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PRUITT-IGOE  
Facts and Memories of an American Ruin

Georg Simmel, writing on ruins, grants nature a monopoly on the business of ruination. He pits the constructive spirit of the human will against the “brute, downward-dragging, corroding, crumbling power of nature,”\(^1\) locating the ruin at the equilibrium-point where “what was raised by the spirit becomes the object of the same forces which form the contour of the mountain and the banks of the river.”\(^2\) While nature is no doubt history’s most prolific ruiner, Simmel forgets the human spirit’s reflexive role in destroying its own work. Sometimes a ruin is not a standoff between man and nature but between man and man, a conflict of spirit against spirit, and a staging point for competition over the material and semiotic domination of an environment. Because of this, it is possible to speak not only of the aesthetics of a ruin but of its epistemologies and politics as well. Such ruins challenge the unitary notion of a constructivist urge in mankind; they exhibit the perpetual dialectic between thesis and antithesis which drives human life forwards.

One such ruin which figures heavily in the American imagination of modernity, urbanity, and community is the vanished housing project Pruitt-Igoe, built in St. Louis in the early 1950s and now no more than a messy plot of trees with an electrical substation. Pruitt-Igoe was a fairly standard product of the postwar period of American social planning and urban renewal, designed in a High Modernist style and one of hundreds of redevelopments across the country aimed at counteracting the emptying-out and immiseration of city centers. Before long, though, Pruitt-Igoe became a living ruin, turned rotten and desperate due to the decay and hopelessness of the society inhabiting it. As occupancy plummeted and the buildings developed the scars of underclass anger and
racist neglect, the project became an icon of the physical and moral blight of the American metropolis. Pruitt-Igoe’s ruination was carried to its endpoint by the city itself in the early 1970s, when the housing authorities chose to raze their own project rather than pursue a fruitless rehabilitation. In a stunning act of destructive power, the towers were imploded less than two decades after they were built. That shocking image became the material for an ideological battle waged over the function of public architecture and the utility of expert rationality amongst the texture of urban experience. Thus, through all its phases of ruination, Pruitt-Igoe has been a kind of document, first in bricks and blueprints, then in graffiti lines and trash heaps, and finally in films and essays, of the different ways of imagining, executing, and then remembering Modernist ideals. It calls out through history to signify “the past that could have been and the future that never took place.” It is an archetypal American ruin.

The etymology of the English ‘ruin’ lies in the Latin *ruere*, meaning to fall. Every building in existence is in the slow process of falling, only some perform their falls more obviously. We may thus say that ‘ruin’ is not a classificatory state but a dimensional quantity: it is not that some buildings are ruins and other buildings are not, but rather that all buildings display their ruination in different degrees. Falling, of course, is a motion which is bound together with the language of failure. Make falling proper-definite and it becomes The Fall, when man turned away from innocence and discovered sin; use falling in history and it becomes the demise of empires and ideas, the fall of Rome or the fall of feudalism. The ruined building is thus the evidence of a failure—sometimes a failure of pylons or of a concrete mixture, but just as often a failure of ideology or a drying-up of human vitality. Then again, we also *fall* in love. So too are ruins an object of beauty and passion, surrounded by a “holy charmed circle,” in Simmel’s words. We apprehend ruins with a feeling that is “not merely intellectual but also sensual.” And, just as falling in love famously strips away logic, the mystery of the fallen ruin creates a
place where ideological polemics can be played out—pageants of nostalgic obsession or disgust.

In 1947, Le Corbusier published *The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning*, the now-famous explanation of his plans for a rationalized urban scheme with high-rise housing units scattered amongst vast green areas. In the story of Pruitt-Igoe, Le Corbusier’s ideas, along with those of other members of the *Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne*, play the role of the ‘upward spirit.’ These ideas constitute the raw stock of spiritual will which compelled 33 slab towers to materialize and rise above the slums just outside of downtown St. Louis. Thinkers and artists of Le Corbusier’s school believed that by simplifying and systematizing the physical layout of cities, their social and community layouts could also be rationalized and improved. It was a movement not so much about rectilinear, functional buildings as it was about the rectilinear, functional societies that would be produced by them—societies where the new man of the millenium would live healthily and decently. The utopian world proffered by the Modernist ideal was charged with imaginative potential, and those who partook in its secular apostolicism became convinced that they could rebuild cities in the form of a well-calibrated but humane machine.

