

Do you think that any of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings could have been saved instead of being demolished?

Yes. There was a viable plan produced by the tenants themselves, working with the Chicago architect Walter Netsch. The plan called for the demolition of half of the buildings, along with reducing the height of the remaining towers to 2, 4, and 6 stories. Along with new garden landscaping and low-rise rowhouses, it would have been a brand new neighborhood of mixed public and private housing. But the federal government and the local housing authority wanted to wash their hands of the project once and for all, and so went ahead with demolition.

What laws have been passed as a result of Pruitt-Igoe's demise?

No laws were passed based on Pruitt-Igoe, but a few things did change. There was a famous "rent strike" at Pruitt-Igoe from 1969-1969, where tenants joined together to withhold rent payments until they gained a greater say in management. While this didn't help Pruitt-Igoe to avoid its fate, it was a practice that spread across the country. Today tenants have much more say in the management of public housing, thanks to the efforts of Pruitt-Igoe tenants.

Did President Nixon's anti-public housing campaign influence the demolition? How?

It is difficult to say what influence Nixon's policies had. He definitely oversaw the shift away from large-scale government spending on urban problems, consolidating a wide range of programs into stripped-down block grants to States. But there were plenty of people who wanted to see Pruitt-Igoe torn down, even before Nixon was elected, and these voices gained steam by the late 1960s. However, you are no doubt correct to suggest that his election and policies very likely accelerated the process, especially since there was less and less money available to fix public housing problems under his administration.

Which political groups influenced the construction of Pruitt-Igoe?

Pruitt-Igoe had many constituencies for and against. The main supporters were downtown business interests (bankers, department store owners, industrialists, financiers) who wanted to see the ring of slums (low-rise private market tenements) around the downtown cleared out and the people who lived there relocated into public housing projects. Trade unions supported public housing because it meant hundreds of good paying construction jobs--and organized labor was very powerful in St. Louis politics at that time. Some African-American groups supported public housing because it would mean better homes for black families, while others opposed it because it was a "warehousing" approach to housing people and it would destroy black businesses in the cleared neighborhoods. Large developers and contractors supported public housing, while real estate interests and landlords opposed it because they worried about government competition in the housing markets. Some opposed public housing purely on the grounds that it was an intrusive federal program, likening it to "Communism" (and that carried

weight in the 1950s because of the Cold War). All of these groups worked to influence Congress for and against public housing, so that the program was full of difficult compromises from the beginning.

What exactly were the welfare limitations for people living in public housing in Missouri?

To live in public housing anywhere, families must 'income-qualify', meaning that they cannot make over a certain amount of money--this amount is usually set at 60% of area median income. If a family already resides in a project and their income rises above that amount, they have to move out. Many policy experts argue that this is one of the major flaws of the program, because it provides a 'disincentive' to increase income, especially in places like New York City where public housing is a really good deal. In addition, in Missouri and elsewhere, public housing tenants receiving ADC benefits (Aid to Dependent Children) in the 1950s and 1960s had another layer of income qualification, which often resulted in fathers having to move out so that the benefits could continue. There was a definite moralistic bias against families with fathers receiving welfare. For these reasons, public housing gradually became a place for very low-income female-headed households.

How did the labor unions in St. Louis effect the construction of Pruitt-Igoe?

Labor unions backed the public housing program in St. Louis, and there probably would not have been public housing without their support. Some economists would argue that the high wages paid to union construction workers increased the cost of construction of housing projects, which meant that the limited budgets had to be stretched. They argue that the high cost of labor resulted in cost reductions elsewhere, such as using inferior materials and setting timetables that made quality control difficult. Other economists argue that other factors played just as important a role, including the shortages of materials during the Korean War (1950-1953) and the high price of materials during the recession that followed the war (1954-1957).

Was maintenance performed ONLY by union workers?

Yes, the Housing Authority maintenance staff was unionized. For a time, the Housing Authority did employ a non-union security force.

What happened to the people whose homes were torn down to build Pruitt-Igoe?

Its difficult to know in any total sense, but my students and I did a small study of several blocks in the DeSoto-Carr neighborhood prior to its clearance for Pruitt-Igoe. We wanted to see where people went when they were dislocated. Using census information and city directories, we found that most families moved either into Mill Creek Valley (the city's largest African-American "ghetto"), or into similar

neighborhoods to the West of the site. Some of the families did eventually move into Pruitt-Igoe or other housing projects, but there was never any guarantee that they would be given units in the new projects. They had to apply and qualify along with everyone else.

What public transportation was available to Pruitt-Igoe residents?

Pruitt-Igoe came on line at the very moment that the streetcar system in St. Louis was being dismantled. For a few years, residents still had access to several trolley routes, but by 1958 all streetcar services had ceased. Most of the routes were replaced by buses, which in many respects were more efficient and operated more frequently. For those Pruitt-Igoe residents that worked in the garment / warehouse district or in downtown stores and offices, the project was within walking distance.

Why did the St. Louis Housing Authority have to use union workers?

Unions were very powerful in St. Louis in the 1950s and 1960s. They were active in the Democratic Party, supported candidates for mayor and city council and other positions, and had seats reserved for them on the Housing Authority and other similar bodies. So the idea of using non-union labor in St. Louis for these kinds of jobs was simply not an option. The strength of unions probably drove up construction costs, but it also created a strong middle-class with purchasing power, which in turn kept the city's economy strong.

With the addition of Pruitt-Igoe and other large housing projects, how was the SLHA prepared to meet the projects' needs?

