Housing Act of 1949 is often cited as initiating the federal public housing program, this was not its primary goal. Following World War II, giant rings of poverty and inner-city decay surrounded the central business districts of most major Eastern and Midwestern cities. Leaders believed that clearing the slums and redeveloping the urban core would stimulate the floundering construction industry and the overall economy. In terms of priorities of the 1949 Housing Act, public housing was a distant third, lagging behind slum clearance and construction stimulation. This was reflected in the allocation of federal money: there were funds for clearance and development, but maintenance costs were to be paid by rental income, which was capped intentionally low so as not to interfere with the private real estate market.

Capped rents meant there was never enough money for maintenance, leading building conditions, and occupancy rates, to plummet. Vacant buildings became havens for criminal activity, causing even more families to flee and rental income to drop even further. It was a vicious cycle, with residents and administrators finding only sporadic success in combating. A 1969 resident-led rent strike led to some improvements, but by then the heroin trade had moved in, and there was no turning back.

Just three years later, an earth-shattering explosion shook the grounds as the first federal housing project to be officially abandoned lost one of its buildings to a stack of dynamite. By 1974, all residents had been relocated and the remaining buildings were leveled. Receiving worldwide media attention, the destruction of Pruitt-Igoe served to reinforce the prevailing conception of the failure of public housing and, by extension, the whole American social welfare program.

Director Bios

Chad Freidrichs

Director Chad Freidrichs has worked for four years to complete *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: An Urban History*, his third feature film. The historical nature of this film allowed Chad to spend hours digging around in archives and finding ways to transfer old 16mm films, experiences that he hopes he can apply to future films. *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* also gave Chad the opportunity to meet wonderful scholars and, of course, the kind and insightful former residents of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, without whom this film could not have been made. After so much time devoted to researching, writing, shooting, editing, and mixing, Chad is excited to share this film with audiences.

Chad has been working as an independent filmmaker for over a decade. His previous feature-length documentaries are *Jandek on Corwood*, a film tracing the cult following of the underground musician Jandek, and *First Impersonator*, a look at the world of presidential look-alikes and the troubled life of JFK impersonator Vaughn Meader. Chad's documentaries have played at film festivals around the world, including *South By Southwest*, *Silverdocs*, and *Full Frame*. Chad also recently completed the narrative short *Red Cloud*, a cold-war sci-fi thriller. Chad teaches film and video courses in the Digital Filmmaking program at Stephens College.

Paul Fehler

Producer Paul Fehler and Chad Freidrichs became friends in Eighth Grade, when an alphabetical seating chart placed them in the same row in gym class. He has been helping Chad make films for almost as long.

He was a producer on Freidrichs' previous two feature length documentaries, *Jandek on Corwood* and *First Impersonator*. Mr. Fehler lives in an apartment in the Shaw neighborhood of St. Louis, Missouri and has no pets.

Jaime Freidrichs

Jaime Freidrichs served as an associate producer on Chad Freidrichs' previous two films, *Jandek on Corwood* and *First Impersonator*.

In addition to her role as a producer of *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: An Urban History*, Jaime co-wrote the film's script.

Brian Woodman

Producer Brian Woodman received his Ph.D. in Film/Media Studies from the University of Kansas. He has worked with film collections in several archives around the U.S., and for the past few years he has served as the Documentary Co-Curator for the St. Louis International Film Festival.

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth is Brian's first film with Chad, Jaime, and Paul.

Credits

Directed by

Chad Freidrichs

Produced by

Chad Freidrichs, Jaime Freidrichs, Paul
Fehler, Brian Woodman

Script by

Chad and Jaime Freidrichs

Music by

Benjamin Balcom

Narrator

Jason Henry

Interviews

Sylvester Brown, Robert Fishman, Joseph
Heathcott, Brian King, Joyce Ladner, Ruby
Russell, Valerie Sills, Jacquelyn Williams

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/26/arts/design/penn-south-and-pruitt-igoe-starkly-different-housing-plans.html?_r=3&partner=rss&emc=rss

The New York Times

Art & Design

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Towers of Dreams: One Ended in Nightmare

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Published: January 25, 2012

Hortense Davis sat beside neat stacks of new magazines in the pristine administrative office at Penn South, the 1960s high-rise housing cooperative development for low- and moderate-income workers in Chelsea. She was asked to ponder life there across 20 years.

“Perfect,” she said after a shrug, stumped to come up with some complaint. “Especially if, like me, you live alone and don’t drive, because it’s close to shops and transportation, it’s secure, the grounds are beautiful in the summer.” Ms. Davis, a 76-year-old former Brooklynite, has an apartment on the ninth floor, facing the Hudson. “It’s like a penthouse,” she told me. “I like to stand at my window and watch the ships.”