Before the upward spirit of Modernism could reify itself in pavement and concrete, though, it had to legitimate itself as a viable ideal. Beginning in the 1940s, the United States underwent two crucial developments that laid the groundwork for urban rationalizing projects. First, the demographic oscillations caused by the end of the Second World War, the opening up of new suburban developments and highways, and African-American in-migration saddled most of the nation’s cities with major cases of urban decay. As middle-class whites fled the inner city and the prewar housing stock fell into disrepair and uninhabitability, impoverished ghettos began to appear and then grow. At first the slum problem had no racial boundaries, but as time wore on urban blight took
on an increasingly racial dimension. Before long, the physical shattering of the city led to
an even more important spiritual shattering: those who lived in cities no longer cared for
them, and those who lived elsewhere feared and detested them.

Second, the increasing power of administrative apparatuses developed during the
New Deal meant that social scientists, urban planners, and other design professionals
began to occupy a new role as technocratic guardians of the public good. A technocracy,
in which experts with privileged access to scientific information about society, is in many
ways the iconic power structure of the first half of the twentieth century. Max Weber
famously suggested that bureaucracy was the axiomatic consequence of modernization. It
was one of a few points where Communist, socialist, and capitalist ideologies came into
convergence; each group agreed that expert knowledge and rational planning was a
necessary fuel for the generation of “progress.” Whether they took the form of French
administrative officers in North Africa or Soviet production commissars, technocratic
operations were always chained to aspirational values of social harmony and
improvement. By 1945, the United States had a Social Security Board, an Agricultural
Adjustment Authority, and Federal Housing Administration, and other bureaucratic
organs dedicated to improving and streamlining society. The nation’s political faith in the
gospel of technocracy was at its high-water mark.

This combination was fertile ground for the ideology of the Modernist movement.
The desperation of the cities perfectly mirrored in negative the transformative promises of
rational administration. Thus, when the city of St. Louis received money from the 1949
Housing Act to improve living conditions in their blighted downtown by building 5,800
public housing units, they embraced the Modernist vocabulary of urban improvement
almost without question. Joseph Darst, elected mayor in 1949, was a member of the “new
breed of big-city mayors” who believed city centers demanded immediate and massive
public interventions. The essence of this ideology is concentrated into the very name of
the city’s urban renewal bureaucracy, the Land Clearance and Redevelopment Authority. The existing urban environment, which had grown organically and idiosyncratically since the rise of industrialization around the Civil War, was so utterly rotten, and, more importantly, so utterly out of line with ideas about progressive rationality, that messy communities had to be \textit{cleared} and then \textit{redeveloped} from scratch. The name indicates not only the physical clearing which was approved on a vast scale by urban authorities, but also the cathartic epistemological clearing which it enabled. With an infusion of new money, new buildings, and, crucially, a new spirit, the city could perform a phoenix-like sleight-of-hand. It could eviscerate and thus forget its blighted past at the same time that it constructed its future.

The St. Louis Housing Authority decided to allocate 2,700 of the public housing units from the federal grant package to a 57-acre site located at the center of the black ghetto on the city’s north side. An officer from the federal Public Housing Authority decided that the project would consist of 33 eleven-story buildings occupying a superblock carved from the structure of the existing neighborhood.\footnote{The entire redevelopment, named after the black fighter pilot Wendell Pruitt and Congressman William Igoe, was to be executed in the perfect Modernist mode: new, clean, and mass-produced housing blocks set within open space would liberate the poor from the mean, decrepit life endemic to the broken-down slum neighborhoods.} The entire redevelopment, named after the black fighter pilot Wendell Pruitt and Congressman William Igoe, was to be executed in the perfect Modernist mode: new, clean, and mass-produced housing blocks set within open space would liberate the poor from the mean, decrepit life endemic to the broken-down slum neighborhoods.

There is no evidence to indict the architecture team, led by Minoru Yamasaki, of any malfeasance in the project. Quite the opposite: by every indication, the architects produced a design which combined the contemporary innovations of the design community with creative applications individualized to the site. The budget for the project was quite tight, and so the designers were forced to compromise on a number of issues—a reminder that every built structure, especially public ones, is a bricolage of the various intellectual, political, economic, and design forces which animated it. Yamasaki tried to
mitigate the budgetary concessions with new techniques for fabricating urban community. Skip-stop elevators combined with galleries were intended to create a sense of neighborhood in the large, undifferentiated complex. The 1956 review of Pruitt-Igoe in *Architectural Record* commended the design for its focus on “communities with individual scale and character which would avoid the ‘project’ atmosphere so often criticized.”

