

Planning News – Commentary

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Pruitt-Igoe

My family dating back three generations is all native Saint Louisans. I remember my great grandmother and other relatives regaling me with stories of the 1904 World's Fair midway where the ice cream cone and iced tea were invented, gas streetlamps downtown, speakeasies in the 20's, the 1944 World Series between the St. Louis Cardinals and St. Louis Browns and the building of the Gateway Arch.

One additional Saint Louis landmark event is less heralded in my hometown, but nonetheless has had an impact both nationally and internationally. Forty years ago, the first of the '*implosions heard 'round the world*' commenced. Along with the wrecking ball destruction of 33 high-rise apartment buildings barely sixteen years old, the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe laid bare social, racial, architectural, demographic, governmental, political and economic failures, hopes, fears and misconceptions that defined America's mid-century urban neurosis.

My family's 'ties' to the Pruitt-Igoe area are many. My mother grew up in a north St. Louis neighborhood two miles from the site. My father worked as a concrete finisher for the project, building sidewalks and parking lots. My grandfather's hardware store remained in the same neighborhood, north of Pruitt-Igoe, into the late 70's. My family saw firsthand the ups and downs of north Saint Louis, neighborhoods in the city in general and eventually the city itself.



(Pruitt-Igoe Development upon its completion in the late 50's)

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(Families awaiting opening day orientation into their new homes)

While too young to remember the birth of Pruitt-Igoe, I do recall its slow death in the early 70's. I don't remember a time when public housing developments in St. Louis were ever 'nice'. By the time I was old enough to take notice, public developments of the massive type at Pruitt-Igoe all had broken windows, boarded-up doors, falling-apart fences, abandoned vehicles, broken fire hydrants and ubiquitous graffiti. By the early 90's these Corbusier-eque slab-style projects were torn down in Saint Louis (as they were in most cities), and were replaced with dispersed housing, low-rise contextual townhouses and eventually, vouchers.



(Racially-integrated community activities – a first in Saint Louis)

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(Decline During the 60's)

So what went so terribly wrong, and why? Were the social and economic changes in the country so disruptive and overwhelming that no level of “social engineering” could address them? Could planners not anticipate the massive community disruptions that would result from this wholesale neighborhood displacement and upheaval? Did the failure to properly fund, build and maintain them as originally designed and envisioned, doom them from the start? Were politicians not able to see that, far from triggering investment, a return to the city and an increased tax base, developments like Pruitt-Igoe only sped the flight from the city and decreased property values in the surrounding area? Did racial unrest and fear, amplified by the largest internal migration in history during the 40's and 50's, prove too much to overcome? Finally, did the GI Bill, subsidized interstate freeway system and mass-produced suburban housing technology act as the final nail in the urban neighborhood coffin? Likely, the mixed soup of all of these ingredients played the part.

A new documentary *Pruitt-Igoe: the Myth* has recently been circulating around various communities in the country, after its premier in Saint Louis. While I have not yet seen it, I have read about its sensitive and well-researched story of the residents and families who were uprooted from their thriving though poverty-stricken original neighborhood demolished to make way for Pruitt-Igoe, the families who subsequently called Pruitt-Igoe home and the displacement and eventual abandonment and demolition of the neighborhood anew.

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(From inside one of the notorious common area breezeways)



(Wholesale abandonment starts)

If good can come of adversity, let's hope the past forty years have made us planners better agents of community improvement, brought us a greater awareness and sensitivity to the role the built environment plays in people's lives, and instilled in us a respect for the importance of community ownership and input in shaping and facilitating better neighborhoods.

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(Implosions commence – note Gateway Arch in the background)

To date, nothing has been rebuilt on the massive Pruitt-Igoe site. After years of verdant plant growth through the changing Midwest seasons, the site has reverted to its green, natural, meadow/prairie condition whose only residents are small rodents, feral cats, raccoons and birds. Considering how much emotion, anger, hand-wringing and soul-searching the site engendered, the area today looks rather bucolic and...innocuous.



(Pruitt-Igoe Site Today)