I went to Penn South this week, having seen “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth,” Chad Freidrichs’s shattering documentary, now at the IFC Center. Pruitt-Igoe was the notorious St. Louis public-housing complex, demolished in 1972. Images of imploded Pruitt-Igoe buildings, broadcast worldwide, came to haunt the American consciousness. Critics of welfare, big government and modern architecture all used the project as a whipping boy. “The day that modern architecture died,” Charles Jencks, the architect and apostle of postmodernism, called the demolition.

Penn South is a cooperative in affluent, 21st-century Manhattan past which chic crowds hustle every day to and from nearby Chelsea’s art galleries, apparently oblivious to it. It thrives within a dense, diverse neighborhood of the sort that makes New York special. Pruitt-Igoe, segregated de facto, isolated and impoverished, collapsed along with the industrial city around it.

But they’re both classic examples of modern architecture, the kind Mr. Jencks, among countless others, left for dead: superblocks of brick and concrete high rises

scattered across grassy plots, so-called towers in the park, descended from Le Corbusier's "Radiant City." The words "housing project" instantly conjure them up.

Alienating, penitential breeding grounds for vandalism and violence: that became the tower in the park's epitaph. But Penn South, with its stolid redbrick, concrete-slab housing stock, is clearly a safe, successful place. In this case the architecture works. In St. Louis, where the architectural scheme was the same, what killed Pruitt-Igoe was not its bricks and mortar. (Minoru Yamasaki, who designed the World Trade Towers, was the architect.)

The lesson these two sites share has to do with the limits of architecture, socially and economically, never mind what some architects and planners promise or boast. The two projects, aesthetic cousins, are reminders that no typology of design, no matter how passingly fashionable or reviled, guarantees success or failure: neither West Village-style brownstones nor towers in the park nor titanium-clad confections. This is not to say architecture is helpless, only that it is never destiny and that it is always hostage to larger forces.

Pruitt-Igoe opened to great fanfare in 1954. The St. Louis Housing Authority advertised a paradise of "bright new buildings with spacious grounds," indoor plumbing, electric lights, fresh plastered walls and other "conveniences expected in the 20th century."

Ruby Russell, one of Pruitt-Igoe's early tenants, recalls in Mr. Freidrichs's film: "It was a very beautiful place, like a big hotel resort. I never thought I would live in that kind of a surrounding." Having moved from dismal slums, she marveled at the light and views from her "poor-man's penthouse" on the 11th floor. Then "one day we woke up and it was all gone," she says.

The documentary unpacks the factors conspiring against the project — all the things that don't apply at Penn South — among them inadequate money set aside for maintenance and unfathomable welfare rules stipulating that no able-bodied man could live in a home where the woman received government aid. A night staff from the Welfare Department patrolled apartments searching for fathers to evict.

As disastrously, opponents of public housing blocked federal money that could have helped local authorities improve conditions. The 1949 Housing Act, which promoted urban renewal at federal government expense, paved the way for Pruitt-Igoe and simultaneously promoted the white flight that doomed it, financing new segregated towns on city outskirts that drained jobs from the inner city. There's an unspeakably sad clip in the documentary in which a soft-spoken young father breaks down before a television interviewer over his failure to find anyone willing to hire a black man, and a vintage clip of a young white suburban mother explaining in a shaky voice, "We have our home here, and if the colored move in and run real estate prices down, it's bound to create tension.

"I think their aim is mixed marriages and becoming equal with the whites," she feels compelled to say.

Besieged and increasingly abandoned, Pruitt-Igoe was overtaken by drug dealers and murderers, broken pipes and shattered windows, set afire and adrift. Public authorities and cultural experts after the fact blamed the residents or the architecture, but these both were more the victims than the cause.

Like Pruitt-Igoe, Penn South was a midcentury slum-clearance project. Designed by Herman Jessor as a modern cooperative for working class families, backed by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, it called for 10 buildings spread across 20 acres between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, from 23rd Street to 29th Street. It was not public housing. Two bedroom apartments cost \$3,000 when the complex opened in 1962. (Those same apartments now sell for \$100,000.) President John F. Kennedy stood atop a flag-decked dais in the bright May sun to dedicate it.

Steady income from maintenance payments and retail units in commercial buildings the co-op owned guaranteed Penn South a stable income. Tax relief from the city shielded it from escalating real estate values. Residents poured money into improvements. Repeatedly they declined the right to sell their apartments at market rates, preserving the ideal of moderate-income dwellings, adding facilities for toddlers and the elderly, playgrounds, a community garden and a ceramics studio.

