Icons of Ruin and Those Who Worship Them

The Visual Memory of Pruitt-Igoe

Alexander Pines
Columbia University
Department of American Studies
Advisor: Lynne Breslin
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Thank you to Lynne Breslin for her advice and support throughout the project, Professor Maura Spiegel for her notes on the first draft, Kitty Chibnik at Avery Library and the staff at Harvard's Frances Loeb Library for research assistance. Image credit on front page: Betteman/Corbis.

Introduction

At the corner of Cass Avenue and Jefferson Street near the north side of St. Louis stands thirty-three acres of overgrown brush and trees. Unlike Forest Park to the east in a wealthier section of the city, the wooded site is disorderly and unplanned. The city has not designated it as an official park and the rows of trees and bushes are feebly tamed by a chain-link fence to keep the sidewalk more or less clear. The area was once the site of thirty-three, eleven-story buildings constructed in a Modernist slab-style by Minoru Yamasaki, who would later design the World Trade Center in New York City. Together these buildings comprised the Wendell Pruitt and William Igoe Homes, a public housing project first occupied in 1954.

More than forty years after Pruitt-Igoe's demolition, the one-story, pale yellow brick electronic substation is still in use, down a dirt path that opens onto Cass Avenue. The entrance is unmarked and across the street from Grace Baptist Church, a squat white building simply adorned with a crucifix resting below the gently peaked roof and a pair of rust-colored doors. This section of the street is largely empty, with vacant lots poking holes in the otherwise flat landscape. St. Louis is a driving city, its arteries formed by a number of highways—few, if any, pedestrians pass through the neighborhood. A half demolished building sits east of the church, the brick façade standing guard over the caved-in roof and piles of wood and concrete. Glass from the windows, some of which are boarded up, has long ago been smashed into powder that dusts the sidewalk. Next to the rubble is the former social services center for Pruitt-Igoe, a two-story brick building with white molding bordering a roof that would look stately had it not been subjected to decades of weather damage. The siding has either fallen or been picked off and the west-facing façade is white with a thick purple cross painted over the drywall.

Venturing into the undeveloped woods yields evidence of the site's past. A light post rises

over the slower-growing trees, bulb long gone, with the casing perilously dangling over the brush. The lamp can be seen from various clearings throughout the site—former green space for the tenants—and serves as a reminder that this otherwise abandoned space housed, at one point, more than 2,600 occupied residential units.

The site is riddled with these architectural ghosts: the concrete stub of a curb grown over with plant rot, small piles of bricks, and a narrow access road with cracked pavement mixed with patches of grass that bisects the impromptu forest.

If not for these trace remains of modern civilization—piles of trash, the pavement peeking through thick patches of weeds—it would be easy to forget that this is a place where people, at most around 12,000 of them, lived. The housing project's location on the near north side of St. Louis placed it relatively close to downtown and the famous Gateway Arch (after which a neighboring middle and elementary school are named), a memorial built after World War II to re-energize riverfront businesses and commemorate westward expansion, hovers in the distance. The ghost of progress looking down at the abandoned remains of a failed dream.

Pruitt-Igoe received national attention upon its demolition in 1972 and coverage of the implosion was as widespread as the New York *Times* and *LIFE* Magazine. Footage of the April 21, 1972 implosion was broadcast on the news and much of Pruitt-Igoe's current legacy can be attributed to the potency of that image—the first massive housing project in the United States come crashing disastrously down.[1] Today, the most widely reproduced image of Pruitt-Igoe is of that demolition: it illustrates articles in *The Guardian*, The American Institute of Architects, adorns the cover of the 2011 documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, think pieces on Thought Catalog, as well as scholarly articles on

1 According to a New York *Times* timeline, Pruitt-Igoe was the first significant demolition of a public housing project and marked the end of construction of high-rise towers. See http://partners.nytimes.com/library/national/public-housing-timeline.html.

Figure 1. The April 21, 1972 demolition image that appeared in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*.

the housing project in books like architect William G. Ramroth's *Planning for Disaster* and Jeff Byles' *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition*, among others (fig. 1). Why is this, more than any other single image and notably devoid of any semblance of human life, the one that has endured? What does it say about the ways in which Pruitt-Igoe has been remembered? What interests does this particular image—and the narrative contained within—serve?

In *Camera Lucida*, a meditation on photography, Roland Barthes writes, "This fatality (no photograph without *something* or *someone*) involves Photography in the vast disorder of objects—of all the objects in the world, why choose (why photograph) this object, this moment, rather than some other?" (Barthes 6). What stories do the other images tell, and why have those been forgotten?

For decades after its demolition in 1972, the dominant argument, largely attributed to architectural theorists Oscar Newman and Charles Jencks, about the cause of Pruitt-Igoe's failure was that the architecture, specifically Modernism's International Style (widely critiqued by Jencks, Jane Jacobs, Robert Venturi, and others by the 1970s for being outdated), was to blame. This story is reflected in the images used to represent the housing project throughout its short life. Early praise for Pruitt-Ioge's design include images that generally depict the built environment (without its occupants, potential or actual) in service of a popular trend that saw architecture as a mechanism through which social ills could be addressed. "We must rebuild, open up and clean up the hearts of our cities. […] The fact that slums were created with all of their intrinsic evils was everybody's fault. Now it is everybody's responsibility to repair the damage," St. Louis Mayor Joe Darst said in the April 1951 *Architectural Forum* article called "Slum Surgery in St. Louis" that praised Yamasaki's initial designs for Pruitt-Igoe ("Slum Surgery in St. Louis" 130). The images represent this belief, casting the new project as a clean and shining alternative to the blighted slums they were constructed to replace,

heavily influenced by the aesthetics of Le Corbusier's Radiant City.[2]

The popularity of Modernism and living conditions in Pruitt-Igoe fell into decline in tandem, alongside the rise of a more humanist urban theory promoted by Jane Jacobs with the 1961 publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Throughout the 1960s, visual representations of Pruitt-Igoe featured tenants at odds with an increasingly hostile built environment, such as photographs of residents seemingly trapped by ice resulting from winter pipe breakages, a trend that continued until the first demolitions in early 1972. After these demolitions by implosion of several Pruitt-Igoe buildings, human subjects largely disappear—even though some towers were occupied until 1974, and many former residents gathered to witness the explosions—and these are the images that have remained in the public and intellectual consciousness through reproduction by theorists like Jencks, films, and popular media.

The seemingly innocuous deployment of these images—specifically ones of the 1972 demolitions and others that decouple the project's inhabitants from the built environment—as proof that Pruitt-Igoe failed has had the effect of proliferating the myth that architecture was the dominant cause of the project's (and, to some extent, this type of public housing in general) demise. In other words, the visual media used to illustrate the debate about Pruitt-Igoe has contributed to the masking of larger structural and social issues that impacted its inhabitants and St. Louis at large. By relying on pictures of the architecture alone, how we remember Pruitt-Igoe as a failed space demon-

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2 The Radiant City, or *Ville Radieuse*, was an architectural style and urban planning ideology that proposed to reduce ground-level living and house city populations in massive, highly geometrical high-rise towers. This would open up the grounds of the city for green space, promoting a supposedly healthier lifestyle that would, in Le Corbusier's eyes, contribute to a better society. While the Radiant City idea was highly influential throughout the Modern era of architecture, New Urbanists such as James Howard Kunstler would later critique the concept for its lack of a human scale, describing the space between buildings on some sites as "a yawning wasteland of parking" (Kunstler 263). For more information, see Le Corbusier's *The Radiant City* and Kunstler's *Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*.

strates a greater failure to address the underlying social and political causes that necessitated the buildings' destruction (and construction) in the first place.

Much has been said about the legacy of Pruitt-Igoe as a case study in poor design or discriminatory urban and social planning, and while the debate surrounding the buildings is rich and provides a number of insights into twentieth century American housing policy, little to none of this analysis has specifically examined the ways in which any facets—popular, journalistic, scholarly, etc.—of this debate have used photographic or filmic media to make and support their claims. This paper seeks to draw attention to these images in order to better understand the stories they tell and how their use in the years of discussion surrounding Pruitt-Igoe has informed our understanding of the towers. In other words, *how* we talk about Pruitt-Igoe can be just as helpful in understanding the buildings' history, from high optimism to brutal decline, as what we say *about* Pruitt-Igoe.

Finally, these demolition images, through the absence of people, represent what might be called the real tragedy of Pruitt-Igoe: it was, according to Alexander von Hoffman, built to "transform Saint Louis into a gleaming, growing, modern metropolis" that would revitalize an ailing city (von Hoffman 202). Pruitt-Igoe was meant to bring the people back, making it doubly devastating that its visual legacy is so devoid of them.

Historical and Literature Review

The funding for Pruitt-Igoe came from the 1949 Housing Act in the spirit of postwar housing reform and urban renewal, building on legislation passed in the 1930s by President Roosevelt. As described by Alexander von Hoffman's "A Study in Contradictions: The Origins and Legacy of the Housing Act of 1949," the legislation was the complex product of several reform movements at odds with each other. Title I addressed slum clearance, a process that would later be criticized by activists as a "form of class and race warefare" and colloquially known as "Negro removal" because neighborhoods populated by communities of color were often those to be razed by the government and not replaced with affordable housing (von Hoffman 318). Title III enabled the government to build just over 800,000 new low-rent public housing units over the course of six years[3] in order to meet an estimated population boost, and mandated that for each new public housing apartment built, a slum dwelling would either be rehabilitated or demolished. According to von Hoffman, however, this piece of the housing act had a "fatal flaw: a naïve reliance on physical dwellings to carry out social goals" (von Hoffman 312), representative of what Katharine Bristol would call "the Pruitt-Igoe Myth" in 1991.

Pruitt-Igoe's initial design was in many ways Modernist idealism embodied: just as form follows function, placing the low-income population of St. Louis in high-rise towers would theoretically lift them out of poverty.[4] Architect Minoru Yamasaki was inspired by the light-filled towers rising above green, open space in Le Corbusier's Radiant City designs, a sharp contrast to dark slums

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3 As von Hoffman notes, it would take the country nearly twenty years to achieve that goal.

4 This arguably also represents a misinterpretation of Le Corbusier's ideals—Radiant City designs were meant to maximize green space allowing for more recreational space, transforming society by making it more physically fit and healthy. His writings are not explicitly about transforming society along class or racial lines.

with tenement houses packed next to each other. It was constructed, according to von Hoffman's essay "Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe," as a way to bring middle- and upper-class residents back to St. Louis from the surrounding suburbs, who would presumably populate the private market once the blighted slums of St. Louis were replaced with Modernist alternatives. The massive scale—thirty-three, eleven-story buildings in total—was to accommodate optimistic projections for population growth and more safely house residents relocating from overcrowded tenement homes. "Urban experts and leaders believed that the problems of the city were essentially physical in nature," von Hoffman argues (von Hoffman 183). In other words, city planners saw the built environment—as opposed to other social, political, or economic problems—as the key issue in the city.

Expanding on St. Louis' plan to bring the population levels back up, von Hoffman notes that a city's physical aesthetic can impact quality of life: cities with areas marked by urban blight or decay are doomed to watch people leave. "Following the thinking of the City Plan commission, the *Post-Dispatch* preached that most of Saint Louis's difficulties, including the problems of unskilled and poor blacks, would be solved by destroying the slums and creating environments that would attract people of all backgrounds and wealth to the city" (von Hoffman 185). Echoing von Hoffman's claims about the 1949 Housing Act, architecture has here been enlisted in the role of social planning and salvation, a role it will continue to fill in St. Louis until it is eventually blamed for the collapse of the housing projects.

Von Hoffman presents St. Louis Mayor Joe Darst (who left office a year before Pruitt-Igoe was first occupied) as a figure infatuated with "Manhattan and its modernist monuments" inspired by Le Corbusier, and sees Pruitt-Igoe as the result of St. Louis' dreams of becoming a "Manhattan on the Mississippi" (von Hoffman 191).[5] Initially, the housing project was received with great acclaim,

5 Von Hoffman goes into detail about Mayor Darst's trips to New York City, which has also

and its designs—"skip-stop" elevators that would open every third floor onto wide "galleries" for residents to use as community spaces—were praised in *Architectural Forum*'s 1951 article "Slum Surgery in St. Louis."

The towers were first occupied in 1954 and, while Pruitt-Igoe never reached full occupancy, were initially quite popular. A 1975 article in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* calling for the towers to be brought down features an interview with a former tenant who reports that when she first moved into the project in 1955, "applicants were screened, [and] she and her husband had to produce their marriage license, his military discharge certificate, and a sheaf of other documents at the rental office" (Porter 5F). Another former tenant, interviewed in the 2011 documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, proclaimed that his new apartment was like a "poor man's penthouse," with spectacular views of downtown St. Louis and the recently constructed Gateway Arch. Admittedly, the one-time popularity of Pruitt-Igoe has been largely buried under the more widely known narratives of absolute despair, crime, and vandalism.

In a 1952 article called "High Buildings for Public Housing? A Necessity, Says Architect Minoru Yamasaki" from the *Journal of Housing*, Yamasaki argues that in many ways the design came to be as a result of budgetary constraints. "As an architect, if I had no economic or social limitations, I'd solve all my problems with one-story buildings. Imagine how pleasant it would be to always work and play in spaces overlooking lovely gardens" (Yamasaki 226). On its face, Yamasaki's yearning for

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employed the use of high-rise housing projects for its low-income inhabitants. It is likely that, in seeing the relative wealth and prosperity of Manhattan, largely under the sway of "master builder" Robert Moses, Darst believed that by emulating the design choices of New York urban planners in St. Louis he could achieve similar results. Unlike St. Louis and most other American cities, New York City's high-rise towers are still in use. For more information on Robert Moses, see Robert A. Caro's *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, and while a thorough discussion of New York City is beyond the scope of this paper, Nicholas Bloom's *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century* provides an excellent analysis of New York's relative success in building and maintaining high-rise public housing projects.

smaller structures seems to contract the ideals of Le Corbusier's high-rise Radiant City, but the end of Yamasaki's remarks reflects Le Corbusier's greater desire to provide open space or "lovely gardens" on a massive scale.

While Pruitt-Igoe was initially backed by business owners in order to quickly clear the unsightly tenement slums away from the slowly revitalizing downtown (which would in turn assist in bringing the diverse group of people Darst envisioned to the city), expensive and more popular projects like highway construction and continued slum razing chipped away at the budget for Yamasaki's initial designs (Montgomery 235). These constraints only worsened throughout the building process, meaning that a number of planned amenities such as painted concrete walls, insulation on steam pipes, outdoor landscaping, first-floor public restrooms, and more were scrapped from the finished housing project.

Initially a segregated project, Pruitt-Igoe had to be quickly integrated after a series of laws prohibiting housing discrimination passed in 1955 as a result of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which mandated desegregation. Few white families approved of integration and all eventually left Pruitt-Igoe to purchase homes in the burgeoning suburbs. Very quickly, Pruitt-Igoe became an all-black and tremendously poor housing project, subsequently falling into decline as tenant incomes could no longer fund much-needed maintenance on a massive scale. Urban historian Robert Fishman traces Pruitt-Igoe's troubles back to the 1949 Housing Act in "Rethinking Public Housing": "low-rent public housing has from its inception what I would argue was a fatal flaw. As specified in the 1937 Wagner-Steagall Housing Act and reaffirmed in the landmark 1949 Housing Act, […] the local housing authority, which owned and administered each project, was responsible for meeting all the day-to-day maintenance costs with rents paid by the tenants" (Fishman 27). In other words, in addition to the troubling implications of using architecture to address social ills, the policy that gave

birth to Pruitt-Igoe was incapable of accommodating its operating expenses. The strain of financing Pruitt-Igoe's maintenance was massive, and the cost of that maintenance was supposed to be covered by rent from its tenants. Had public housing attracted its "target" population as described by Fishman, working families with steady incomes and few children, this disparity between expenses and the inhabitants' ability to pay rent that would cover these expense might never have materialized.