One has only to look at the cheerleading publications produced by the city to comprehend the humanistic—and indeed artistic—spirit under which they articulated this rationality. The annual reports of the St. Louis Housing Authority are beautifully rendered documents, full of photographs of families at play and work, colorful illustrations of utopian cities, and lusty quotes set in Modernist sans-serif typefaces. They are textual memorials to the kind of aspirational vitality which invigorated (and also indoctrinated) the agents of urban change at midcentury. In the 1959 report, a full spread under the title “Oliver Wendell Pruitt Homes: Community Activities” shows photos of children milling about a playground, three girls sewing in a classroom, and a troop of Boy Scouts on parade, all framed by the crisp rectilinear austerity of the towers. Elsewhere, a line drawing of the wind blowing factory smoke away from a blooming sunflower appears between two photographs of Pruitt-Igoe.10 The back cover of the 1963 report bears a photograph of an integrated youth baseball team with the banner “PROGRESS means happiness for the citizens of the community.” Inside, the report details the transformation of St. Louis from ramshackle slums to “pleasant, well tended homes and safe play grounds” through the simultaneous deployment of Modernist redevelopment and intense social-service programs.11

Still, there was no getting around the fact that Pruitt-Igoe was communal housing, and cheaply-produced communal housing at that. Here the building—along with the ideology it metonymically represented—encountered its first stumbling block. If the
communal apartment can be called a “a metaphor of the distinctive Soviet mentality,” it is possible to say that the ranch home or the suburban cul-de-sac is a metaphor of the distinctive American one. Americans have long been under the sway of an overriding mythological attachment to the single-family home and its attendant ideal of property ownership. Partly this is due to the cultural belief that Americans are a frontier people and partly it is due to economic, social, and political conditions which have long encouraged detached homeownership. But it was not just a material reality. The concept of owning a home on its own piece of land took on an aspirational and ideational supersignificance in the values of postwar American life. American Modernists and social reformers could not overcome the perception that public housing was a kind of “microcosm of the socialist city,” as indeed it was in Russia. At a time when socialism and its entire orbit of aesthetic figurations served as a public hate object in American life, it was doubly difficult to wedge public housing into the system of American values.

It was not long after Pruitt-Igoe was completed that its ruination began. When Pruitt-Igoe was first planned and built, experts agreed that St. Louis badly needed more housing to rejuvenate its economy. By 1960, however, so many middle-class whites had left the city that there was now a large surplus of housing, creating a demand gap which led to “deterioration, devaluation, red-lining, speculation, and finally demolition” all throughout the city. The original scheme to house blacks in Pruitt and whites in Igoe was soon overturned by a desegregation order, and, instead of integrating, the whites simply left, leaving the entire complex a racially-homogenous ghetto. Economic forces that extended beyond Pruitt-Igoe’s boundaries and indeed far beyond St. Louis pinioned the housing development at the center of a reflexive cycle of impoverishment and ill-use. Before long, the complex became “the dumping ground for all the people nobody wanted in other projects around the city.”
The sociologist Lee Rainwater chose Pruitt-Igoe as the location of his study *Behind Ghetto Walls*, which documents the life of residents there from 1963 to 1966. During that time, the complex had only 74% occupancy; there were 2.5 times as many women living there as men, and 70% of its children were under twelve. By this point, the conditions had become scandalous. Residents complained about atrocious physical conditions, such as piles of trash, mice, cockroaches, and elevators that perpetually smelled of urine. Ironically, many residents found the skip-stop elevators and galleries which the architects had designed to create community cohesion were in fact dangerous, unused places. In 1965, an alarmed *Architectural Forum* noted that “the undersized elevators are brutally battered ... the galleries are anything but cheerful social enclaves.”

It was the way people lived in these spaces, however, that concerned Rainwater the most. Residents complained of fights, drug use, vandalism, and theft. Again and again they spoke of feeling unsafe and of perpetual defense against their neighbors. The community had broken down and turned on itself. People had been defamiliarized from traditional residence patterns and kinship structures in a way that did not produce a critical appreciation of modernity but rather a pathological vacuum occupying modernity’s remainder. The elements which make a city socially habitable—neighborhood tribalism, ontologies of belonging, idiosyncratic microtextures of travel and behavior—had undergone a malign inversion in these vertical cities, becoming mutual suspicion and spatial negligence.