Few people chose to leave, aging in their apartments, and in 1986 Penn South became the country's first Naturally Occurring Retirement Community, or NORC. That's an official designation for housing that wasn't built for elderly people but is occupied by enough of them to become eligible for special grants.

It turns out that the very architectural traits that conventional wisdom said made tower-in-the-park projects like Pruitt-Igoe inhumane actually make these buildings ideal for retirees: the elevators (so long as they work) and communal spaces, the enclosed green areas where it's possible to walk safely, the openness and in-house programs. Once again architecture evolves in bottom-up ways that architects and planners can never fully predict. Today New York has dozens of NORCs, most of them towers in the park.

I stopped into the Penn South Program for Seniors the other afternoon, and Elaine Rosen, the program coordinator, showed off the book-lined common room, the basket of donated eyeglasses, and a long program sheet of concerts, lectures and free Swedish massages. "It's a community," she said.

So was Pruitt-Igoe, whose fleeting, forgotten Eden the film movingly excavates in the recollection of Sylvester Brown, an early resident. He remembers the smell of pies and cakes in the hallways. Jacquelyn Williams, who moved with her 11 siblings from a shack where her mother slept beside the kitchen's potbelly stove, recalls "friendships and bonds formed there that have lasted a lifetime."

"I know a lot of bad things came out of Pruitt-Igoe," she says. "I know they did. But I don't think they outweighed the good."

Another early Pruitt-Igoe tenant in the film, Valerie Sills, remembers as a little girl moving into Pruitt-Igoe when it was ablaze with Christmas lights. Then she describes

returning to the project as a policewoman when enraged residents dropped homemade firebombs on her car.

“There is enough blame to go around,” she concludes. But “I can see it,” she insists, meaning the Pruitt-Igoe of her childhood. “I remember dancing in the street, I remember riding my bike, I remember we raced up and down the hills. It was our *home*.”

Ms. Sills pauses and starts to weep. I think of Ms. Davis, staring at the Hudson from Penn South. “When I feel bad, I don’t intend to, but I dream about Pruitt-Igoe,” Ms. Sills says.

“And I always see myself standing at the window, looking out the window.”

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/film/the_pruitt-igoe_myth_freidrichs



THE FILM FILE

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth

(director: Chad Freidrichs; 2012)

by Michael Sragow

This devastating documentary, about the St. Louis high-rise public-housing development that went from Great Urban Hope to international disgrace, is an engulfing real-life horror story as well as a testimony to the dominance of the image in American public discourse. The pictures of the thirty-three Pruitt-Igoe buildings imploding during a planned demolition in 1972 have often been used to assert how government subsidies for the urban poor have failed. But the director, Chad Freidrichs, employs evocative archival footage and incisive firsthand reportage to brush away the clichéd and often prejudiced conventional wisdom that puts the blame for the project's demise on its black residents. He lucidly and tenaciously chronicles how government and business reinforced de-facto segregation and did nothing to stop the collapse of the metropolitan job base, and shows that, once Pruitt-Igoe was up and running, there was little public money available to maintain it. Along with this exposé of hopeless botches and compromises, the movie contains surprising recollections of a brief paradise lost. The photographs of the brand-new Pruitt-Igoe buildings (they opened in 1954) sting with an electric poignancy; we learn that the residents viewed them as wondrous havens before they went horribly awry.

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2012/01/20/movies/the-pruitt-igoe-myth-by-chad-freidrichs-review.html?scp=1&sq=pruitt-igoe&st=cse>

The New York Times

MOVIE REVIEW

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth

A Renewal of Urban History

By RACHEL SALTZ

Published: January 19, 2012

“The Pruitt-Igoe Myth” tells the story of a public housing project in St. Louis that opened in the mid-1950s, part of the postwar dream of replacing slum apartments with modern, affordable high-rises. By the 1970s Pruitt-Igoe was in such disrepair that it was torn down, the demolition was televised, and a myth was born: public housing was a disaster, an example of government overreaching. The architect Charles Jencks even called the project’s demise the death of Modern architecture.

Focused and unfussy, “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth,” directed by Chad Freidrichs, is the documentary as essay, and it has a stated purpose: to unpack the myth. The film puts Pruitt-Igoe’s history in the broader context of American cities after World War II, as they lost jobs and population — especially white residents — with the growth of the suburbs. And it shows how projects like Pruitt-Igoe were built, then left to struggle in declining cities with shrinking tax bases.