Perhaps even more damning to Pruitt-Igoe's potential success, Title II of the 1949 Housing Act was an expansion of the National Housing Act of 1934, which established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) to assist in making private residential mortgages more affordable through favorable insurance policies, a piece of legislation that was, according to von Hoffman's analysis of the act, expanded throughout the 1950s and 60s in response to the supposed failure of public housing and urban renewal. "Essentially," Robert Fishman says in *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, "we had a national pro-suburban policy during the years when Pruitt-Igoe was being built." The "target" tenants, some of whom might have otherwise lived in public housing, were able, through expanded FHA loans, to buy homes in the suburbs that were less expensive than paying rent in the city. This economic incentive, in addition to the racist response to the mandated integration of Pruitt-Igoe, led the wealthier white residents to leave St. Louis for traditional suburban residences that initially had few, if any, black people. Occupancy at Pruitt-Igoe quickly dropped off after it opened and nationwide white flight from cities created vacancies in the private market where working and middle-class black families moved. According to an *Architectural Forum* article called "The Case History of a Failure," Pruitt-Igoe was nearly a third vacant by 1965: "Its buildings loom formidably over broad expanses of scrubby grass, broken glass and litter, and they contain hundreds of shattered windows," writer James Bailey reports under an intimidating photograph of the dilapidated projects (Bailey 22). Those who

remained in the housing project were often extremely poor, and subject to strict social controls[6] as a consequence of the welfare system.

The federal government pumped millions of dollars into rehabilitating Pruitt-Igoe in 1965, restoring some aspects of the original design such as first-floor bathrooms and modified elevators,[7] but despite the efforts to remodel and organizing on the part of the tenants, Pruitt-Igoe was slated for destruction in the early 1970s, fully demolished by 1976. In 1974, the last residents were relocated through Section 8 vouchers via the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a program designed to subsidize rent in the private market for eligible low-income families, often single mothers.

The debate surrounding the demise of Pruitt-Igoe largely falls into two camps: those who believed that the architecture—the built environment itself and the ideals which inspired the design—was to blame for the vandalism and crime that plagued the project starting shortly after its construction and continuing until its eventual demolition; and those, largely in response to the architecture argument, who saw the design as just one part, even an insignificant part, of a more complex failure on legislative, economic, and social levels.

Charles Jencks is most widely known (and blamed, by some) for his endorsement of the architectural argument by insisting in *The Language of Post-modern Architecture*: "Modern Architecture

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6 These controls included prohibitions against painting the cinderblock apartment walls and, more critical for family life, a ban on many men from living within the homes. One of the conditions of receiving aid from the state was that mothers with children were often not allowed to house the unmarried fathers of those children within their subsidized apartments. For more information, see Lee Rainwater's *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* and *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*.

7 The "skip-stop" elevators, which opened on every third floor, combined with the lack of first-floor restrooms and the relatively high population of young children in Pruitt-Igoe, meant that the elevators often became impromptu toilets, reeking of urine and fecal matter when children misjudged the amount of time they needed to return to their apartments.

died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts)" (Jencks 9). While Jencks was off by a few months (the demolition he references and illustrates with a photograph actually occurred on April 21 of that year), it served to introduce Jencks' larger case for a new, post-modern way of thinking about design. "Pruitt-Igoe was constructed according to the most progressive ideals of CIAM (the Congress of International Modern Architects) and it won an award from the American Institute of Architects when it was designed in 1951," Jencks writes. "Alas, such simplistic ideas, taken over from philosophic doctrines of Rationalism, Behaviorism and Pragmatism, proved as irrational as the philosophies themselves. Modern Architecture, as the son of the Enlightenment, was an heir to its congenital naiveties, naiveties too great and awe-inspiring to warrant refutation in a book on mere building" (Jencks 9-10). In keeping with a quintessentially American notion of forward progress, out with the old, in with the new. Pruitt-Igoe, as Jencks' chosen embodiment of Modernism, "was finally put out of its misery. Boom, boom, boom" (Jencks 9).

While Jencks' prose is more bombastic and perhaps more memorable, he attributes analysis of the specific design flaws and the ills they caused to Oscar Newman's 1972 book *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design*, in which Newman argues that the built environment of certain spaces makes them more or less vulnerable to the proliferation of violent crime. Pruitt-Igoe is featured as a case study of architecture gone wrong, and Newman points to specific features like the galleries, lack of a public/private divide separating building entrances from open space, and the institutional aesthetic as areas where Pruitt-Igoe became a site prone to violent crime and vandalism. Building on Lee Rainwater's lukewarmly received 1970 sociological work with Pruitt-Igoe's residents, Newman writes: "A resident who has resigned himself to not caring about the condition of his immediate surroundings—who has come to accept his ineffectualness in modifying his condition—is not about to intercede, even on his own behalf, when he becomes the victim of a criminal" (New-

man 108). Pruitt-Igoe would appear in later works by Newman, including his 1996 HUD-sponsored monograph *Creating Defensible Space*, mostly as an icon of ruin used to explain other crime-ridden physical spaces.

Defensible Space was not the first work of architectural or urban theory to see Pruitt-Igoe as a failure of design: James Bailey's 1965 *Architectural Forum* article "The Case History of a Failure" cites Pruitt-Igoe's massive size and quotes an architect dismissing the "not altogether rational craze for open space" representative of Radiant City ideals. By the 1960s and 70s, the Modern style of architecture was decidedly outdated.[8] The physical decline of Pruitt-Igoe and its increasingly ruinous image in the public eye coincided with this larger architectural shift away from Modernist thinking and design. Jane Jacobs's widely influential 1961 text *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* begins with the pronouncement that the book "is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding" (Jacobs 3). Unfortunately for Pruitt-Igoe's image, its Modernist style was no longer seen as shiny or new.

Jacobs' critique of postwar urban planning is profoundly rooted in the necessity of a strong community presence in neighborhoods. The opening chapters are adamant about the need for eyes on the street as a method of informal policing and security. "Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs," she writes. "Once a street is well equipped to handle strangers, once it has both a good, effective demarcation between private and public spaces and has a basic supply of activity and eyes, the more strangers the merrier" (Jacobs 29, 40). Urban planning was conceptually being brought down to a more human scale—a far cry from the "tower in the

8 While its critical reception among architects was mixed, many ordinary Americans would read Tom Wolfe's 1981 text *From Bauhaus to Our House*, a critique of the International Style championed by Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe, and a call for architects to be more interested in building structures people liked as opposed to being the most avant-garde.

park," where, according to Jacobs, Corbusier promised that "nobody […] was going to have to be his brother's keeper anymore" (Jacobs 22). Other texts like Robert Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas*, first published in 1972 and revised in 1977, and Peter Blake's *Form Follows Fiasco*, published in 1977, call for a rethinking of architectural theory, each book critiquing the ideals behind Modernism.

Katharine Bristol, in her 1991 article "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth," takes the architectural argument to task for obscuring other political, economic, and social problems that impacted Pruitt-Igoe. "By placing responsibility for the failure of public housing on designers, the myth shifts attention from the institutional or structural sources of public housing problems" (Bristol 163). Her essay contends that the story of Pruitt-Igoe had been repeatedly and inaccurately retold as a narrative of failed architecture, with its root in Bailey's *Architectural Forum* article (which she does credit for pointing out that the social issues present at Pruitt-Igoe at the time), cemented by Oscar Newman, Charles Jencks, and the popular media. Her argument, among others by Mary Comerio, Chris Bacon, Robert Fishman, and Alexander von Hoffman,[9] represents an attempt within the academic community to interrogate the ways in which Pruitt-Igoe's legacy has been created—and the ways in which that legacy has been shaped by arguments in service of aims beyond merely explaining the failure of Pruitt-Igoe, as Jencks does by using the housing project as a case example in his larger description of the death of Modernism.

Today, it seems to be widely accepted that architecture was just one cause, likely a small one, among many that brought Pruitt-Igoe down. This is not to say that the architectural argument is dead, however, as William Ramroth's 2007 book *Planning for Disaster* declares that "Pruit-Igoe's [*sic*] tenants fell victim to its immense size, lack of amenities, poor security, deficient maintenance, and

9 See "Pruitt Igoe and Other Stories" by Mary Comerio, *Pruitt-Igoe Revisited* by Chris Bacon, "Rethinking Public Housing" by Robert Fishman, "Why They Built Pruitt-Igoe" by Alexander von Hoffman, and "Pruitt-Igoe and the Critique of Public Housing" by Joseph Heathcott for more.

high-rise institutional appearance that branded everyone who lived in it as under-privileged, and therefore different from everyone else" (Ramroth 164). He continues to list the architectural failings, including the lack of first-floor bathrooms and skip-stop elevators, ultimately describing Pruitt-Igoe as "a tragic example of how not to build low-cost housing" (Ramroth 166). The fact that the remains of the design-as-failure argument continue to linger in the discourse surrounding Pruitt-Igoe may explain some of why the visual representation of the housing complex has exclusively, in the years since the towers were demolished, featured the built environment without images of Pruitt-Igoe tenants. This approach further dehumanizes tenants already branded as "Other" by society at large, allows interlocutors in the debate to avoid the human consequences of the theory they either champion or disparage, and refuses narratives contrary to those proposed by the likes of Jencks or Newman. The following sections of this paper will consist of an analysis of the visual iconography associated with Pruitt-Igoe throughout its short life, beginning with its design in 1951 and continuing through footage of its demolition reproduced in documentaries and films today.

Figure 2. Tenement housing in St. Louis, 1948 and 1952, from the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*.

Figure 3. Advertising materials for Pruitt-Igoe that appeared in periodicals and building journals in 1954 and 1955, via *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*'s Flickr profile.

The Early Years

To sell the residents of St. Louis on public housing, publications like the *Post-Dispatch* frequently ran images of dilapidated slum housing surrounding the inner city. Accordingly, most imagery associated with Pruitt-Igoe emphasized the architecture, presenting it in stark contrast to the dark and crowded slums it was to replace (fig. 2 and 3).

The visual of the tenement homes crowded together and general sense of decay foregrounded in the shot, coupled with the absence of people walking around, makes the space seem especially inhuman/e. The view of downtown in the distance echoes the supposed discrepancy between the progressive idea of a new, postwar America and the degraded housing situation pictured here (fig. 2). The 1952 image featuring children reinforces a motif that presents lower-income people as a kind of other. The composition and framing of the photograph, with windowpanes divided by wood frames that evoke bars, visually and physically separates these children from the viewer. There are no parents around to care for these children; their home is clearly in disrepair, and so on. Going further, the wooden bars that make up the window frame also suggests the cultural specter of the black male as criminal, echoing the ways in which low-income neighborhoods are also categorized as criminal spaces. In a 1970s newsreel featured in *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, a white resident of nearby Black Jack, Missouri, speaking about the potential for the construction of a low-income apartment complex in town, says, "They don't want to bring in, shall we say, 'trash?' Trash people? They're just, uh—well, you won't be able to walk around the neighborhood, then." Neighborhoods have the potential to be racialized, and an unfortunate consequence of that racialization is often the widespread criminalization of that neighborhood's occupants.

While images of dilapidated tenement life were used in order to show the need for higher quality housing, many of them appearing around the same time as a *Post-Dispatch* series called

"Progress or Decay? St. Louis Must Choose," the content of these images depicts the people that need this sort of housing as being fundamentally different than the average *Post-Dispatch* subscriber, further reinforcing the social and economic distinctions already in existence. Photography, in this sense, can be understood in part as a means of social control, reinforcing the status quo. Describing the rise of photography, particularly as a way to capture family life (and enforce 1950s ideals of family normativity), in *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes, "To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a 'good' picture), to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune" (Sontag 536). This statement seems inherently at odds with the use of these images to provoke social change—so while media outlets like the *Post-Dispatch* may have been running these images alongside articles calling for the betterment of these peoples' lives, the medium of photography itself, and the character of these particular images especially, continues to perpetuate the other-ing of low-income and black people in St. Louis. The photographs highlight the miserable conditions faced by their subjects, but the way in which they are highlighted serves to further marginalize these communities.[10]

Advertising and promotional materials for Pruitt-Igoe present the buildings as clean and stately in comparison to their slum counterparts (fig. 3). The exterior materials of the structure appear in black and white as sharp and bright,[11] surrounded by dark masses of older, more decayed

10 Jacob Riis' 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives* is a case study in photography used to great effect as a tool of social change, spurring on a number of legislative and social reforms to address the living conditions of New York City tenement dwellers, but it is worth noting that the vast majority of Riis' subjects are photographed within their homes, in contrast to the photographs of St. Louis slum residents.

11 The symbolism here—new, white buildings surrounded by darker slums—is especially interesting given that during Pruitt-Igoe's decline, when the project had only black residents, the build-ings appear, through use of contrast on the photograph, as being darker than their surrounds.

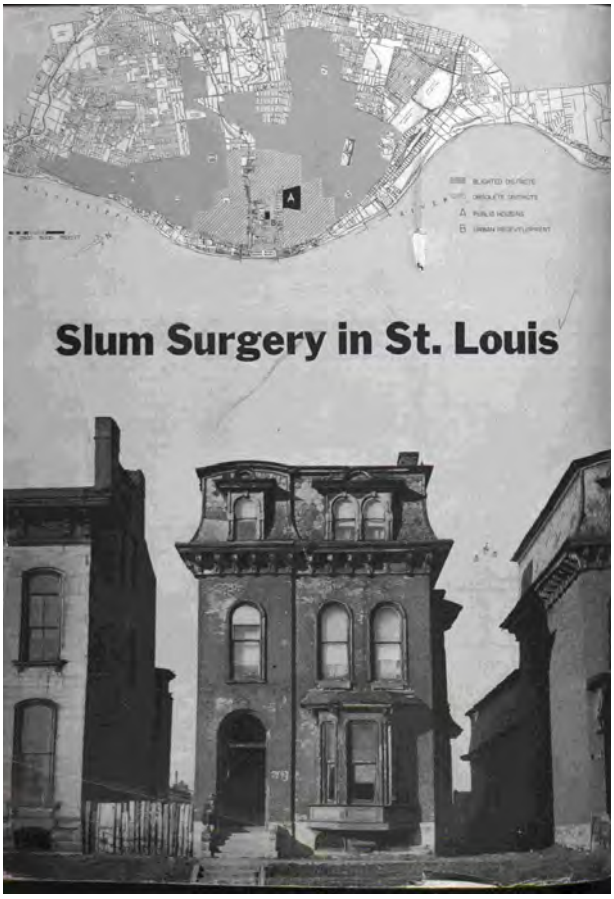


Figure 4. Reproduction of "Slum Surgery in St. Louis" from *Architectural Forum*, 1955 aerial shot of Pruitt-Igoe from the Missouri History Museum, and a 1925 rendering of Le Corbusier's "Plain Voisin" for Paris reproduced from Robert Fishman.

residential areas. Following Alexander von Hoffman's analysis of Mayor Darst's initial optimism and idealism surrounding the housing project, the ultra-Modern look of these buildings and their visual presentation as such reinforces the belief that residents would be lifted out of the poverty still visible around them. This, perhaps more than the 1965 *Architectural Forum* article Katharine Bristol cites, represents the beginning of the Pruitt-Igoe myth.

Pruitt-Igoe in many respects represents the realization of Le Corbusier's Radiant City ideal (fig. 4). The buildings command attention, appearing to be large even from an aerial view. The use of aerial images also demonstrates the enactment of a post-Enlightenment idea that man is capable of surpassing the divine: the image, with its humongous, man-made objects, taken from a bird's (or God's) eye view suggests dominance over the limits of nature. This interpretation is supported by Jane Jacobs' analysis of Le Corbusier: the act of no longer needing to be one's brother's keeper—a statement loaded with religious connotations—represents another version of moving beyond belief or faith in the divine.

