The Pruitt-Igoe Myth

Dir. Chad Freidrichs
83 min.; 2011

Reviewed by Michael Kuelker
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On St. Louis’ near north side, shaped out of the old DeSoto Carr neighborhood and fueled by mid-century theories of modernism in politics and architecture, there came and went something called Pruitt-Igoe. The name itself has never failed to signify – as the mid-20th century example above all others in America of high hopes and failed design and as a gathering place of all the maledictions of poverty. Michael Allen, a St. Louis architectural historian, calls it “the site of the death of public housing in the United States.”

But before the death, Pruitt-Igoe had a birth and short life. In his riveting 2011 documentary, Chad Friedrichs goes beyond what he calls a thin “myth” of perdition and failure about the community. One instance, not cited in the film but easily found online, comes from a speech in St. Louis given May 3, 1991, by President George H.W. Bush: “Think of how Pruitt-Igoe suffocated this community, attracted crime and sheltered drugs and shattered hope.” And that’s all the President offered about Pruitt-Igoe in his housing policy speech, a one-sentence jab at our fear glands. Examples like this have replicated endlessly in the last 35 years, and so a film with new oral history and social and historical context is not only valuable but necessary. The Pruitt-Igoe Myth is a work of density and range which has earned every one of its many fine reviews, an indispensable reference for academic and political discourse and, more generally, for the public consciousness on subsidized housing in the United States.

Erected in 1956 and demolished just 20 years later, Pruitt-Igoe was intended to be a model of modern housing for low income residents. For a short time, the vision was realized. In the early days the residences in the 33 buildings on 57 acres – “vertical neighborhoods for poor people” – provided uplift for the residents. Many of them were single mothers whose children are interviewed in the film. Ruby Russell was the first in her unit to be moved in – to the top floor, the 11th, which she describes as a “poor man’s penthouse.” Jacqueline Williams recalls the three-room shack where she and her 11 siblings grew up (and where her mother slept on a rollaway cot in the kitchen) and the much nicer amenities at Pruitt-Igoe, where everyone had a bed and her mother had her own room. Valerie Sills fondly reminisces about the shimmering lights of Christmastime across the complex.
But by the 1960s the dream was dying. Pruitt-Igoe became a casualty not only of vandalism, violent crime and neglect but of a little-acknowledged failure of planning at the macro level. Its problems intractable, Pruitt-Igoe began to be dismantled in 1972, and the implosion of Building C-15 produced one of the era’s iconic images about public housing. By 1976, P-I was rubble, its inhabitants dispersed, relegated to fodder for academicians and policy makers and political pundits.

“Little was said,” the film tells us about the standard narrative of Pruitt-Igoe, “about the laws that built and maintained it, the economy that deserted it, the segregation that stripped away opportunity, the radically changing city in which it stood.”

Pruitt-Igoe, we learn, was financially doomed from the start. The 1949 Housing Act, the federal legislation which set the housing project in motion, didn’t have provisions for maintenance beyond monies collected in rent. The residents were low income in the first place. Compounding the problem were the unforeseen variables. As soon as the site opened and against projections, St. Louis began losing population. People who could move out to the suburbs or elsewhere in the emptying city did so, leaving the housing project to the poorest. The physical facilities were neglected and abused: broken windows were chronically left as-is; lights were vandalized even when fashioned into prison-quality lighting, covered with mesh or Plexiglas and recessed deep into the ceiling; elevators stank with urine.

But there is another narrative, one just as dense, that Friedrichs unveils.

“I remember a warm sense of family, a warm sense of community,” says Sylvester Brown, Jr, who lived there as a child from 1964-67. Brown renewed interest in the housing project when he was a columnist for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in the 2000s. “Pruitt-Igoe is a place that I remember of different smells, of pies and cookies and cakes and all these eclectic dishes ... It was a place where we played hard, up and down these little breezeways and up and down the steps and running around.”

The design of the housing, though, became endemic to the problems of the place. Pruitt-Igoe encompassed 25 blocks and at peak population had upwards of 12,000 residents in the 11-story buildings. There can’t be that many people in that space without services – public safety, a grocery, everything a village needs. There were too many people in a relatively small area; things couldn’t help but break down more often, though vandals undoubtedly worsened things.