At Pruitt-Igoe maintenance was always a problem. Rent was meant to cover upkeep, but couldn’t, and rents rose even as living conditions became untenable, and vandalism and crime rampant.

This history is too recent to seem dry, and the film gets an added emotional punch from interviews with former tenants, whose memories mix fondness with anger and loss. They talk about community, the thrill of being the first occupants of apartments with views (one woman calls hers a “poor man’s penthouse”) and of living in a place that quickly became a symbol of failure.

A version of this review appeared in print on January 20, 2012, on page C10 of the New York edition.



Public Disgrace

The horrors of a St. Louis housing project in *Pruitt-Igoe*
By Ernest Hardy Wednesday, Jan 18 2012

There's a broodingly meditative tone to Chad Freidrichs's *Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, a film whose deceptively simple, by-the-books documentary template serves dual purposes. Freidrichs's main goal, which is fully realized, is the painstaking illustration of how racism, classism, and government serving the interests of big business all shaped the now-myth-like horrors of St. Louis's notorious Pruitt-Igoe housing project. The massive complex, which at one time housed roughly 12,000 people in 33 buildings, was launched with much fanfare in the mid 1950s and touted as a solution to the city's many crime-ridden slums. It was demolished with even more fanfare in 1972 after being allowed to slide from a state-of-the-art planned community to a hellhole of violence and despair.

Right-wing politicians gloated that the failed undertaking was proof of the folly of the welfare state. But, as Freidrichs notes in voiceover, "Little was said about the laws that built and maintained [the housing project], about the economy that deserted it, about the segregation that stripped away opportunity, or about the radically changing city in which it stood."

Freidrichs details all of that and more. Nothing revealed in the film is really new, though seeing it all carefully laid out onscreen through talking heads (social scientists, journalists, former residents of Pruitt-Igoe) is maddening; old news and archival footage of the project is riveting. What gives the film its human dimension are the conflicting memories of former residents. One middle-age woman tearfully says that the early years of the building, when it was meticulously maintained by both residents and hired caretakers, were the best years of her life. But another former resident, his face still deeply pained more than two decades after his brother was shot and killed in cold blood in the same projects, says that moving there completely destroyed his family. Freidrichs's acknowledgment of both realities underscores the complexities behind the myths and facts of Pruitt-Igoe. Given the ongoing shredding of the social safety net in America, the film's greatest service might be to remind us that programs and services for the poor have always had hostile enemies. Today's assaults are nothing new.



American public housing

Why the Pruitt-Igoe housing project failed

Oct 15th 2011, 18:24 by J.S. | NEW YORK

THE filmmakers behind “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth” confronted a formidable task: to strip away the layers of a narrative so familiar that even they themselves believed it when they first set out to make their documentary. Erected in St Louis, Missouri, in the early 1950s, at a time of postwar prosperity and optimism, the massive Pruitt-Igoe housing project soon became a notorious symbol of failed public policy and architectural hubris, its 33 towers razed a mere two decades later. Such symbolism found its most immediate expression in the iconic image of an imploding building, the first of Pruitt-Igoe’s towers to be demolished in 1972 (it was featured in the cult film *Koyaanisqatsi*, with Philip Glass’s score murmuring in the background). The spectacle was as powerful politically as it was visually, locating the failure of Pruitt-Igoe within the buildings themselves—in their design and in their mission.

The scale of the project made it conspicuous from the get-go: 33 buildings, 11-storeys each, arranged across a sprawling, 57 acres in the poor DeSoto-Carr neighbourhood on the north side of St Louis. The complex was supposed to put the modernist ideals of Le Corbusier into action; at the time, *Architectural Forum* ran a story praising the plan to replace “ramshackle houses jammed with people—and rats” in the city’s downtown with “vertical neighbourhoods for poor people.” The main architect was Minoru Yamasaki, who would go on to design another monument to modernism that would also be destroyed, but for very different reasons, and under very different circumstances: his World Trade Centre went up in the early 1970s, right around the time that Pruitt-Igoe was pulled down.

The promise of Pruitt-Igoe’s early years was swiftly overtaken by a grim reality. Occupancy peaked at 91% in 1957, and from there began its precipitous decline. By the late 1960s the buildings had been denuded of its residents, the number of windows broken to the point where it was possible to see straight through to the other side. The residents that remained had to act tough for the chance to come and go unmolested. Critics of modernist architecture were quick to seize on the design of the buildings, arguing that such forward-thinking features as skip-stop elevators, which stopped only at the first, fourth, seventh and tenth floors, were wholly unsuitable and ultimately dangerous. Designed to encourage residents to mingle in the long galleries and staircases, the elevators instead created perfect opportunities for muggings. Charles Jencks, an architectural theorist, declared July 15th 1972, when Pruitt-Igoe was “given the final coup de grâce by dynamite”, the day that “Modern Architecture died”.