In addition, the widespread replication of photographs showcasing Pruitt-Igoe's physical image follows what Beatriz Colomina believes is an essential connection between Modern architecture and mass media.[12] "Photography does for architecture what the railway did for cities, transforming it into merchandise and conveying it through the magazines for it to be consumed by the masses. This adds a new context to the production of architecture, to which corresponds an independent cycles of

12 Colomina's work *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, through a series of close readings of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, makes the case that architecture becomes Modern through its engagement with mass media, decoupling the notion put forth by critics like Tom Wolfe that architecture is an avant-garde rejection of mass culture. Instead, Colomina argues, what makes architecture Modern is the transformation from building as building to building as media object, as represented through the lens of popular and architectural journals. The site of architectural production, she believes, has moved past the physical site of a building and into drawings, photographs, films, and advertising, such as the images of Pruitt-Igoe that publicize its steel boilers, for example.

usage, one superimposed upon that of built space" (Colomina 47). Not only does it make sense for advocates of public housing to advertise it as a consumable object at the height of postwar American consumption in the 1950s, this separation between the physical site of the building and its image allows for the continued idealization of architecture as agent of social change. "To separate an object from its place, which is always part of the object itself, implies a process of obstruction in which the course of which the object loses its aura, ceases to be recognizable," Colomina writes, echoing Walter Benjamin's argument from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Colomina 50). By showing Pruitt-Igoe as a structure outside of its context and place, the photograph draws attention away from its actual purpose—to alleviate the poverty of many St. Louis residents—and toward the idealism of its architecture. The conversation thus becomes about the buildings, instead of poverty or race. These pictures make Pruitt-Igoe an abstraction, divorced from the deeply segregated and unequal city it resided in. Finally, and looking ahead, this process of abstraction also explains how images of a decayed Pruitt-Igoe were published in mass media in order to sell the opposite argument, that public housing is an expensive and dangerous failure that must be brought down, allowing Pruitt-Igoe to stand in as a cipher for high-rise projects in general.

Despite the prevalence of architecture-only images of Pruitt-Igoe, some early photographs do illustrate the experiences of tenants. The *Post-Dispatch* ran an article in 1954 covering the dedication day of Pruitt-Igoe, still a segregated project at that point (fig. 5). The frame of the accompanying photograph is split more or less equally between the large crowd of visitors and a line of buildings proudly rising behind them. An October 1954 article in the *Post-Dispatch* depicts the first residents' move to Pruitt-Igoe, showing them personalizing new apartments with captions like "Each unit is light and airy, has painted walls, steam heat and cross-ventilation" (Hannon 2). Unlike the tenement photographs, these images show the tenants without visual barriers between them and the viewers—

Figure 5. St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* photograph from dedication day, photo essay from October 1954, reproduced from microfilm of the *Post-Dispatch*.

MASS MOVE TO PRUITT

First Tenants in the New Public Housing Project

By ROBERT E. HANNON of the PICTURES Staff

Photos by ARTHUR WITMAN of the PICTURES Staff

the shots are taken from within the residences, as opposed to through windows. This is important because, as Sontag points out, "Photographs were enrolled in the service of important institutions of control, notably the family and the police, as symbolic objects and as pieces of information" (Sontag 543). Just as the tenement photographs portrayed dysfunctional family life, with unaccompanied children and severely run-down home environments, these images show a version of functional family life, portraying communities working together in ways that would read as salient to the general public. "Mr. and Mrs. Robert Gordon arrange furniture in their second-floor apartment," the caption for one image reads. "They moved from a dilapidated tenement […] which is about to be torn down to make way for a new public housing project" (Hannon 2). These images present Pruitt-Igoe as a safe, clean place for people fleeing neglected slums to live, possibly paving the way for attracting the "target" tenants described by Robert Fishman. Notably, however, these family-centric images have not been widely reproduced and for the most part live within archived collections of the *Post-Dispatch*, more or less invisible to a general public today.

In accordance with Alexander von Hoffman's theory that Pruitt-Igoe was built to bring residents back to St. Louis, much of the promotional material produced by various housing authorities throughout the country had an emphasis on the benefits to potential residents. The National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, for example, published a pamphlet in 1958

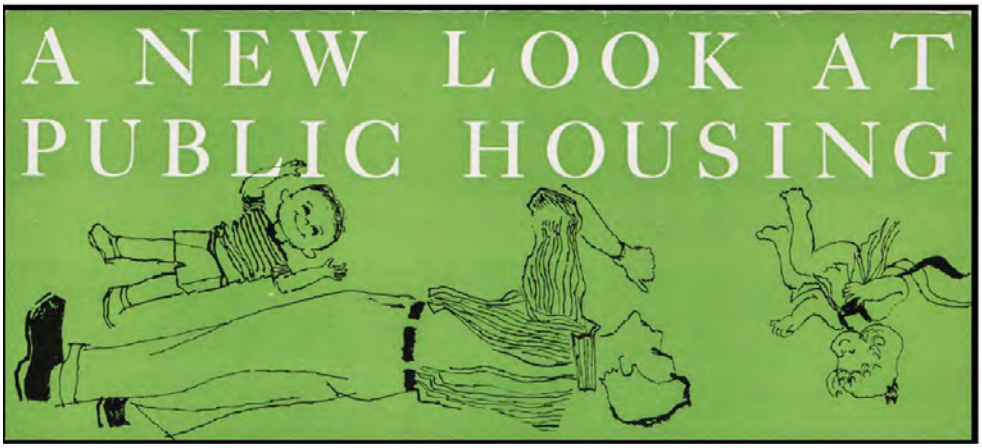


Figure 6. Reproduced from *A New Look At Public Housing.*

entitled *A New Look at Public Housing*, depicting what appears to be a happy (white) family at play on the cover (fig. 6). The document, which lays out and supports many of the provisions of the 1949 Housing Act, notably includes no images of actual public housing projects, planned or otherwise, within its pages, seeming to indicate a belief that the best way to attract residents is not with displays of architectural prowess, but rather simple depictions of daily, family life. Again, this is in accordance with the population public housing perhaps needed to attract in order to support itself as explained by Robert Fishman—working families with one or two children.

In specifically marketing family life at Pruitt-Igoe, images from a 1959 St. Louis Housing Authority report reveal a striking bias against black inhabitants of the housing project (fig. 7). Of the handful of images contained in the report, two full spreads display white children smiling and laughing on or near the housing project's site. A schoolroom scene (of thirteen children, eleven appear to be white) shows a group of young students learning instruments together, their faces all visible and bodies taking up a little more than half of the frame. A black adult, possibly a teacher, is barely visible, but the crease in the page swallows her body. Another spread shows five white children, all facing the camera and smiling, with small insets of dilapidated slum housing (unlikely occupied by these children) in the corner. The images with black children are much smaller. In one, another domestic scene, the children are bent over a table, engaged in what appears to be a craft project. While they engage in a familiar aspect of family life, two of the three children face away from the camera, and no child's eyes are visible. In another two photographs, seemingly of a Boy Scout troop and of a community gathering, the human subjects occupy less than half of the frame, with faces too small to see. In the background of both, Pruitt-Igoe stands rigid and tall. According to the St. Louis Housing Authority, it would seem, the happy family life in their housing projects is restricted to its white residents—and these images of relative peace and contentment at Pruitt-Igoe, for the most part, have

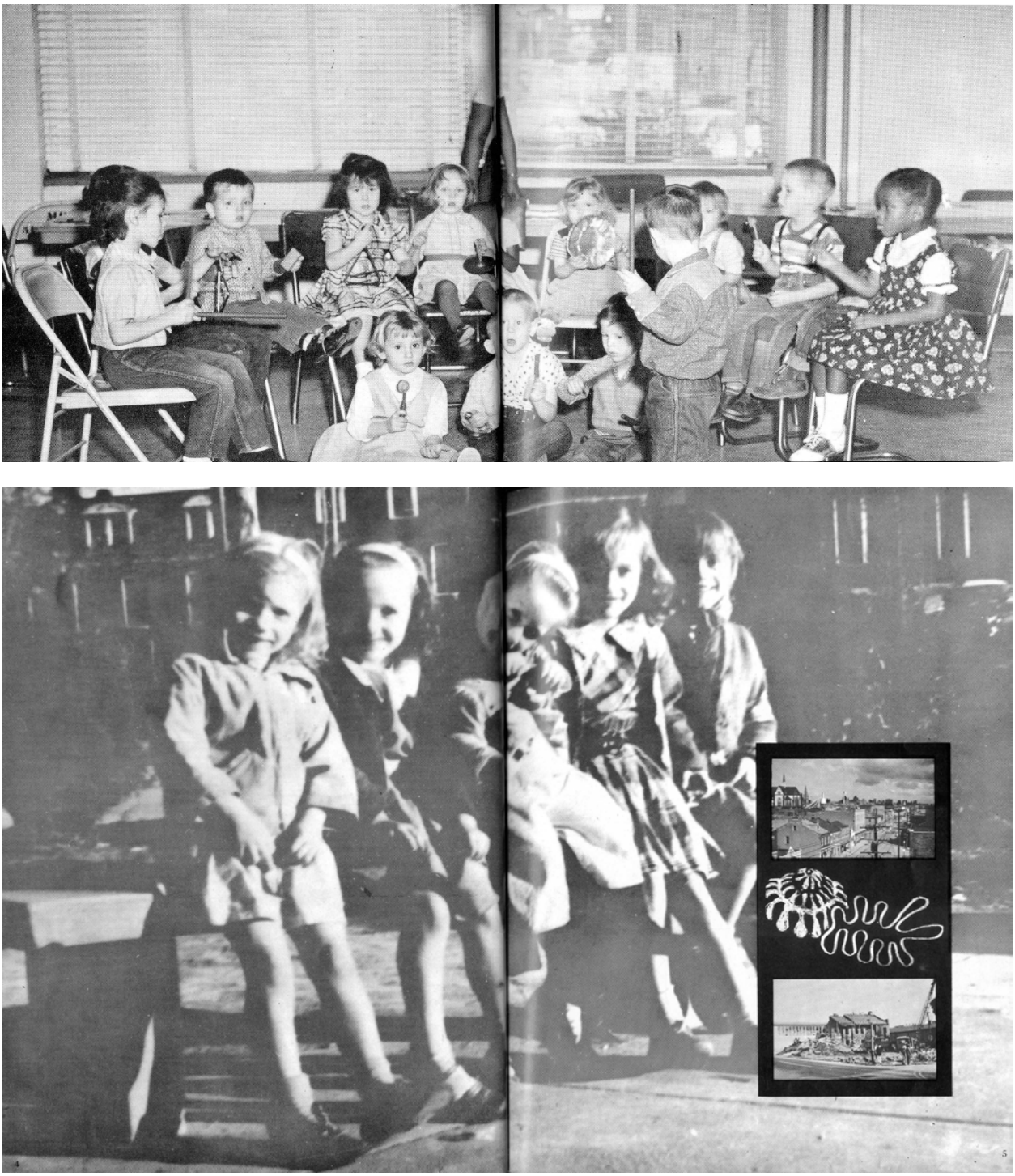
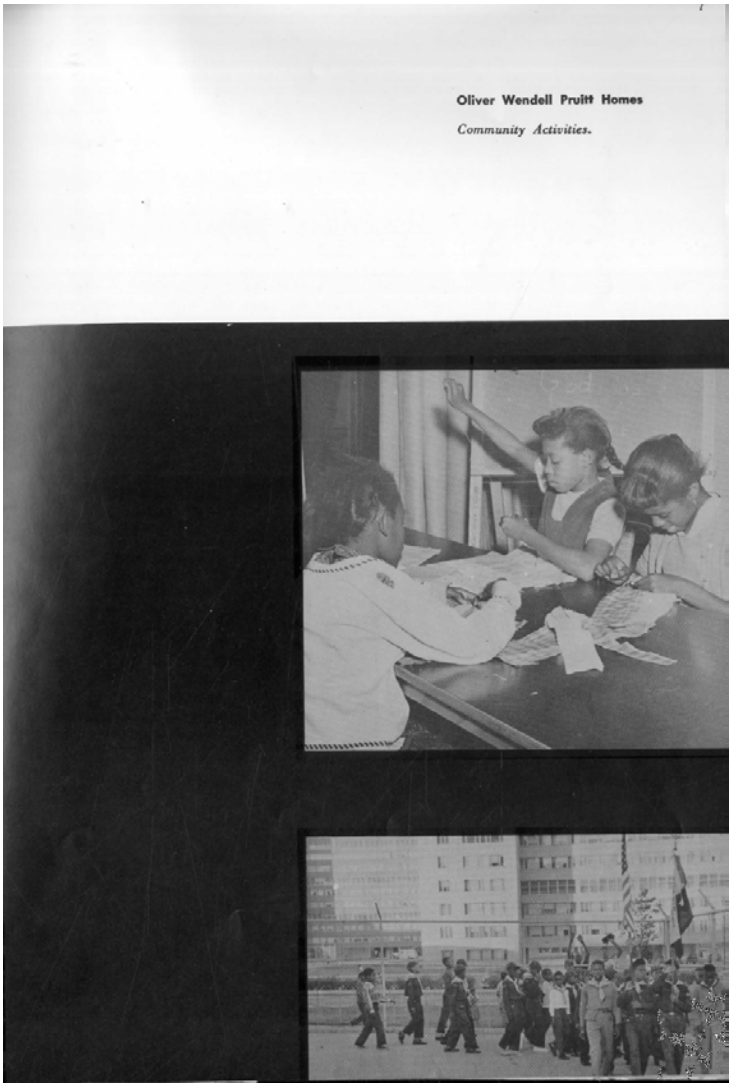


Figure 7. Reproductions from 1959 St. Louis Housing Authority annual report detailing community activities for Pruitt-Igoe residents.


Oliver Wendell Pruitt Homes
Community Activities.

not been reproduced in popular media today.

The images that have remained and been reproduced from Pruitt-Igoe's early years have largely been used as a means by which various writers have shown the distance between the initial designs and the neglect manifested upon the built environment in the years that followed. Oscar Newman, for example, reproduces the gallery drawings from Yamasaki's design above a photograph he took of a gallery area in the late 1960s, drawing a sharp visual distinction between the pleasant atmosphere Yamasaki envisioned (which, notably, includes images of white tenants drawn to depict scale) and the neglected, grim hallway inside an actual building (fig. 8). The use of images like these as a kind of before/after allows a single image to stand in for the entire housing project, imposing with the authority of a photograph a seemingly unquestionable truth that is likely still the product of an argument—in the case of *Defensible Space*, Newman himself took this image, likely with the specific intent of providing a drastic contrast to the relative cheer of the planned design.

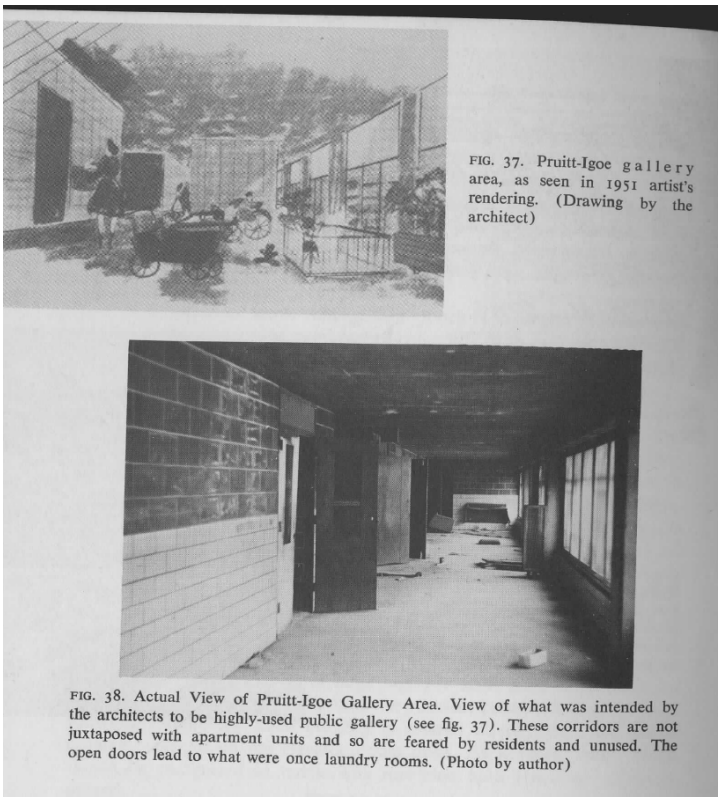


FIG. 37. Pruitt-Igoe gallery area, as seen in 1951 artist's rendering. (Drawing by the architect)

FIG. 38. Actual View of Pruitt-Igoe Gallery Area. View of what was intended by the architects to be highly-used public gallery (see fig. 37). These corridors are not juxtaposed with apartment units and so are feared by residents and unused. The open doors lead to what were once laundry rooms. (Photo by author)

Figure 8. Yamasaki's gallery drawing and an actual Pruitt-Igoe gallery, reproduced from *Defensible Space.*

Decline

Pruitt-Igoe's physical and social decline coincided with the rise in criticism of the Modernist movement in architecture. As the buildings fell into disrepair throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, writers like Jane Jacobs, Robert Venturi, and Peter Blake published books and articles calling for a re-evaluation of the ideals of Modernism that led to the construction of housing complexes like Pruitt-Igoe. A common criticism of Modernism was its lack of emphasis on human scale in favor of massive superstructures and high-rise living environments that, according to the critics, were disconnected from the necessities of daily life and lacked amenities conducive to a safe and comfortable social environment.