These visible realities overlapped with the pernicious way the welfare system operated. The system had punitive stipulations and, damagingly, offered assistance to single mothers but not if there were men at home. Without income-earning men consistently at home with their families, there was a vacuum out of which arose a violent hypermasculine ethos.
As Brown says, “The experiment had gone terribly awry.” Vacant, unmonitored buildings became havens for the worst elements. “You had drug dealers who would go and set up a whole empire in an empty building,” Brown recalls. “Criminal activity could fester.”

Things turned especially incongruous when, amid the danger and chronic dilapidation, residents were expected to pay increases in rent. But passive they were not. In 1969, people organized, using the Pruitt-Igoe community center to conduct meetings that resulted in a rent strike and peaceable public demonstrations. The St. Louis Housing Authority acceded to some of the residents’ demands, but the housing project would soon be no more.

Director Freidrichs offers a taut, engrossing, multi-layered and multi-vocal treatment, with sharp observations from the four former residents and the historians. But the documentary is only 83 minutes in length and nags me with questions:

Why wasn’t Pruitt-Igoe better maintained? We see from the film that the place was neglected, but we would do well with a flow chart of power and responsibility.

Why weren’t there contingency plans in case the growth in population and job opportunities that the vision depended on didn’t materialize?

How does Pruitt-Igoe compare to other housing projects?

In the sixties, as conditions in Pruitt-Igoe worsened, where was Lyndon Johnson and his administration’s War on Poverty and commitments of a Great Society?

Who represented the people of Pruitt-Igoe in the halls of officialdom?

Why do people piss in elevators? Or throw bricks and bottles at firemen? There are psychological issues about ghettos, power and powerlessness that the documentary only begins to address.

If you walk briskly from the Arch, you can get to the place where Pruitt-Igoe once stood in about 20 minutes, a fact which lays bare one of the brutal contradictions of city life: the tall burnished buildings of downtown St. Louis and what remains of Pruitt-Igoe – acres of ungoverned trees, mounds of trash and rubble and the near-complete wreckage of an idea about public housing. See and discuss.

[ see SIDEBAR ]
SIDEBAR:

Pruitt-Igoe: Extra, Extra

The dvd release of The Pruitt-Igoe Myth comes with extras that deserve more than a passing glance, two segments in particular.

One is an illuminating present-day site tour led by architectural historian Michael Allen. The camera follows Allen through snatches of the urban wilderness that Pruitt-Igoe has become and past two grade schools (one empty) and a neglected park. The site is dotted with the products of unauthorized dumping, including streetcar tracks apparently from downtown St. Louis. The old Pruitt-Igoe is visible only in small chunks. Curiously, an electrical transformer station built in 1952 still stands, abutting Dickson Street, which was laid out in the 19th century and which was the dividing line between the once segregated Pruitt (for blacks) from Igoe (for whites). One of the site’s borders, 22nd Street, is walled off from downtown by gray warehouses built in 2003. Indeed, Pruitt-Igoe not only is what it was intended to be and what it became but also what it is in its afterlife.

A rare gem in the bonus material is a documentary short titled More Than One Thing, made in 1969 by Steve Carver, a master’s degree student at Washington University. The Pruitt-Igoe Myth, in fact, incorporates some of Carver’s footage, which focused on the life of one adolescent resident at Pruitt-Igoe, William Townes. Carver used jazz music in the soundtrack and wielded the camera deftly. Townes maintains (as Sylvester Brown, Jr. does years later in Friedrichs’ documentary) that it’s not the people in the projects who do most of the damage but people who come in from the outside, do things and leave. There is also something dispiritingly familiar about how our culture embeds the quest for celebrity in our youth when the athletic Townes says, “I want to be famous – bad. That’s my real dream in life.” More Than One Thing had a showing at the St. Louis Ethical Society in 1970 and then faded into complete obscurity. It’s remarkable to have it back.

The bonus materials are rounded out by additional interviews and a director’s commentary. See Pruitt-Igoe.com.

Given the prevailing misconceptions about Pruitt-Igoe, it would have been edifying to have a bonus track which assesses public housing in the present. Today in St. Louis, public housing still exists but not in the form of high rises. The goal in the last generation has been to have mixed income neighborhoods with scattered site public housing (e.g. Tiffany neighborhood) as opposed to deep concentrations of poor people. How is it working (and not)? Because if the last generation is any guide, 21st century America can be expected to produce greater disparities in wealth and thus a greater need for public housing.