The technocrats, however, had not given up on Pruitt-Igoe quite yet. In the early sixties, a Joint Task Force between the Public Housing Administration and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was set up to resuscitate “community planning for concerted services in public housing.” The 1965 annual report of the St. Louis housing authority crowed “Pruitt-Igoe—the past becomes prelude,” and laid out a program of simultaneous spatial and social reordering that included new lighting,
community centers, landscaping, and picnic areas, all “tied to intensified social services.”

The page is splashed with pictures of a community hearing, a young girl on the street, an artist’s rendering of a new play area, and, finally, the everpresent image of a group of children playing in front of one of the giant housing units. The Modernist spirit was still trying to keep its symbolic structure coherent, to reaffirm the faith in a progressive world that would materialize given enough enlightened spatial-social planning. But it was locked in combat with a countervailing force—not nature, as in Simmel’s essay, but other people. Thus Pruitt-Igoe became an inhabited ruin, balanced in equilibrium between the Panoptic utopianism of upwards-lifting Modernism and the frenetic decay of a downwards-dragging broken society.

By the beginning of the 1970s, however, the authorities decided that the city could no longer continue throwing more planning, more ideas, and, most importantly, more money at keeping Pruitt-Igoe out of ruination. The project had become a national embarrassment and a pawn in the fight over federal public housing grants. On March 16, 1972, three buildings were exploded in a test demolition. The remainder followed, and the entire project was extinguished by 1976. It was an act of sheer destructive nihilism. The city left the land fallow, and today the site hosts a vast tangle of plants, a literal urban jungle where entropy finally exercises its untrammeled chaos.

In 1977, Charles Jencks published the first edition of *The New Paradigm in Architecture*, one of the foundational texts of the postmodern architectural movement. It begins with a photograph of Pruitt-Igoe collapsing. The copy follows:

Happily, it is possible to date the death of Modern Architecture to a precise moment in time. ... Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 pm (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grâce by dynamite. ... Without a doubt, the ruins should be kept, the remains should have a preservation order slapped on them, so that we keep a live memory of this failure in planning and architecture. Like the folly or the artificial ruin—constructed on the estate of
an eighteenth-century English eccentric to provide him with instructive reminders
of former vanities and glories—we should learn to value and protect our former
disasters.\textsuperscript{22}

It was the beginning of Pruitt-Igoe’s conversion into a ruined memory. In the years that
followed, Pruitt-Igoe became the leitmotif for every manner of assault on the Le Corbusier
tradition of Modernist urbanity at Jencks’s suggestion. The towers were not made stand in
for only for a particular aesthetic style, either: postmodernists used the haunting ruin of
Pruitt-Igoe to bludgeon an entire worldview, to discredit and defame the complex of
rationalist assumptions which made projects like Pruitt-Igoe possible. As it bored deeper
into the lexicon of architectural theory, the Pruitt-Igoe image lost connection with the
project’s actual history; it ceded its materiality to become a metareferential
mythologization.

Much of Pruitt-Igoe’s polemical power derived from its sudden fall from standing
ruin to vanished ruin. In both the high drama of its destruction and in the plot arc of its
history, Pruitt-Igoe concatenated together the fragility of totalizing urban systematics and
the almost unlimited destructive capacity of modernity. The demolition of the buildings
was caught in photographs and on film, where Pruitt-Igoe acquired yet another layer of
interpretive potentiality. In the 1982 film \textit{Koyaanisqatsi} (a rough translation of the Hopi
word for “life out of balance”), Godfrey Reggio and Ron Fricke made Pruitt-Igoe one of
the keystone vignettes. Accompanied by a music piece by the same name composed by
Phillip Glass, the “Pruitt Igoe” sequence of \textit{Koyaanisqatsi} begins panning through the
corridors of the financial quarters of New York City. It abruptly cuts to the burnt-out
brick buildings of an older industrial city, with rubble and decay everywhere—exactly the
kind of neighborhood that Pruitt-Igoe was designed to replace. Residents of the slum sit
idly on the street corner, and children play in oily puddle amongst trash heaps. All at
once, the view is of a newer slum: Pruitt-Igoe after all its residents had been evacuated.
Streetlights hang from their mountings. Windows are shattered. A playground lies unused.
As the music turns more dramatic, the camera begins flying amongst the Pruitt-Igoe complex, which often fills the picture from edge to edge. It is a heady and quite beautiful image. Rows of massive towers, perfectly square to each other, sit placidly and perfectly on lawns and pavement. As the camera gets closer to the towers, it becomes apparent that they are empty hulks—denatured façades of modernity. The hollowed-out windows of one tower allow a view clear through to the tower behind it. A many-pronged evisceration has taken place here: an evisceration of buildings, of social units, of urban hopes, and of thwarted ideologies. The music climaxes as the buildings are detonated from beneath, hobble momentarily, jellify, and then disappear into smoke.23