Modernism, in the eyes of its critics, was out of touch. "As Experts with Ideals, who pay lip service to the social sciences, [architects] build for Man rather than for people—this means, to suit themselves, that is, to suit their own particular upper-middle-class values, which they assign to everyone. Only the very poor, via public housing, are dominated by architects' values," Robert Venturi writes in *Learning from Las Vegas*. "Developers build for markets rather than for Man and probably do less harm than authoritarian architects would do if they had the developer's power" (Venturi 154-5). The aesthetic and symbolic idea represented by these building forms, in other words, took precedence over the actual needs of those who would have to live in them. Peter Blake, in *Form Follows Fiasco*, goes so far as to note repeatedly that Modern architects (he names Mies van der Rohe among them) found their own designs impossible to live in, preferring to remain in their own, more traditionally constructed homes. "Few of the architects ever move into one of their own ephemeral creations. They know what is best for them—places with solid walls, solid doors, and real windows that let in real air and real light. The open plan is for somebody else, preferably someone who is deaf to noise, blind to views, and equipped with his or her own portable supply of air" (Blake 36). An

emerging understanding of Modernism was that these buildings were themselves simply not places where people could live—and they weren't designed with people in mind. This could explain why most of the 1950s images of Pruitt-Igoe lacked portrayals of human life—the building stood in as a symbol or vision of humanity that the messiness of actual people interrupted. Attacking the "ideal cities" dreamed up by Modernists, massive planned spaces dominated by high-rise superstructures, Blake writes, "Bird's eye view of another 'Ideal City,'" alongside a design plan. "No people are in sight, and none are expected" (Blake 159) (fig. 9).

The resulting media representation of Pruitt-Igoe during its decline was a tenuous balance between efforts to demonstrate the struggles the inhabitants faced combined with the overall degradation of their built environment. For example, KMOX, a local news affiliate, broadcast coverage of a burst-pipe incident in winter 1968, covering a period of days in which the lack of heating and frozen water made living conditions hostile at best. Before cutting to a resident laying out a series of demands to make to the city (among them a permanent solution to the pipe problem—a frequent occurrence at Pruitt-Igoe and other housing complexes throughout St. Louis), Fred Porterfield, the reporter, stands in front of the camera reading off a list of humanitarian actions that had taken place at the project, such as donations of clothing and food, or door-to-door canvassing by white fraternity members at a nearby university to catalog further necessities, which signified the community effort to improve Pruitt-Igoe. As Porterfield speaks, detailing these specific efforts by various local groups, the camera leaves his face and lingers on the buildings, showing ice frothing out of broken windows and what appears to be burn scars on the heavy brick façades (fig 10). A minute or two later, as the resident finishes with her demands, the voiceover returns, listing steps taken by the housing authority to alleviate the situation as the camera slowly zooms in on the housing project, blacked out windows seeming to grow ominously on screen as they fill the frame. The broadcast ends as the reporter

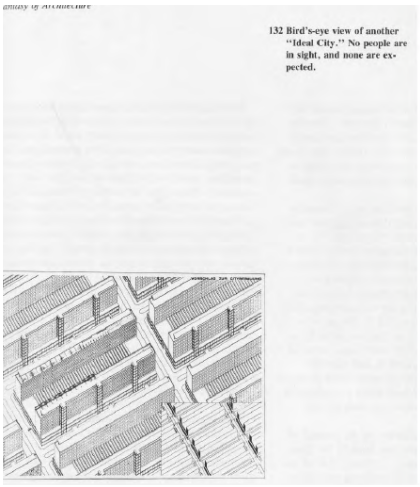


Figure 9. Reproduction of 'Ideal City' design plan from *Form Follows Fiasco*, film still from KMOX news clip. Figure 10. Stills from 1968 KMOX news video.

holds up a small button reading "Make Pruitt-Igoe #1." "Outside one of the buildings in the mud, the slush, and the debris, we found this button, which looks a bit for the worse for wear," Porterfield says. "Make Pruitt-Igoe number one. That undoubtedly reflects the feeling of many of the residents who live here." As the video shows, even when a given media outlet makes a dedicated effort to represent the larger social and economic issues impacting the residents of Pruitt-Igoe, the spectacle of the buildings themselves become a distraction, dominating the visual narrative.

It should be noted here that living conditions in Pruitt-Igoe were indeed tremendously poor. As documented in photographs published by the *Post-Dispatch*, the KMOX news video, and *Defensible Space*, vandalism was rampant and the buildings frequently experienced pipe breakages during cold Midwestern winters that were exacerbated by the broken windows. Even though the federal government spent millions on rehabilitating the towers in 1965, small additions like first-floor bathrooms did little to alleviate the general disrepair. Residents interviewed in *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* describe losing family members to violence, and being afraid to use the stairways and other common spaces for fear of being attacked by those involved in the drug trade. While these residents insist that Pruitt-Igoe, through media accounts, was an exaggerated representation of the social terror surrounding black poverty, black drug use, and black crime, "that element of fear had crept its way into the definition of Pruitt-Igoe," one resident says. Police would rarely respond to calls in the area, and, as the project's inhabitants were moved out, drug use and trade became rampant in abandoned towers. Social controls mandated by federal welfare policy prohibited many fathers from living with their families, risking the loss of federal income if they did so. Tenants were often unable to paint or personalize their homes in other ways for fear of being evicted. Trash chutes would clog frequently and it was common to come across sections at the base of buildings where residents were forced to burn their trash in the open. Elevators broke down often and only a few maintenance men were able

to service all thirty-three buildings. Even when operational, the elevators rarely had functional lights, and stank of urine.

However, as *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*'s interviews show, the towers weren't solely desolate places to live. "It was like another world," one former resident says of moving into her new apartment. "Everybody had a bed. My mom had her own bed, and I was so happy to see her just in a room to herself, with a door." Another resident describes Christmas in Pruitt-Igoe. "Everybody had Christmas lights, it seemed like they all came home about the same time, just as soon as the sun would go down the Christmas lights would start to come on and I would go, 'wow, look at this.' I can still see it, it was really nice." A third resident, reminiscing, says, "[Pruitt-Igoe] had this life, this engaging, electric life."

These more pleasant scenes, however, were not the ones typically broadcast in mass media. A common image in local newspapers during Pruitt-Igoe's decline (before the 1972 demolitions) depicted residents trapped under the weight of their living environment. A 1969 photograph from the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* shows residents mopping up water from one of the many flooding issues that plagued the housing project. The image is shot from above and does not focus on the faces of the tenants, emphasizing instead the general despair that they live in. Their shoulders are hunched over from the effort of the work, yet water continues to fall from above onto the area where they stand, giving the impression that this single incident is just one of many issues within the built environment that continually fall upon the residents from above. While one could argue that the idea of misery-from-above is particularly applicable at Pruitt-Igoe given the failings of the local and federal governments to address the concerns of the residents, the fact that that water stands in for those higher agencies gives the metaphor a naturalistic and therefore inevitable (because nature more or less always wins out over mankind) touch, implying that nothing here can be changed.

Another image, this one from 1970 in the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, shows conditions after yet another burst pipe in the complex. "Joseph, Vincent and Kent Powell are framed by an ice-crusted stairway in their flooded Pruitt-Igoe apartment building," the caption reads. All three figures appear to be children, photographed without their parents, and they gaze out from behind thick bands of ice. As with the 1952 photograph of the children in the tenement home, the vast social difference between the presumed audience of the article and these children is articulated by the ice, which not only coats the stairwells but also seems to drip down, spreading all over the structure (fig. 11). The dripping function of the ice suggests a kind of toxic infection, causing instability and ruination wherever it touches, and framing these children within this contagious structure perhaps transfers some of this toxicity to them. The 2014 documentary *Spanish Lake* thoroughly examines suburban resistance to former Pruitt-Igoe residents, suggesting that something of the toxicity of the building was indeed transferred to its inhabitants.

The visual link between the boys at Pruitt-Igoe in 1970 and the children in the St. Louis tenements in 1952 is important in considering Pruitt-Igoe's eventual status as a federally supported slum, as it is called by Lee Rainwater. Pruitt-Igoe, as established by Alexander von Hoffman, the *Post-Dispatch*, and others, was meant to be a tool of slum clearance: *Architectural Forum*'s 1951 article all but calls it the instrument of slum surgery in St. Louis. Slums become unslummed by virtue of being seen as desirable places to live, a desirability fostered by the creation and firm establishment of a community. "The key link to a perpetual slum is that too many people move out of it too fast—and in the meantime dream of getting out. This is the link that has to be broken if any other efforts at overcoming slums or slum life are to be of the least avail," Jane Jacobs asserts in *Great American Cities* (Jacobs 271). "The constant departures leave, of course, more than housing vacancies to be filled. They leave a community in a perpetually embryonic stage, or perpetually regressing to

First-floor tenants at a Pruitt-Igoe apartment sweeping water that had run down the stairs from an upper floor where a fire hose fixture had been removed. (Post-Dispatch Photo)

Joseph, Vincent and Kent Prowell are framed by an ice-crusted stairway in their flooded Pruitt-Igoe apartment building at 2311 Dickson st. (Another picture on Page 3A.) —Globe-Democrat Photo by Ken Winn

Figure 11. 1969 image from the *Post-Dispatch* showing tenants dealing with a flooding issue, 1970 photograph from the *Globe-Democrat* portraying tenant conditions after a burst pipe situation.

helpless infancy. The age of buildings is no index to the age of a community, which is formed by a continuity of people" (Jacobs 277). The consistent portrayal of Pruitt-Igoe as a site of slum misery presumably proved devastating to efforts aimed at "making Pruitt-Igoe #1," as the button above proclaimed. While tenants held rent strikes and community organizers led drives to clean the projects up throughout the 1960s, the dizzying array of negative media portrayals, combined with the economic incentive to leave the city and move to the suburbs provided by expanded FHA loans, meant that the population flow was consistently out of the project for all but the most impoverished. "Pruitt-Igoe also is a state of mind," reports James Bailey for *Architectural Forum*. "Its notoriety, even among those who live there, has long since outstripped the facts. Its crime rate, though high, is well below that of the surrounding slum neighborhood—and declining. Yet, until recently, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* referred to every offense committed anywhere in the general neighborhood as a 'Pruit-Igoe' [*sic*] crime—its way of saying 'Negro'" (Bailey 24).

While Bailey's article does address the social and political environment contributing to Pruitt-Igoe's toxic environment, even going so far as to call out the news media's racism, the accompanying illustrations are relentlessly grim (fig. 12). The human subjects are massively dwarfed by their environment. Harsh, high-contrast photography makes the buildings appear especially stark, the buildings now appearing darker than their surroundings, in contrast to images from the 1950s, and the framing of the opening spread gives the buildings a tombstone-like quality, as if the residents are milling about a massive graveyard. As Bailey notes, the reality of Pruitt-Igoe was nowhere close to the monster its reputation suggested. But Pruitt-Igoe's image problem transcended the text of news reports. The accompanying illustrations of the housing project, even before the buildings were slated for destruction, appear absolutely ruinous. "The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because nothing can be refused or

Figure 12. Reproduction from 1965 issue of *Architectural Forum*.

transformed," Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 85). Not only is the image powerful, but it also suggests that the situation is irrevocable and unable to be changed—going by the images in *Architectural Forum* alone, one might believe that the towers were to be brought down in 1965 and not 1972. It is also important to note that photographs, however convincing they are as representations of truth, are still made objects. "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of a reality that anyone can make or acquire" (Sontag 530). Even though there was still time for Pruitt-Igoe to be remade into a workable, livable space, the presentation of these images, combined with the power of a photograph to convey permanence upon a captured instant, undoubtedly contributed to the further inability of Pruitt-Igoe to regain the population it sorely needed to survive.

In the two or so years leading up to the city's decision to raze the complex, residents began to disappear from Pruitt-Igoe's visual record, replaced with images of white policy-makers and planners. The images that retain depictions of the residents further cement the established visual narrative of helplessness when faced with an impossible environment, denying the tenants an agency the officials are portrayed to posses. A 1970 photograph from the *Post-Dispatch* highlighting dilapidated apartment conditions shows a small child surrounded by clothes under a damaged wall. The composition and framing suggest that this child is almost part of the scene: he is placed away from the camera, his body language is contained, and he almost blends in with the disarray of objects around him. The caption identifies the boy as Zachary Marsh, a three year old, who uses the vacant apartment as a playroom. Disturbingly, the *Post-Dispatch* prints his name as "Gregory" a few sentences later in the caption, implying that not only does this child not have access to a safe home,[13] but also that

13 For more on the psychological and theoretical importance of "home" in a person's life, see Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, a meditation on the various ways in which one's built environment can impact her ability to access imagination and happiness.

the print media cannot even correctly identify his name. In contrast, a *Globe-Democrat* photograph from 1971 and a 1972 *Post-Dispatch* article both depict city officials at Pruitt-Igoe in the midst of determining the housing project's future. Both pictures present their human subjects, all white, as taking up most of the space in the frame, their bodies in action (as opposed to inert, like the boy's). These people are distinct from the environment, able to affect change to it, in contrast to the passivity of not only the decaying buildings behind them, but also the ways in which Pruitt-Igoe's residents themselves are posed (fig. 13).

The image of the passive Pruitt-Igoe resident is in many ways a contradiction to a dominant narrative of public housing that implicates the residents in their own destruction. Describing his experiences at Pruitt-Igoe in *Creating Defensible Space*, a 1996 monograph expanding on his 1972 work *Defensible Space*, Oscar Newman writes:

> Occupied by single-parent, welfare families, the design proved a disaster. Because all the grounds were common and disassociated from the units, residents could not identify with them. The areas proved unsafe. The river of trees soon became a sewer of glass and garbage. The mailboxes on the ground floor were vandalized. The corridors, lobbies, elevators, and stairs were dangerous places to walk. They became covered with graffiti and littered with garbage and human waste. (Newman 10)

The passive tense (echoing the passive images of the residents) belies Newman's implication that while the design here is to blame, it was the residents themselves who perpetrated the horrors of Pruitt-Igoe—design alone cannot vandalize itself. Not only does the use of passive voice here subtly blame Pruitt-Igoe residents for the problems of the housing project, it also negates the existence of outside factors that led to these dangerous conditions in the first place—the fact that the buildings were not maintained properly, security staff quickly stopped patrolling, or that, as *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* argues, few low-income people of color were able to find stable employment, among others. So Pruitt-Igoe residents were doubly stigmatized through their seeming lack of agency while being

Figure 13. 1971 *Globe-Democrat* photograph featuring community leaders at the Pruitt-Igoe site, 1972 *Post-Dispatch* image depicting a demolitions expert a month before the first explosions, 1970 *Post-Dispatch* portrait of a young Pruitt-Igoe resident.

At Pruitt-Igoe Friday, from left, are Rep. Leonor K. Sullivan; a newsman; Thomas P. Costello, acting executive director of St. Louis Housing Authority, and HUD Secretary George Romney. —Globe-Democrat Photo

AN OUTLINE OF DEMOLITION being shaped by the hands of J. Mark Loizeaux of Baltimore as he explained an experiment in cutting stories off the tops of buildings in the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex. (Post-Dispatch Photo)

WET "PLAYGROUND": Zachary Marsh, 3 years old, sitting in a vacant apartment in the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, where he plays when it rains. The rain comes in through broken windows of the vacant apartment. Gregory and his family live in an adjacent apartment. (Post-Dispatch Photo by Nicholas Sapieha)

blamed for the physical decay of their poorly managed homes. Or, as one former resident interviewed in *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* put it, "In the project, it seemed to be strategically planned to create an environment that people felt isolated, that people felt restricted, that people felt, you know, inhuman almost. You're bad, we have to restrain you," he says, describing social controls imposed by the local and federal welfare system. "We have to curtail what you're doing. It was void of humanity. It was void of caring. It seemed more like a prison environment that you'd have to escape from."