Directed by Chad Freidrichs and currently travelling the American film-festival circuit, “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth” complicates that picture by considering the larger context. The city of St Louis was undergoing its own postwar transformations, to which a project such as Pruitt-Igoe was particularly vulnerable. The city’s industrial base was moving elsewhere, as were its residents:

over a short period of 30 years, the population of St Louis had shrivelled to a mere 50% of its postwar highs. The Housing Act of 1949 encouraged contradictory policies, offering incentives for urban renewal projects as well as subsidies for moving to the suburbs. Federal money flowed into the construction of the projects, but the maintenance fees were to come from the tenants' rents; the declining occupancy rate set off a vicious circle, and money that was dearly needed for safety and upkeep simply wasn't there.

Abstract policy decisions and large-scale economic changes are difficult to render compelling, no matter the medium, but this documentary succeeds in finding the drama. Original footage from Pruitt-Igoe's early days, including a promotional reel replete with a buoyant, 1950s-era voiceover and cheerful primary colours, runs up against desolate photographs of the project's decline. The film also features interviews with several former residents of Pruitt-Igoe, who convey their hopefulness when they first moved in, as well as an affection for the buildings that for many of them persists to this day.

In their eagerness to challenge the Pruitt-Igoe myth, the filmmakers verge on suggesting that the design of the buildings had nothing at all to do with the failure that ensued. But critics of High Modernism can point to the counter-example of Carr Square Village, a low-rise housing project built in 1942 across the street, which didn't suffer from Pruitt-Igoe's escalating rates of vacancy and crime. Clearly many factors—economic, demographic, political and, arguably, architectural—converged on Pruitt-Igoe.

"The Pruitt-Igoe Myth" owes much to earlier academic work that exposed the seams in the dominant consensus. This eight-page paper by Katharine Bristol, published in the *Journal of Architectural Education* in 1991, offers more analytical rigour than could be captured in an 84-minute film. The difference, of course, is that the documentary carries a more visceral punch, which gives it the potential to reach the kind of wider audience that Ms Bristol's 20-year-old scholarly paper never had. In order to unseat a powerful narrative about the failure of modern architecture and public housing, the filmmakers have offered a powerful narrative of their own.

http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/content_display/reviews/specialty-releases/e3icdc2669e8e3720c4ed5c9ec876c9bcc4



Film Review: The Pruitt-Igoe Myth

Deeply impressive and disturbing exposé of what went terribly wrong with one hopeful post-War American housing experience.

Jan 19, 2012

-By David Noh

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth starts with footage of the explosive destruction of the titular housing project, designed by Minoru Yamasaki (who also did the very differently demolished World Trade Center), the first such in St. Louis. The reasons for this mass architectural detonation provide the basis for a compelling documentary, directed and co-written by Chad Freidrichs.

Opened in 1954, the project presented what seemed a beneficent antidote to the shoddy housing provided for lower-income African-Americans. Interviews with reminiscing original inhabitants have them calling it wonderful, a “poor man’s paradise.” But by the 1960s, the local housing authority, supposedly cash-strapped, cut back on maintenance, and things swiftly deteriorated into a miasma of open garbage, severe leaks, lack of heating, and other woes. This led to a 1969 rent strike, the first in the history of public housing, but which changed nothing. What once had been a safe environment for kids to play in devolved, as the amount of crime and violence which arose had certain inhabitants even ashamed to claim they came from Pruitt-Igoe.

Freidrich has done deeply impressive work to explore this still-nagging problem, using interviews and archival reconstructions. What emerges as a major factor here are the urban policies, which emphasized an environment of segregation that encouraged whites to flee the city, with the declining population (some 60% in St. Louis alone) contributing to revenue loss and widespread poverty. Archival footage reveals racist hatred being spewed by St. Louis natives wanting to live in exclusively white neighborhoods. The deeper psychological effects of the hell which Pruitt-Igoe became remain vivid with its residents, particularly one man who recalls seeing his brother killed in a hallway, with his mother desperately attempting to save his fast-ebbing life.

For all the horror they experienced, however, some former inhabitants still look wistfully at the overgrown, vacant lot where the project once stood, and their happy memories—of Christmas and communal dancing to Martha and the Vandellas on the radio—stand as a bittersweet testament to yet another destroyed American dream.