*Koyaanisqatsi* is a film which problematizes the nature of technological progress; as such, the Pruitt-Igoe scene can be understood according to the Jencks conception, an iconic moment where Modernist rationality and scientific progress failed spectacularly. And yet, in the fleeting seconds before the destructive moment which vaporizes Pruitt-Igoe, it is possible to isolate a sense of deep reverence, of proud nostalgia, and of genuine beauty. For there is something noble, and also something heartbreaking, about Pruitt-Igoe. It was the result of a great deal of humanistic and enlightened goodwill. One wants to believe that the utopian drawings shown in the housing authority’s annual reports are tenable. But those drawings are fabrications; the films of the decrepit project are real. Thus the ruin-as-failure and the ruin-as-unrealized-possibility proceed forward in dialectical lockstep, forcing a negotiation of values between the upward-lifting and downward-dragging elements of human nature itself.

Indeed, much of the debate over Pruitt-Igoe is a proxy debate over the nature and condition of cities, both in their immediate physical conditions and in the ways we apprehend and comprehend them as inhabitants and practitioners. When Jencks enlisted the destruction of the towers as a weapon, he did so under the banner of the informatics and epistemes native to late-twentieth century virtuality and interconnectedness. “With
the triumph of consumer society in the West and, for seventy years, bureaucratic State
capitalism in the East, our unfortunate Modern architect was left without much uplifting
social content to champion,” he wrote, and, in doing so, revealed the essentially political
and positional aspect of this particular urban argument. On the inverse side, writers like
Bristol suggest that such arguments subtly aggrandize the structuring role of the designer
by attributing all of St. Louis’s urban difficulties to the layout of a few towers. “The
architectural design was but one, and probably the least important, of several factors in
the demise of the project,” she notes. “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.” The interpretation and meaning of Pruitt-Igoe does not exist as a fact on its
own; it has no value in and of itself. Rather, it is activated within a matrix of ideals
principally defined by how we remember and re-evaluate midcentury Modernism.

Simmel recognized the necessary past-ness of the ruin, calling it “the site of life
from which life has departed.” Indeed, there is something inherently inaccessible ruin,
something which is irredeemably occulted behind a temporal veil. At the same time, the
ruin is an interface where that past rejoins the actuality of its present observer. “The
ruin,” he said, “creates the present form of a past life.” This sense of temporality is
crucial to understand the ruin; like the off-modern gaze, the ruin “acknowledges the
disharmony and the contrapuntal relationship between human, historical, and natural
temporalities.” The story of Pruitt-Igoe, which begins as a historical account, transfers
at the point of ruination into a point where historical sentimentality, political polemic,
and the epistemologies of urbanity are bound and cross-indexed. It is a story of an
American ruin in fact and in memory, where questions about the legacy of Modernism
were and are carried out.
References


2 Ibid., 262.


4 Simmel, 265.

5 Boym, 44.


9 “Four Vast Housing Projects for St. Louis,” Architectural Record 120 (August 1956), 185.

10 Housing Authority and Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority of St. Louis, “St. Louis Reports, 1959.”


13 Ibid., 127.

14 Mary C Comerio, “Pruitt Igoe and Other Stories,” JAE 34, no. 4 (Summer 1981), 26–27.

15 Ibid., 27.


18 Ibid., 9–11.

19 Ibid., 9.

20 St. Louis Housing and Clearance Authorities, “The Year ’65.”

21 Bristol, 166.


24 Jencks, 24.


26 Simmel, 265.