After the initial demolition of Pruitt-Igoe in 1972, human subjects are almost entirely erased from decline-era images of the housing project. The buildings, still standing, have a ghostly quality, as though they are barely living ruins. Barthes, meditating in *Camera Lucida* on photography after the loss of his mother, implicates death as an essential element in any photograph. "And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* [ghost] emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead" (Barthes 9). Not only does the photograph evoke the specter of death, it also transforms that death into a spectacle, shifting the attention away from the plight of Pruitt-Igoe's residents and toward the eerie graveyard they used to (and, until 1974, continued to) inhabit.

This death-space narrative of late-stage Pruitt Igoe also makes it difficult to assert the existence of any kind of reality or history outside of the image. "The photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer* but only and for certain *what has been*" (Barthes 85). In other words, even while the towers remained standing, its status as icon of failure became cemented through these images that sought to deny the construction of any other kind of history. Describing the nature of ruined buildings or spaces, Walter Benjamin writes, "In the ruin, history has merged sensuously with the

setting. And so configured, history finds expression not as a process of eternal life, but rather one of unstoppable decline" (Benjamin 180). Once Pruitt-Igoe was seen as an object of history—a ruin—it no longer seemed to exist in the present. This allowed for the relegation of what might be called "Pruitt-Igoe concerns," such as poverty, drug use, and crime, to the past, meaning they continued to go unaddressed.

A 1974 image from the *Post-Dispatch*, part of an article about the last families leaving the housing project, shows the grounds behind a thick line of barbed wire. The use of the wire as a framing device is eerie, and further separates the housing project from the line of view as well as reinforcing Pruitt-Igoe's reputation as a criminal space. The placement of the dead patch of landscaping in place of ghost buildings already demolished continues to demonstrate the idea that the remaining buildings do not belong—it is almost surprising to see them at all, as if they should have been torn down already. Another image from the *Post-Dispatch* in 1974, from a photo essay called "Pruitt-Igoe: Tombstones Mark Grave of Dreams," portrays another disturbing, disaster landscape. The foregrounding of a broken doll in the shot suggests a kind of human ruin that recedes into the stark line of buildings, themselves too far away to appear terribly dilapidated, but the more clearly seen rubble in front becomes easy to superimpose into the façades (fig. 14).

The ruin, according to sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, unsettles because it represents a shift in the balance between man and nature. Man harnesses nature to form the component parts of the building, the ruin is the enactment of nature beginning "to become master over the work of man" (Simmel 259). While the average ruin, by demonstrating man's ultimate failure to overcome nature, "conveys the impression of peace," or an acceptance of entropy, Pruitt-Igoe disturbs because man, not nature, has been cast as the destructive force. This idea is echoed by the broken doll image printed in the *Post-Dispatch*: the doll, as a common post-disaster (and horror) trope, visually links the

END OF A DREAM: Pruitt-Igoe closes for good.—(Post-Dispatch Photo by Bill Kesler)

Figure 14. 1974 *Post-Dispatch* photograph showing remaining projects the day the last tenants moved out, slection from 1974 *Post-Dispatch* photo essay called "Pruitt-Igoe: Tombstones Mark Grave of Dreams."

housing project to other manmade disasters, further decontextualizing it from the specific circumstances that led to its unmaking.

Returning to Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space* repeatedly refers to photographs of parts of Pruitt-Igoe as being "typically vandalized" by residents. This is to say that Pruitt-Igoe unsettles because it denies the harmony implied by the simple return of a form to its essential, natural materials. Going further, the transference of blame to the building's design (possibly a coded way of blaming the residents) has made it easier to ignore the more troubling implication that St. Louis failed its most marginalized citizens. To conceptualize Pruitt-Igoe as a living ruin is to place it—and the issues associated with it—firmly in the past (Simmel 265). This distancing allows for the problems of Pruitt-Igoe's residents to go further unaddressed—to view Pruitt-Igoe as a failed (as opposed to failing) space is another way of saying that what is done is done and cannot be changed.

Demolition

The most famous and widely reproduced image of Pruitt-Igoe is of its April 21, 1972 demolition by implosion, taken by a photographer for the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*. This is the photograph that accompanies the vast majority of articles about the housing project or text implicating architecture in social disasters in general, reprinted by Peter Blake, Charles Jencks, Katharine Bristol, Oscar Newman, and several others (fig. 15). It is the visual most associated with Pruitt-Igoe, springing to mind with any recollection of the housing project.[14] Even though a slightly different image, in color, ran in *LIFE* Magazine in May 1972 (fig. 16), by far the black and white photograph has been more widely reproduced. The grainy quality of the print renders an otherwise cheerful blue sky grim and menacing, becoming a thick fog that presses down onto the collapsing buildings as the smoke spreads outward. The dust from the explosion becomes more prominent in contrast to the darker materials of the buildings, forming a puffy line that spreads across the center of the image, seeming to permeate even beyond the borders of the photograph itself.

It is important to note that implosion with dynamite was not the only way Pruitt-Igoe's towers were brought down, nor did images from April depict the first demolitions at the site. The plan for Pruitt-Igoe in early 1972, according to a *Post-Dispatch* article by Tom Yarbrough entitled "Expert's Aim: Bringing Pruitt-Igoe To Knees," was to reduce parts of the eleven-story buildings to four floors, subsequently refurbishing and reoccupying them. The approach, according to the demolitions expert, was to be "like that of a surgeon" (Yarbrough). But by 1974, city officials abandoned the idea that the project could be saved, and all of the residents had been moved out according to Gerald M. Boyd's *Post-Dispatch* article "Last Families Leave Pruitt-Igoe." Over the course of the next two years,

14 And, arguably, with public housing in general—type "public housing failure" into Google Images and this demolition photograph is the first to appear, alongside five similar photographs within the first ten results.

Figure 15. The implosion photo reproduced. From top left: "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth" by Katharine Bristol, *Planning for Disaster* by William Ramroth, two images from *Rubble* by Jeff Byles, section from *Form Follows Fiasco* by Peter Blake, section from Oscar Newman's 1996 monograph *Creating Defensible Space*, Robert Fishman's "Rethinking Public Housing," Edmund Fowler's "Faulty Towers," and Charles Jencks' *The Language of Post-modern Architecture*.

Figure 16. Lee Balterman's photographs from *LIFE* Magazine (original on top, Getty Images reprint on bottom).

the remaining buildings were knocked down with wrecking balls. A September 1976 photograph from the *Post-Dispatch* shows the last of Pruitt-Igoe's thirty-three buildings being demolished: "Rubble shower: The smack of the headache ball bringing down another load of steel, concrete, and dust as the last of the 11-story Pruitt-Igoe apartments is torn down" reads the caption from the front-page, full-color teaser image, inviting readers to look at the full story inside the paper.[15] Wrecking ball photographs have been considerably less reproduced, if at all, in other texts—even Byles' *Rubble*, which purports itself to be a history of demolition. Perhaps this is because the 1972 demolitions were more dramatic—the project was so new, and it was the first of its kind to be brought down this way,[16] but it can also be argued that there is equal symbolic weight in showing the final tower being destroyed. In addition, the April images show the second demolitions, the first occurring on March 16, 1972. Compared to the explosions a month later, though, the March photographs depict a relatively tame scene—Andrew Wilson for the *Globe-Democrat* reported that only one half of one building was targeted, making for a less striking visual than the total destruction of a larger building in April (fig. 17).

Returning to the wrecking ball photographs, there is a vast difference between the aesthetic and visual impact of the destructive forces in the 1972 and 1976 images (fig. 18). In the earlier pho-

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15 This is another example of Barthes' evocation of the photograph as spectacle that temporarily brings back the dead—here, the spectacle of a dead "monster," as Pruitt-Igoe was colloquially known at the time, is in use to sell newspapers.

16 This is important when considering that Pruitt-Igoe is sometimes linked to the Robert Taylor Homes or Cabrini-Green Homes in Chicago, housing projects demolished between the 1990s and early 2000s. Pruitt-Igoe was the first major public housing project to be torn down in the twentieth century and the massive spectacle of its failure undoubtedly influenced policymakers when considering similarly miserable conditions at the towers in Chicago. For more information on the Chicago Housing Authority and the notoriety of both Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor, see *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* by D. Bradford Hunt.

Figures 17. and 18. March 16, 1972 “surgical” demolition, reproduced from St. Louis *Globe Democrat*; September 1976 wrecking ball photograph reproduced from St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*; and April 1972 *Post-Dispatch* implosion photograph for comparison.


Pruitt-Igoe building collapses Thursday after being clouted by 90 pounds of dynamite.
—Globe-Democrat Photo by Ken Winn


RUBBLE SHOWER: The smack of the headache ball bringing down another load of steel, concrete and dust as the last of the 11-story Pruitt-Igoe apartments is torn down. Story on page 9A. (Post-Dispatch Photo by Scott Dine)

tograph, the imploding building is at the center of the frame, immediately backed by darker buildings that seem to press down on the lighter-colored building being destroyed.

Because of the way explosives were placed, the building appears to be collapsing in on itself, and the utter absence of any human apparatus save for a few light posts in the foreground give the impression that the building's demise was some kind of disaster beyond human control. On another level, the almost vaporized effect produced by the image is reminiscent of photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, bombings widely believed to be horrendous but necessary. The later picture, already less foreboding because it is in color, is clearly an image of man-made destruction. The mechanical apparatus of a crane is visible in the upper left corner of the frame, and the messiness of the collapsing building—its guts, so to speak, hanging out as a result of the wrecking ball—creates the impression of a destruction in progress, compared to the chilling finality of the earlier photo. For these reasons, the 1976 wrecking ball image lacks the visual weight (aesthetically, the 1972 photo has a "cleaner" look to it) and narrative neutrality necessary for easy reproduction and versatile use alongside a number of different arguments. The presence of the physical wrecking ball in the 1976 picture tells too much of a story on its own compared to the implosion image, being more opaque with respect to cause and effect. Thus, regardless of the original symbolism of the event in either image, the 1972 photograph has survived.[17]

The implosion picture is, without a doubt, haunting. Decay and other urban ephemera familiar from other images of the projects return here, and the absence of even cars from the scene

17 While the Techwood Homes in Atlanta was the first federally funded public housing project to be constructed, in 1936 (another, the Garden Homes, was built by socialists in Milwaukee after World War I), Pruitt-Igoe was the first housing project of its kind to be demolished. In addition, the Techwood Homes were low-rise and not demolished until 1996. For more on the Techwood Homes, see Frank Ruechel's "New Deal Public Housing, Urban Poverty, and Jim Crow: Techwood and University Homes in Atlanta" from *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*.

give the image a nightmare, inhuman quality. Whatever made these buildings a space to live in has been utterly stripped away. "For me, photographs of landscape (urban or country) must be *habitable*, not visitable" (Barthes 38). The uninhabitable, alien landscape depicted here thus has tremendous power—the only familiar element in the frame is the Gateway Arch in the upper left corner. While the Arch anchors the image to something recognizable, it is only a visitable and not an inhabitable space—the idea of westward expansion that the Arch represents suggests a sense of passing through and lack of permanence. Along these lines, symbolically, the Gateway Arch gives the image an added layer of trauma: not only does it show the death of these particular buildings, but also the death of a specific sort of progress embodied by the Arch, looking down at its corpse.

As James Bailey notes in his 1965 *Architectural Forum* article on the social and design failures of Pruitt-Igoe, it was commonplace for newspapers to refer to activities in or around Pruitt-Igoe as "Pruitt-Igoe" activities. This suggests that the aura of the building has transcended its physical structure, bringing with it a host of dismal associations. In considering the ways in which the residents have been implicitly blamed for the downfall of the housing project and their visual passivity when photographed alongside the buildings, it seems as though the ruined body of Pruitt-Igoe, as remembered through the frequent reproduction of the 1972 implosion photograph, has come to stand in for the bodies of its tenants.

The erased or invisible black body is not uncommon in the American public consciousness. Activists criticized slum clearance authorized by the 1949 Housing Act as a tool of forcible segregation, razing predominantly black neighborhoods in urban spaces that bordered more lucrative business centers. Destroyed homes, as discussed by Alexander von Hoffman and the documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, were rarely replaced with affordable housing, and urban renewal was nicknamed "Negro removal" (von Hoffman 318). This process of erasure is not limited to urban planning. Black

poet Claudia Rankine's 2014 National Book Award-finalist *Citizen: An American Lyric* records, repeatedly, the black body made invisible. "Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists the medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure" (Rankine 11). Rankine began *Citizen* as a research project on the effects of John Henryism and while the finished book encompasses considerably more than a meditation on the medical term, the presence of erasure permeates the text itself. The book object is made up of slender black letterforms in a sans-serif font (taking up the least amount of space on the page as possible), printed on a sharp white background. In the case of Pruitt-Igoe, the black bodies of its residents have not been allowed to take up any space in the dominant cultural discourse surrounding their former homes, erased and replaced by image after image of tombstone-like buildings buckling to their knees.

It is interesting to note that, while not widely reproduced, a handful of images ran alongside the famous demolition photos in St. Louis newspapers that do feature human subjects. That being said, the people pictured are exclusively white. An image from April 1972 that ran in the *Globe-Democrat* portrays two demolitions experts standing in front of the toppled Pruitt-Igoe. They occupy half of the frame and despite being captioned as "reluctant maestros" are shown with wide smiles, triumphant in front of a representation of the ruined black body (fig. 19). Earlier photographs of white subjects in front of Pruitt-Igoe from the early 1970s (see fig. 13, page 44) also allow the subjects to take up most of the space within the image. This visual in these later photos grants these people the appearance of agency and the ability to make things happen, compared to the passive decay of the buildings behind them. Thus, while demolition photos with human subjects did exist, they are still in service of the general erasure of the black residents who made these towers home—a legacy that can be traced back to the St. Louis Housing Authority report from 1959 (see fig. 7, pages 28-9).

Figure 19. April 21, 1972 image reproduced from the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* showing demolitions experts in front of Pruitt-Igoe's remains. *Globe-Democrat* photograph from July 19, 1976, showing another white demolition expert in front of the remaining buildings to be torn down.

As shown with Pruitt-Igoe, photography—which is conventionally considered to be an act of memory making or memory preservation—can be a powerful tool of destruction and erasure. "There is an aggression in every use of the camera" (Sontag 532). The image has the power to supplant and revise reality, its concrete tangibility and reproducibility allowing it to embed itself more forcibly in the mind than something as tenuous as memory. Photography, in other words, has the power to alter the perception of time. "In the real world, something *is* happening and no one knows what is *going* to happen. In the image world, it *has* happened, and it *will* forever happen in that way" (Sontag 646).[18] The use of photography itself as a tool to represent and remember Pruitt-Igoe contributes to the continued erasure of the experiences of its inhabitants—the implosion photograph reduces the memory of all those lives to the shot, seemingly unavoidable, of that blast.

Along these lines, the photograph has an atomizing capability, one which can deny that there is more to the reality presented within the image. "The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers upon each moment the character of mystery" (Sontag 544). This is all there is to know, the photograph says, allowing for its compelling use in a number of arguments, especially those that deny mitigating factors that may challenge or question the truth of the reality set forth in the image. "In America," Sontag writes, "the photographer is not simply the person who records the past but the

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18 For example, photographer and essayist Hervé Guibert describes, in his memoir *Ghost Image*, a time when he photographed his mother in an attempt to preserve a kind of record of her. He laments, however, the ways in which the photograph will, over time, come to replace his actual memories. "Yet I know that that face, the real one, is going to disappear completely from my memory, driven out by the tangible proof of the image" (Guibert 26). Another description of this effect comes from W.G. Sebald's *Vertigo*, where Sebald's Beyle, a fictionalized Stendhal, offers this experience: "[Beyle] came across an engraving […] and he was obligated to concede that his recollected picture of that town in the evening sun was nothing but a copy of that very engraving. That being so, Beyle's advice is not to purchase engravings of fine views and prospects seen on one's travels, since before long they will displace our memories completely, indeed one might say they destroy them" (Sebald 8).

one who invents it" (Sontag 575).[19] In considering the implosion photograph of Pruitt-Igoe, it is important to remember that the received truth expressed in the image is just as made as the implosion itself—what happened in St. Louis on April 21, 1972 was not, as the picture suggests, necessarily the only thing that could have happened.