The Housing Authority expanded its staff and operations dramatically in the 1950s to accommodate the new projects coming on line - not just Pruitt-Igoe, but also Darst-Webbe, Vaughan-Taylor, and Blumeyer Homes. They hired both on site and off site. On site, they hired new managers, assistant managers, rent collectors, maintenance staff, groundskeepers. For the 'back office' functions, they had to bring aboard more accountants, secretaries, clerks, social workers, and other staff.

Why was there so little oversight of maintenance of Pruitt-Igoe?

All public housing projects in the U.S. are meant to be 'self-sustaining.' This means that they must pay their mortgage debts and fund their operations, maintenance, and upkeep from the rents they receive from tenants. The federal government's investment comes primarily at the front end, with low-interest loans for construction. Local housing authorities do not receive extra funds from the federal government for operations costs. Thus, public housing, just like private market housing, is highly vulnerable to vacancy. If the vacancy rates go up, there is less money for operations. In New York City

this was never a problem, because the waiting lists for public housing have always been long. In St. Louis, however, the rapid decline of population in the 1960s led to lower overall housing prices in the city, which led to vacancies in many of the public housing projects--especially Pruitt-Igoe. So its not that the Housing Authority was negligent in providing maintenance; rather, it simply had less and less money to do so.

Was the vandalism at Pruitt-Igoe typical of vacant buildings in the area?

Yes, but it got more attention because of the project's massive scale and notoriety. Vacant buildings in the old, low-rise neighborhoods around Pruitt-Igoe suffered even worse, with vandalism, scavenging, and arson a common condition. The vandalism at Pruitt-Igoe, however, was more obvious because it was in the media spotlight. Many felt that because it was a taxpayer investment, the vandalism was an affront to taxpayer support. Of course, taxpayers only marginally supported public housing, since much of it was financed through bonds and low-interest loans. Many residents argued that the vandalism was a response to the lack of maintenance and care for the project, and that the Housing Authority sent the signal that it didn't care what happened to the place. Unfortunately, all of this created a vicious cycle that nobody could easily control.

How do you think that Pruitt-Igoe's failure has influenced the public's attitude towards the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor?

Pruitt-Igoe has often been used as a 'foil' or symbol for arguments against public investment, and as an argument against the very idea of government intervention for the public good. On the front end, tenants were screened based on ideas of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (income, criminal backgrounds, welfare compliance, etc). As the project declined, the larger public tended to blame the residents and their poverty for the problems, rather than the policies that created the problems. This kind of blame shaded into racist views of tenants as lacking the proper 'morality' or 'skills' to live in high-rise urban housing. In the end, many people in the general public blamed the residents for the failure of the project, therefore casting them as 'undeserving' of government generosity (bearing in mind, again, that public housing is only nominally supported by federal granting).

How did racism affect the location of Pruitt-Igoe?

Significantly. First, its important to know that all public housing projects in St. Louis (and most in the U.S.) before 1954 were built and settled on the basis of racial segregation, which at the time was legal. Projects were conceived either as all-white or all-black projects. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court overthrew "separate but equal" (Brown v. Board of Education) in public accommodations. For public housing, this mean that Housing Authorities could no longer use race as an explicit criteria for tenancy.

Of course, existing housing projects continued to be segregated, since desegregation only applied to *new* projects.

Meanwhile, since the 1930s, St. Louis elected officials and city planners saw public housing as a way to increase segregation in the city. Projects for white families would be built in largely white neighborhoods (mostly the South Side), while projects for black families would be built in predominantly black neighborhoods (mostly the North Side). Pruitt Homes was conceived as a blacks-only project and slated for the North Side. Igoe Apartments was originally conceived as a whites-only project and slated for the South Side. But the Igoe site on the South Side was not ready in time for construction, so planners relocated Igoe Apartments to the North Side adjacent to Pruitt Homes. City officials knew that, after the 1954 Supreme Court Decision, any interest by white families to live at Igoe Apartments would disappear because the area was predominantly African-American. As a result, the Pruitt-Igoe project was 100% African-American by the time it was fully settled in 1956.

What are some examples of public housing projects built at the time of Pruitt-Igoe that were successful? Why have these not received the same attention as the failures?

All public housing projects that have been built in New York City at any time, from the 1930s through the present, continue to exist, and indeed to provide an absolutely critical function in the overall housing system of the city. In many ways, NYC would not be possible without public housing, as half a million people call the projects home. These are the people that keep the city running, and public housing allows people to live and work in relatively close proximity, therefore reducing commuting and traffic congestion as well as the amount that working families have to spend to get to their places of employment, which in turn leaves them with more money to spend in the economy.

Most of the public housing projects in New York were built between 1937 and 1965, and nearly all of these are in the high-rise tower form similar to Pruitt-Igoe. In most respects they are no different from Pruitt-Igoe--perhaps a little more durable. The big difference is not the buildings or even the management, but rather the demand. Unlike St. Louis and other cities (Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore) there has never been a vacancy problem in NYC public housing, so therefore there has been enough money to do the bare maintenance required to keep the buildings in decent shape.

I would say that Pruitt-Igoe gets a lot of attention because its failure was so spectacular, and because it was the first housing project to be demolished in the U.S. -- a trend that swept the nation in the 1990s and 2000s. But Pruitt-Igoe's failure was so spectacular because the city of St. Louis's decline and population loss was so rapid and intense, perhaps more so than any other American big city (much more

than Chicago, for example). While New York City did lose population in the 1970s, it was only a blip of a downturn, which has since been reversed. St. Louis continues to decline, unfortunately.

So Pruitt-Igoe, with its dramatic implosion image, very quickly became a 'symbol' of urban decline. Politicians, policy makers, and other interests have used the symbol of the blown up housing project to advance arguments against government intervention, welfare, and public investments in housing. Unfortunately, they tend not to see the complexities of the Pruitt-Igoe case, and miss the deep grain of the story.