Finally, photography can also be described as a system of meaning making: the act of taking a picture of an object confers importance onto it (Barthes 6). This raises the question of the objects or subjects that are not photographed, especially given the widespread use of photography within the pages of most American newspapers and magazines at this time. What does this mean for those who go un-photographed, and, in a time when photography is increasingly easy to reproduce, the choice to memorialize through certain photographs instead of others?

The continued reproduction of the 1972 demolition photograph in the popular and intellectual debate surrounding Pruitt-Igoe, an image that implicitly reflects the cultural and political erasure of black bodies, is a means by which the scholarly and general community can further distance themselves from the social failure of Pruitt-Igoe and public housing in general. This creates a historical understanding that evades accountability. "History is hysterical," Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*. "It is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it" (Barthes 65). The construction of history depends on a self that writes or examines the past, and an other that the past depicts. The other becomes nothing more than an object of study, instead of an active historical agent, and the focus on the demolition photograph further separates the authors of a history of Pruitt-Igoe and the residents themselves. This allows the history as written and remembered to further distance itself from the bodies whose needs went

19 This becomes especially troublesome when considering the widespread use of photography as a form of documenting truth. Following Sontag's logic, truth becomes whatever the photographer (or person employing the image) has made it to be.

repeatedly and dramatically unmet. When all that remains of this place—the image of a building—is absent of the people who lived there, it becomes possible to lose sight of the social, legislative, and political failures that impacted those people, in favor of the failure of a physical structure preserved mid-collapse.

In the telling and retelling of the story of Pruitt-Igoe, itself a significant chapter in the story of public housing in the United States, decay and demolition images have been used to prove that Pruitt-Igoe was a failure. But who failed, and to whom does this failure belong? What is the role of the people writing the story? Describing the use of photography in the construction of history, Sontag writes, "The past itself, as historical change continues to accelerate, has become the most surreal of subjects—making it possible, as Benjamin said, to see a new beauty in what is vanishing. From the start, photographers must only set themselves the task of recording a disappearing world but were so employed by those hastening its disappearance" (Sontag 582). The use of photographs in the construction of Pruitt-Igoe's narrative as failure has transformed the buildings into a melancholy spectacle sufficiently separated from the lives of those who lived in them. At the 1934 Paris address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Walter Benjamin said that "The camera is now incapable of photographing a tenement or rubbish-heap without transfiguring it […] It has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment" (qtd. in Sontag 603-4). This condition described by Benjamin is the product of the photograph's split use: its functions as both record-keeping and aesthetic object can sometimes be at odds. "As much as they create sympathy [as a record], photographs cut sympathy, distance the emotions [as an aesthetic object]" (Sontag 605). Regardless of the intended use of the image, its initial emotional load—no matter how terrible or provocative—can easily be made manageable when viewed as an art object, acquiring a troubling beauty.

The distancing effect of a photograph, according to Benjamin, is reinforced through reproduction. "In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking," he writes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." "The here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject" (Benjamin 21). Images of Pruitt-Igoe's 1972 demolition often run alongside arguments that barely touch on the housing project at all, the photograph becoming shorthand for unmitigated social and/or architectural disaster without substantive reference to the housing project itself. Charles Jencks doesn't mention Pruitt-Igoe beyond the opening lines of his attack on Modernism; Edmund Fowler published a brief essay called "Faulty Towers" in 2008 about the problems of high-rise housing (citing Jane Jacobs and Oscar Newman in his analysis) that uses a large reproduction of the implosion image as a frontispiece for the paper, which does not discuss the project at all; Jeff Byles' book *Rubble* also uses the Pruitt-Igoe demolition as a frontispiece, discussing the housing project in fifteen of the book's more than three hundred pages. In Peter Blake's *Form Follows Fiasco*, the housing project is mentioned a handful of times in passing, but receives its own half page spread depicting the demolition (see fig. 15, page 50). While rich with symbolism on its own, the photograph becomes through reproduction—through abstraction—a blank slate upon which a variety of arguments have been imposed, including arguments only tangentially related to the photograph's subject itself.[20]

Photographs have two simultaneous functions: they can create/erase reality by turning a moment of time into a tangible object, and, through reproduction, they can become a cipher for the

20 Part of Pruitt-Igoe's notoriety was that its presence seemed to "infect" other areas, hence the *Globe-Democrat*'s description of all crimes in the neighborhood as "Pruitt-Igoe crimes"—people believed that the housing project might become a toxic drain on the city, and that was part of why it was destroyed. So it is especially interesting that Pruitt-Igoe's toxic reputation endures today precisely because it was destroyed.

truth claims of others. These functions make photography a powerful vehicle in the construction of a historical narrative that runs the risk of being divorced from the complexity of the events that actually transpired. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin describes a process of history making that obliterates the decoupled or ghost subject (in this case, the residents of Pruitt-Igoe, replaced by images of the ruined buildings) in the story of a given trauma: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it as 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. […] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (Benjamin 225). In addition to the erasure of black bodies evidenced by the photograph itself, the resulting histories of the imploded Pruitt-Igoe buildings are a means by which we can further ignore the enormity of the social inequalities that weighed on the bodies themselves, an image that does not live in the public and intellectual consciousness nearly as pervasively as this one does.

Pruitt-Igoe Remembered Through Film

The enduring memory of Pruitt-Igoe has largely been preserved through film. The April 1972 demolitions were widely televised and other footage of the towers being brought down has been featured in productions like Godfrey Reggio's 1982 filmic essay *Koyaanisqatsi* (a loose translation of the Hopi term for "life out of balance," according to the filmmaker), Chad Freidrichs' 2011 documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, building on Katharine Bristol's essay of the same name, and Phillip Andrew Morton's *Spanish Lake*, an account of white flight in the eponymous north St. Louis County suburb. While the overall project of the three films differ, their treatment of Pruitt-Igoe and use of footage of the buildings provides insight into the ways in which the towers have been remembered. *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Spanish Lake*, which appropriates footage of Pruitt-Igoe from *Koyaanisqatsi*, through visual emphasis on the buildings and the buildings alone, furthers the dehumanized mythology surrounding the housing project. They present these buildings, similarly to the image of the ice in the 1970 photograph (see fig. 11, page 39), as a terrifying contagion. *Spanish Lake* shows some of the impact of that toxic image, created through the emphasis on the built environment, on the community surrounding St. Louis. On the other hand, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, by placing Pruitt-Igoe's residents back into the narrative of the towers—even though the individual experiences of each resident interviewed differ radically—restores some humanity to these buildings, especially poignant in light of Alexander von Hoffman's assertion that the true tragedy of these buildings was that they were meant to bring the people back—and didn't. *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* is ultimately and in this one respect a restorative project, returning the human inhabitants of Pruitt-Igoe to the historical narrative of the place. But even this film does not escape the allure of the demolition photograph, using it in countless marketing materials for the production.

Koyaanisqatsi begins with Philip Glass' looming, ominous score, the music in a lower register

and a minor key. The title appears as large red text on a black background. Flames bloom across the screen shortly thereafter, blending into footage that eventually reveals itself to be a rocket launch. The music and visuals are melancholy, chaotic. The launch, arguably a marker of the highest level of human progress and achievement—space! the final frontier!—is recast here in a dismal light, the music, at this point consisting largely of the repeated drone of the film's title, making it clear that this moment of what might be seen as progress is actually a sign that something has gone terribly wrong.

The film quickly moves to demonstrate the state of being now lost with a gorgeous panning shot of the natural landscape, untouched by industry or signs of human civilization, filling the screen. Again the score is mournful, low strings droning behind plaintive cries of woodwinds: this is an elegy. The film continues along these lines, with no human voices besides the choral drone of "koyaanisqatsi" in the soundtrack, until it unveils industrial iconography and skyscrapers, the now ubiquitous symbol of human achievement.

Eventually, a series of quiet strings plays over footage of unnamed cities. A stray building here and there identifies one scene as New York, another Chicago, a third St. Louis. Slow, panning shots linger over trash, piles of bricks, and abandoned buildings. The images are de-saturated, generally brown. The buildings, it becomes clear, are the real subject of this portion of the film (corresponding to the track "Pruit-Igoe" [*sic*] on Glass' score). While there are a few people moving through the streets or sitting on stoops, they flash onto the screen briefly before the camera retreats, attracted to the dangling casing of a light post or a rusted playground slide.

Pruitt-Igoe's signature eleven-story buildings come into view, an aerial shot. The camera pans over windows gaping toothlessly at each other, small shards of glass clinging to the frames. From this angle, the few cars still on the site are tiny, any human walking past would stand only a few pixels tall. The score crescendos abruptly as the camera flies over the buildings. After a few minutes, the

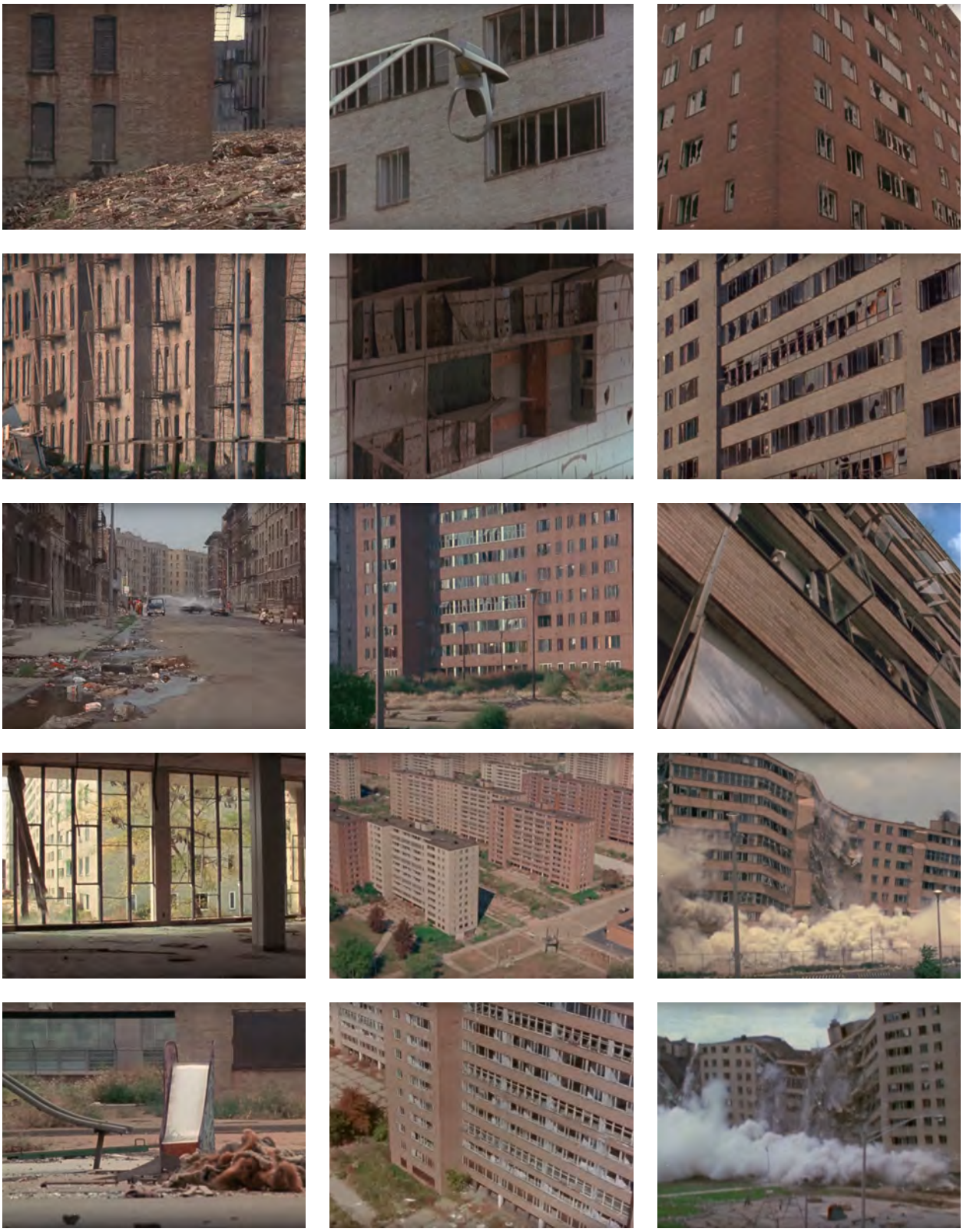

Figure 20. Film stills from *Koyaanisqatsi*. First four (first column, in descending order from top) images do not appear to be from St. Louis.

structures implode, sinking to their knees in a thick clot of brick and concrete dust. Other buildings, bridges, construction equipment, begin to fall, and smoke covers the screen (fig. 20).

The camera work is, for the most part, slow, with several lingering pauses on still images of vandalism and urban ruin. Before the iconic towers of Pruitt-Igoe come into view, the close-up shots of specific instances of partially destroyed sections of the buildings are strung together in a series of cuts. The lack of a continuous world that these images inhabit makes it difficult to place them in a larger universe, suggesting that this version of the world is all there ever was. When the camera begins to move again, it remains fixated on the buildings, panning across a seemingly endless series of façades that do not include forays into the surrounding city. This, coupled with the collage of cities before and after this particular sequence, suggests a kind of nowhere place, divorced from the specific troubles it inherited from the larger world Pruitt-Igoe once occupied. Further, the visual emphasis on the damage to the buildings implies that they alone are what is ruined, as opposed to issues beyond the scope of brick and concrete.

The implication here is that Pruitt-Igoe, among other trappings of contemporary urban and industrial life, is a sign that humanity has gone somehow astray. Following the score for the Pruitt-Igoe section across the internet yields its use in the trailers for *Watchmen*, a 2009 film depicting moral degradation in a dystopic late twentieth century New York City, and *Grand Theft Auto IV*, a video game that allows players to steal and kill for cash. While no piece of scholarly or popular media explicitly makes the case that Pruitt-Igoe's residents were morally suspect in one way or another, the strange second life of the song "Pruit-Igoe" [*sic*] implies that the housing project's legacy is exactly that: a stand-in for not only architectural, but also profound human failure as well. "Films supplant real life," critic Siegfried Kracauer writes in "Those Movies with a Message." "They lend color to public opinion polls. They stir our awareness of the intangible, and they reflect the hidden courses

of our experience. They point out situations that are often difficult to grasp directly but show, under the surface, what we think about ourselves. […] Films mirror our reality" (Kracauer 72). *Koyaanisqatsi* makes no claims outright, but the way in which it depicts Pruitt-Igoe and casts it in its larger argument against the supposedly wrong way that people were living at the time of its release, these sequences reflect and reinforce the understanding of Pruitt-Igoe as a failure for which its residents are implicitly to blame.

This concept of human failure permeates *Spanish Lake*, which sources much of its footage of Pruitt-Igoe (in slightly altered form) from *Koyaanisqatsi*. The narrative arc of the documentary implies that Pruitt-Igoe was in large part responsible for the white flight out of Spanish Lake, Missouri, a small and unincorporated suburb a few miles north of the city. As St Louis and HUD finalized plans to demolish the housing project, residents were granted HUD-sponsored Section 8 housing vouchers to find homes in the private market ("Housing Choice Vouchers Fact Sheet"). The thinking behind Section 8 vouchers, passed as part of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, is somewhat in line with Jane Jacobs' call for diverse communities, placing low-income families in the same neighborhoods as wealthier people, avoiding concentrating poverty in a given area.

However, many suburban towns in St. Louis County resisted Section 8[21] or other programs

21 The effectiveness of Section 8 vouchers provided by HUD, the successor in national policy to the high rise towers of the mid-twentieth century, is an important and necessary question when evaluating state policy regarding low-income housing, albeit one that falls beyond the scope of this paper. In theory (and if we accept Jane Jacobs' view of the city), Section 8 vouchers should work to help alleviate urban poverty. However, as *Spanish Lake* documents, many communities have resisted these vouchers and consequently poverty in cities appears to remain fairly concentrated. In 2013, the Washington *Post* created an interactive map that tracks income and level of college education by zip code throughout the United States (washingtonpost.com/sf/local/2013/11/09/washington-a-world-apart). Looking at the data for zip code 10035, which includes several high rise housing projects in East Harlem, the median household income is $26,365, compared to zip code 10128 (part of the Upper East Side, at most three miles away from East Harlem), which has a median household income of $97,132. The existence of Section 8 alone, it would seem, are not enough to combat local racism and/or discrimination against low-income communities—especially since many cities do not

designed to resettle residents of public housing projects. The formerly unincorporated town of Black Jack, Missouri rapidly incorporated in 1970 to pass a zoning law prohibiting the construction of a planned low-income apartment project. While the zoning law was eventually overturned by *United States v. City of Black Jack, Missouri* in 1974, which found the policy in violation of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, *Spanish Lake* argues that because Spanish Lake did not incorporate like its neighbors in north St. Louis County, the town was forced to accept an influx of former public housing residents. This, along with discriminatory practices by the real estate industry, led to white flight and the town's eventual economic and physical decline. Present-day footage of Spanish Lake shows empty and foreclosed homes in once lively neighborhoods, lawns run unruly with weeds, and windows missing or boarded up (fig. 21). The film includes scenes of former residents returning to their childhood homes and sadly observing years of neglect. Mournful piano music plays in the background under quick interviews with white residents as they push through piles of trash and overgrown greenery. "We didn't know what abandoned houses were," one former resident says as the film cuts to a boarded up single-story home. "All boarded up and, you know, you see fire marks and all this stuff. You see that now. And it hurts me to see that." Another resident laments that even the local Taco Bell could not stay open.

The film, comprised largely of interviews with white former residents (who either left or report things "going bad" around 1973, shortly after the first demolitions at Pruitt-Igoe), is at once sympathetic to the residents' nostalgia, a nostalgia shared by the filmmaker, himself a former resident whose parents moved when he was a child, and critical of their fear. It was this fear, the film asserts through the juxtaposition of footage from *Koyaanisqatsi*, interviews, and the dilapidated landscape of Spanish Lake today, that led to the undoing of the town. Had the more affluent white residents

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have enough Section 8 housing to meet local demands.

Figure 21. Film stills from *Spanish Lake*.

not left Spanish Lake because they were afraid that an influx of former residents of Pruitt-Igoe would lead to economic disaster, the town might not have suffered that very disaster.

Regarding *Spanish Lake*'s marketing, it is interesting to note that the film's trailer exhibits stylistic influences from horror films. The short video opens with a placard advising that viewer discretion should be advised because "THE FOLLOWING TRAILER CONTAINS DISTURBING MATERIAL," with red text on a black background, similar to *Koyaanisqatsi* (fig. 22). The piano score is jarring, and the footage of otherwise banal suburbia is distorted and shaky, cut together quickly. The monster, an essential element of any scary movie, is Pruitt-Igoe (conveniently nicknamed "The Monster" by St. Louis locals in the years leading up to its demolition). "Some people like to call [Spanish Lake] Somalia," a man says over low, buzzing strings. "But it ain't that bad, you know," he says, unconvincingly, as the strings whine loudly.

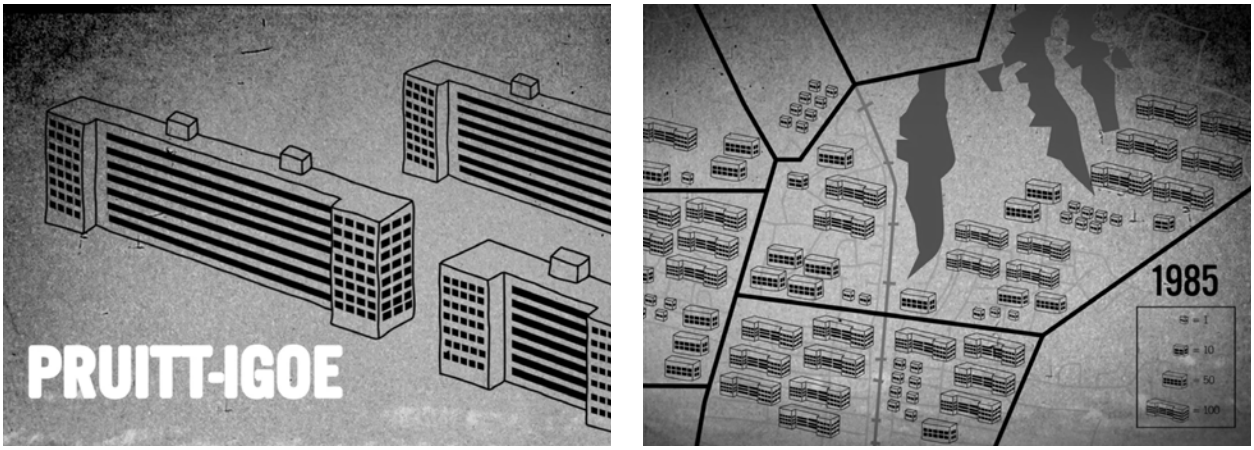
Regardless of the degree to which Pruitt-Igoe was or was not responsible for the population shift in Spanish Lake,[22] it is important to discuss the way in which filmmaker Phillip Andrew Morton presents and critiques the residents' fear. Pruitt-Igoe is visually evoked in two ways: first with an illustrated graphic that is repeated to indicate other apartment complexes in north St. Louis County from the 1970s onward (fig. 23), and footage of general decay and destruction lifted from *Koyaanisqatsi*.

For the most part, as the film points out, the apartment complexes built in the suburbs after Pruitt-Igoe were low-rise structures (and often maintained privately), not massive Modernist slabs. It follows that the architectural style of the buildings would also differ drastically from Pruitt-Igoe, as design trends in the 1970s onward had certainly shifted from the aesthetic ideals of Minoru Yamasa-

22 According to figures given in the film, Spanish Lake was only 17% black as of 1990, fifteen years after Pruitt-Igoe had been destroyed. It was not until the 2010 census that Spanish Lake's population was predominantly black, at around 77%.

Figure 22. Film stills from the trailer for *Spanish Lake* (watch here: youtu.be/Yw38xwWu3r4), with still from beginning of *Koyaanisqatsi* for comparison.

Figure 23. Film stills from *Spanish Lake*. Note similarity of the graphics in both images.



ki's early drafts in 1951. The similarities at most would be that the buildings all had an institutional appearance. Yet the film, in representing these new apartment complexes that bear little to no physical resemblance to Pruitt-Igoe, uses iconography to link the two. A 1970s news clip used in both *Spanish Lake* and *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (Chad Freidrichs, director of the latter film, is credited with research assistance on *Spanish Lake*) explains the fraught nature of this association. Voiceover from the news anchor declares that residents of suburban St. Louis, in this case Black Jack, were in "fear that a project in their neighborhood might become a suburban Pruitt-Igoe, destroying their property values and their safety." The physical condition of Pruitt-Igoe, as shown to residents in the St. Louis area again and again via publication of images in the *Post-Dispatch* and other newspapers, particularly when these buildings are shown without any signs of the tenants' daily lives, which might give the housing project some greater semblance of humanity, appears in this respect as a kind of virus, liable to subject those associated with it (that is, the very residents who must now re-enter the private market) with ruination. The image of the living (or, depending on the year, recently dead) ruin of Pruitt-Igoe was transferred to not only its inhabitants, but also other apartment complexes that would presumably house them. In critiquing this fear, *Spanish Lake* visually re-enacts it through using illustrations that link Pruitt-Igoe with the new apartment complexes. This re-enactment becomes even more apparent through the film's use of footage from *Koyaanisqatsi*.

The appropriated footage is eerie. Even re-ordered and stripped of Philip Glass' dread-inducing score, the images flit across the screen like doom, and the only signs of human life within the housing project are the scars of neglect: vandalized mailboxes, broken light fixtures, trash everywhere. The inhabitants are present through the markers of their absence, the ghosts of Barthes' description of the photographed image appear embodied here as waste and decay. In *Theory of Film*, Siegfried Kracauer argues that film shares a number of qualities with photography, and documentary film, in

particular, retains photography's seeming authority and truthfulness.[23] "The thing that matters is veracity," he writes of the British documentary *Housing Problems*, a film about slum conditions in London. "It is precisely the snapshot quality of the pictures [in the film] which makes them appear as authentic documents" (Kracauer 202). This is to say that the documentary film that makes use of a snapshot-like image, as *Spanish Lake* does with the scenes from *Koyaanisqatsi*, imbues those images with the quality of a truth claim. Remembering Pruitt-Igoe's residents in this way, through these images, establishes a specific and dehumanized kind of historical narrative that becomes recognized as truth through the medium of its expression.

In addition, the appropriation of footage from *Koyaanisqatsi* leads to the further erasure of the iconography's original meaning. When situated in the context of a deeply segregated mid-twentieth century St. Louis, the vandalism and decay can be understood as the consequences of deep and often racist neglect on an institutional level. Removed from that context, the images of the built environment can tell a very different story. As Kracauer writes in *Theory of Film* of a work by Eisenstein, "One shot shows […] a peacock spreading its plumage, the stereotyped symbol of vanity; hands playing harps satirize the futility of Menshevist peace pledges; an enormous typewriter dwarfs the typist behind it, evoking the notion of dehumanized bureaucracy. Yet the use of these objects as signs or symbols voids the shots of them of their inherent meanings. They stand for something outside of them; any peacock would do, indeed" (Kracauer 208). Just as the images of Pruitt-Igoe used in arguments that are not about the towers at all transform the housing project into an abstraction, the re-use of these images in films like *Spanish Lake* strip the original scenes of their specific meaning

23 To be clear, a number of theorists—Sontag included—would argue that film is an entirely different medium than photography and should be treated as such. However, Kracauer makes a compelling argument in *Theory of Film* and offers a number of conclusions that are productive to consider when regarding the filmic treatment of Pruitt-Igoe.

Figure 24. Film stills from *Spanish Lake*, subtitles included to indicate that the middle image is from a continuous voiceover scene.

(a meaning already altered by their inclusion in *Koyaanisqatsi* in the first place).

Going further, film, as Walter Benjamin argues in "Works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," can be a powerful tool of social education. "The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily" (Benjamin 26). The function of film as a form of social education lends itself to an understanding of film as a form of social reinforcement—that is, the way in which the behavior of the residents of Pruitt-Igoe (who were not interviewed in the film) is portrayed on camera assists in training the audience to believe that these people would always behave in this way, regardless of their environment, and that their behavior is not the product of any larger, structural forces. *Spanish Lake* does include interviews that attempt to push back against the narrative of the tenants as inherently destructive, but the visual story told alongside the audio testimonies is powerful and unsettling (fig. 24). "It was about the environment, a man says, referring to the Pruitt-Igoe architecture myth. "So if we take down the high-rises,"—the footage cuts to the 1972 demolition

of the buildings—"and put 'em [the tenants] close to a river and trees, then we could probably just let the environment raise 'em. And it wasn't about the environment," he says, before he and other interviewees explain their own version of Pruitt-Igoe's failure, describing social dysfunctions within families created by harsh economic realities faced by residents and strict controls enforced by federal welfare organizations that meant parents were rarely around. As a current black Spanish Lake resident says, "My mother worked two or three jobs […] so my older sister raised us, when we didn't raise ourselves. So she was a baby raising a baby because mother had to go out and, you know, make it happen for the whole family." The use of the Pruitt-Igoe demolition footage, even alongside an argument that disputes the claims that specific footage has been used to promote, retains its damning effects. In this instance, the film rejects many aspects of the Pruitt-Igoe mythology and offers an argument that criticizes the former residents of Spanish Lake for their fear of Pruitt-Igoe, yet the repeated use of the ominous demolition footage makes it easy to see why they might have been afraid.[24]

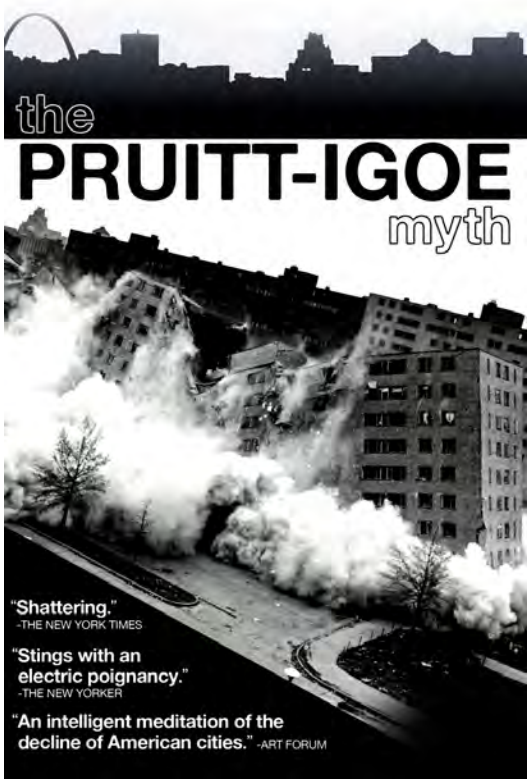
Besides *Spanish Lake*, arguably the most prominent re-entry of Pruitt-Igoe into popular culture in the past few years has been Chad Freidrichs' *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, a documentary that builds on the 1991 essay of the same name by Katharine Bristol. Freidrichs makes the case that far from being the victim of bad architecture; Pruitt-Igoe was doomed by a complex combination of poor policy-making dating back to the 1949 Housing Act; missteps by urban planners who failed to see that both jobs and middle-class white citizens were leaving St. Louis; restrictive social policies by local and national welfare organizations; and disastrously poor upkeep by the St. Louis Housing Authority, in

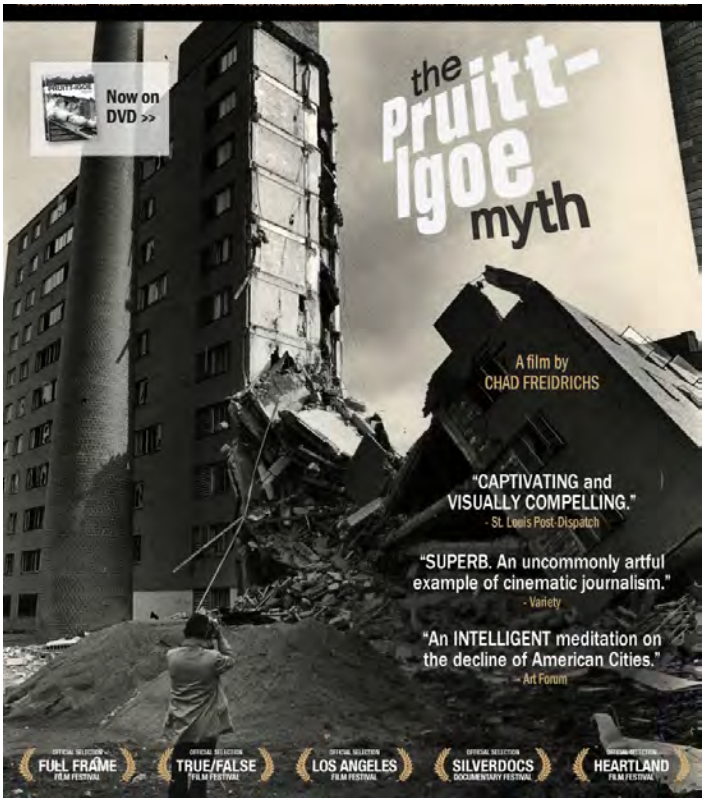
24 As a final note, while the film only briefly discusses Cabrini-Green in Chicago, which some consider to be even more notorious than Pruitt-Igoe, the footage *Spanish Lake* uses to display the housing project is taken, according to the film's credits, from *Candyman*, a 1992 horror flick that chose Cabrini as its shooting location because director Bernard Rose believed it "was a place of such palpable fear."

part because the project's massive finances and maintenance needs depended upon the income of a rapidly diminishing (and increasingly impoverished) tenant population.

The film, as with essentially all other visual records of Pruitt-Igoe, makes extensive use of demolition and archival news reports featuring the buildings as living ruins: its two covers for commercial release depict both the 1972 implosion and a chilling photograph of the partially demolished rubble (fig. 25). Its claims, as evident through the choice to reference Bristol's essay in the title, are by no means unique. Several of the historians and theorists quoted and featured in the film, such as Joseph Heathcott and Robert Fishman, have published more or less the same arguments they say on camera. However, what makes *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* so poignant (and relatively popular among viewers outside of academia) is the use of oral testimony from former residents. The power of the oral testimonies is augmented by their presentation through film. While Lee Rainwater's 1970 study *Behind Ghetto Walls* and Ethan Kaplan's 1972 sociological report on the residents, in addition to a handful of interviews in local newspapers conducted around the same time, all feature the voices of the tenants, these voices come packaged and shaped through the lens of the particular disciplines and frameworks in which they appear. Rainwater and Kaplan's subjects are presented (without their images) as tools to assist in a larger sociological analysis about low-income family life, while the newspapers interviews are not only no longer widely accessible to the general public some forty years after their publication (in contrast, Rainwater's book is still available for sale online), but are also typically accompanied by a photograph of the buildings instead of the human subject. For example, women named Helen Robinson and Rachel Johnson, both former tenants who moved to Pruitt-Igoe shortly after it opened in 1954, are quoted in E.F. Porter's 1975 article "'Pruitt-Igoe Must Be Destroyed'" in the *Post-Dispatch*, but the accompanying illustration is a caricature of the (white) demolition overseer drawn onto a section of the April 1972 implosion photograph (fig. 26). Not only does the implo-

Figure 25. The two release covers for *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, via First Run Features.





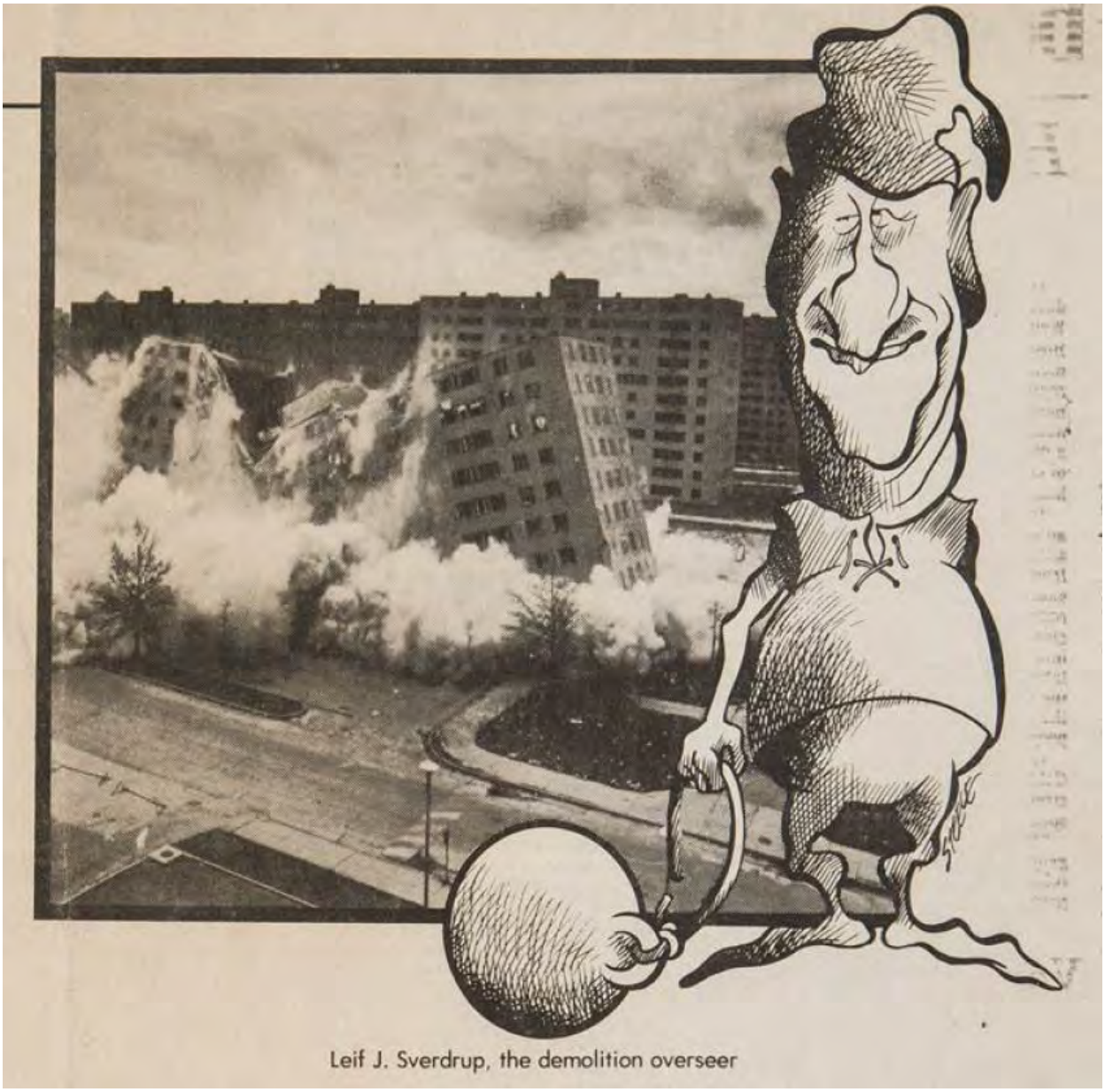


Figure 26. 1975 photo illustration from the *Post-Dispatch* showing the demolition overseer in front of a reproduction of the 1972 implosion photo.

sion seem more monstrous compared to the silliness of the drawing, the overall effect is to override the relatively positive memories expressed by the former residents: "Mrs. Robinson is still nostalgic. 'When I drive past now, I get a hurt feeling. When they blew up those buildings, I got a hurt feeling.' 'We worked hard in Pruitt-Igoe,' said Rachel Johnson, another charter resident. 'We planted flowers and we waxed the floors. We loved it. For me, Pruitt-Igoe is still home'" (Porter 5F). While the overall article is critical of the housing project, the glimmers here of daily life, even enjoyable daily life, that might otherwise contradict the overall narrative of Pruitt-Igoe as a monstrous space are immediately drowned out by the repeated use of the implosion photograph.

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth, like the journalists, sociologists, and others, certainly uses these interviews with tenants in service of a particular argument. And while the edited nature of the film may appear more invisible than editing decisions made in print, giving the impression that the taped testimonies are less crafted by an outside hand (thus approaching the appearance of a greater level of truth or authenticity), there is still significance in the new visual story being told by including the images of the tenants alongside the more established narrative of Pruitt-Igoe's physical decline. *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, unlike most other works about the housing project, reunites the people with their environment. When the former tenants speak, for the most part, the camera remains on their faces, taking up most of the space on screen in front of a simple white background (fig. 27). The tenants are framed on camera no differently than the various theorists and scholars interviewed for the film, visually leveling the playing field between academic or intellectual discourse and lived experience—the documentary allows the words of each subject to have equal weight. In contrast, *Koyaanisqatsi* has no human subjects with speaking roles, and *Spanish Lake* presents Pruitt-Igoe without interviewing a single subject that identifies him or herself as a former resident of St. Louis public housing.

In historical terms, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* takes on the role of a restorative project, allowing

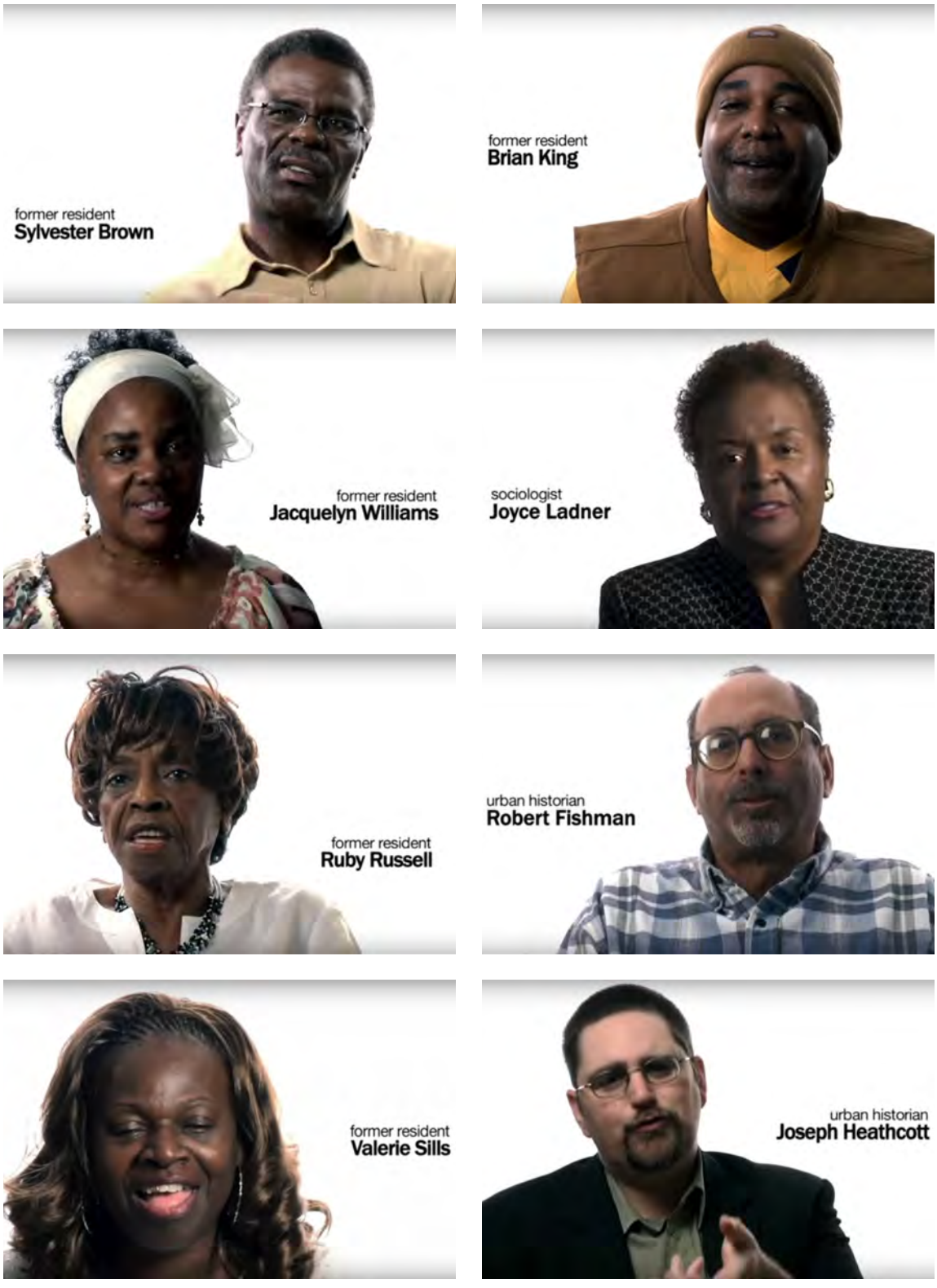


Figure 27. Subjects of *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth.*

through its visual argument for a new consideration of what the failure of Pruitt-Igoe means. Unlike other narratives, the film presents the people failed by Pruitt-Igoe and a variety of their experiences. One man wistfully describes his childhood apartment as a "poor man's penthouse," then later details the visceral fear he felt because of gang violence he witnessed as a young black teen. A woman repeatedly calls Pruitt-Igoe her home, and details the joy of Christmas at the housing project, remembering its hallways as being full of other children with which to run and play. A third describes in painful detail, almost in tears, how he witnessed his brother's death by stabbing, and how in order to escape from the world of Pruitt-Igoe he would cross the street and play with the bugs in the weeds as a child.

In the debate surrounding Pruitt-Igoe, the actual lives and bodies of the residents have been overwhelmingly replaced with an intense focus on the physical conditions in which they lived, allowing the conversation to stray into territory that does not address the structural failures that contributed to the rapid decline of the tenants' quality of life and safety. By decoupling the residents from the structure and allowing the structure to stand in for the residents, it has been that much easier to neglect the institutional and social problems that necessitated Pruitt-Igoe's construction in the first place: poverty in a nation with abundant wealth, lack of access to clean and safe housing, political and social systems stricken by racism—all problems at the forefront of American life today, forty years after the towers fell.

Conclusion

In the years since its demolition, Pruitt-Igoe has widely become known as one of the most infamous housing projects to exist in the United States. While Cabrini-Green in Chicago was not fully demolished until 2011, Pruitt-Igoe's status as a symbol of ruin and failure, visually represented largely through images and footage of its 1972 demolition, has helped cement the idea that the construction of high-rise housing projects was a doomed endeavor. Today, New York City is one of the very few that maintains its high-rise housing projects, with most other cities toppling their towers and scattering their residents across various communities through Section 8 vouchers and other HUD initiatives.

The housing project was built with the hope of transforming St. Louis into a vibrant metropolis, elevating the city's poorest in massive new structures and bringing a diminishing population back to the city. Just as its design was praised as a form of social salvation in the 1950s, the architecture became a convenient source of fault over the course of the next two decades as the project fell into decline and was ultimately destroyed. The Pruitt-Igoe myth, as Katharine Bristol describes the architecture-to-blame theory, is appealing—if only the design had been different, perhaps Pruitt-Igoe could have been a success.

City planners believed that St. Louis' troubles were physical. This belief, along with the host of images deployed in order to support it, from blighted tenements to shining towers rising above them, limited the discussion of these troubles to just that: the buildings. These early images highlight not only the faith and optimism that city planners invested in Pruitt-Igoe and its design, they also produce a complex portrait of racism and poverty, from *Post-Dispatch* photographs that portray black children as an essentially impoverished other to a St. Louis Housing Authority report that swallows the black body of a teacher in order to feature the smiling faces of white children.

The process of turning Pruitt-Igoe into an abstraction meant to stand in for failures of public housing at large (as well as the failures of Modernism and a host of other things only tangentially related to the housing project itself) happened quickly as both Modernism and the buildings themselves fell into decline. Organizations seeking to document the increasingly poor living conditions of Pruitt-Igoe's residents began using those images in service of arguments entirely unrelated to anything that would have helped alleviate those conditions.

Pruitt-Igoe's 1972 demolition and the shadow of that implosion photograph over the ensuing academic and popular debate over the course of the years since the towers fell has only further distanced the discussion from the reasons for which Pruitt-Igoe was built in the first place. While a more nuanced understanding of Pruitt-Igoe's failure has emerged through decades of rigorous scholarly debate, a structural failure that includes discrimination, poor urban and social planning, and utter neglect, the story of Pruitt-Igoe has become more about the mythology of the place instead of a way to work toward actionable steps that address the reasons it not only failed, but was built at all. Each of these arguments have enlisted the service of film footage and photographs of the housing project to illustrate their claims. It is tempting to see these images as passive objects, providing a kind of visual evidence to substantiate a number of different views. But in this case, the lasting impact of these photographs has been in the transformation of Pruitt-Igoe into an icon of ruin. This transformation has informed and shaped the greater historical narrative, and the absence of tenants within these images has only furthered the self/other divide between the residents and the people telling their story.

Today, there is no definitive narrative of Pruitt-Igoe. It continues to be cast as a monster, as shown by *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Spanish Lake*, even as works like *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* attempt to restore the buildings' residents to the story of their homes and untangle the complicated web of policy, rac-

ism, neglect, and myth.

New York still has its towers. Cabrini-Green, according to a 2015 editorial in the Chicago *Tribune*, is rapidly gentrifying. Residents of the Near North Side neighborhood, which houses a diminishing number of Chicago Housing Authority-owned properties, can now enjoy a brand new Target and Starbucks built on the site of the former housing project. The St. Louis Housing Authority's website reports that its Section 8 waiting list is currently closed. The city has left the thirty-three acres where Pruitt-Igoe once stood entirely abandoned. Perhaps this emptiness, this vacancy at the heart of a major American city, is the most accurate representation of Pruitt-Igoe's legacy as there is.

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