

Public Housing Myths

PERCEPTION, REALITY, AND SOCIAL POLICY

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Myth #1

PUBLIC HOUSING STANDS ALONE

Joseph Heathcott

One of the most durable myths about public housing in the United States is that it stands alone, operating in isolation from the city and neighborhoods that surround it. The very terms that we use to describe public housing—"housing project" or "the projects"—encapsulate this myth of distinctiveness and separation. After all, we seldom refer to a suburban neighborhood as a "housing project"; instead, we use terms like "subdivision" that suggest belonging to something greater. While this essay uses the term "project" to refer to particular public housing sites, it is with the understanding that it is a vernacular rather than technical term.

Certainly the architectural and spatial condition of public housing, from rigidly drawn boundaries to tower-and-slab construction, reinforces perceptions of separateness. The common identification of public housing as a landscape produced by the federal government, while inaccurate, isolates projects from the political life of neighborhoods and cities. The wide variety of rules, regulations, and criteria for living in public housing seem to separate it as a form of tenancy from most private rental markets. Perhaps most ironically, the response by housing authorities to the decline of projects in their portfolios—barbed wire fencing, consolidation of tenants into fewer buildings, deferred maintenance, and demolition—provide the most dramatic iconography of separateness.

The forensic efforts to account for the decline of public housing have largely reinforced the idea of projects as islands apart. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the cottage industry of criticism surrounding Pruitt-Igoe, a large housing project constructed in St. Louis, Missouri, in the mid-1950s. Even the titles of now-classic texts encapsulate the myth, from Lee Rainwater's *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* to William Moore's *Vertical*

MYTH #1

*Ghetto: Everyday Life in an Urban Slum.*¹ This chapter compares Pruitt-Igoe with projects in other cities in order to dismantle the myth that the fate of public housing projects are somehow separate from the fate of the cities and regions of which they are a part.

The Federal Role

While clearly a federal program, the U.S. government did not build, own, or maintain public housing. Nor did passage of the Housing Act of 1937 (also called the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937) guarantee the production of public housing everywhere in America. Rather, the principles of federalism required an intricate series of steps to coordinate the various levels of government. In the end, despite the centrally distributed funding allocations, expenditure requirements, and technical specifications, public housing emerged as an intensely local affair.

The Housing Act of 1937 established the United States Housing Authority (USHA), along with a series of regional public housing authorities (PHAs). The USHA and its successor agencies provided capital, technical service, and oversight to localities undertaking public housing development. First, however, it was up to the states to opt in to the program. States had to pass legislation that enabled cities to create state-chartered municipal corporations called "housing authorities," to exempt these entities from taxation, and to provide them with powers of eminent domain. The cities, for their part, also had to opt in, but they could do so only if their state had passed enabling legislation—cities were not to have a direct relationship with the federal government.²

Once state legislation existed, city lawmakers were required to pass ordinances of their own to request a state charter for an authority and to define the scope and limits of its operation. In most cases, a freestanding commission governed the housing authority, with appointments made by the mayor, city council, and governor or designee acting in concert. Typically the commission reflected the supporters of the local regime, with representatives from downtown business interests, civic organizations, religious groups, and professionals. In some cities, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, housing commissions included representatives from African American communities and from organized labor—especially the building trades. The commission hired the executive director, who in turn hired and managed the staff. How involved the mayor or other power brokers were in the selection of housing authority directors differed from city to city. In Chicago and St. Louis, for ex-

ample, mayors treated the local housing authority as a political spoil. In Cincinnati and New York, however, housing authorities exercised significant independence in staffing their ranks.

To undertake public housing development, local legislatures first had to pass ordinances to declare areas "blighted" before housing authorities could compel land purchases, clear slums, and build new projects. The selection of sites was always one of the primary prerogatives of the local regime and reflected the political, economic, and racial preferences of civic elites. Moreover, in cities such as Los Angeles and Houston, where labor unions were weak, Cold War-inspired attacks on public housing programs stalled the expansion of the program.³ In cities with strong and politically connected unions—Chicago, New York, St. Louis, and Philadelphia among them—public housing production reached the maximum capacity authorized by the government.

Funds to develop projects came from congressional appropriations to the USHA, which were then channeled through the regional PHAs. These appropriations covered up to 90 percent of the cost to compensate property owners, clear the site, upgrade infrastructure, and construct the buildings. Most of these funds, however, did not come in the form of grants; rather, the federal government funded public housing through long-term (sixty-year), interest-free mortgage loans to the local housing authority. Local authorities retired these loan debts primarily through locally arranged bond issues, not direct federal taxpayer subsidy.⁴

Finally, while housing authorities received small annual contributions from the federal government to close the gap between income and expenditures, the bulk of operations and maintenance had to be funded through tenant rents. This system of federal contributions and tenant-financed operations proved to be a politically charged issue in the annual congressional appropriations process and turned out to be disastrous for cities like St. Louis, where public housing faced increasing vacancy rates *beginning in the 1960s*.

Designing and Locating Public Housing

American public housing advocates championed the European superblock form and modernist design approach that characterized nearly all projects built before 1968. Perhaps more than any other feature, the consolidation of numerous individual properties into large superblocks with well-defined perimeters enhanced the common view of public housing as a place apart.

MYTH #1

In 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act authorized the Public Works Administration (PWA) to develop housing targeted to families that could afford to pay higher rent but could not find decent housing. Working first through local limited dividend corporations and then through direct financing, the PWA realized over fifty projects, including the Carl Mackley Homes in Philadelphia, Harlem River Houses in New York, Lakeview Terrace in Cleveland, and Techwood Homes in Atlanta.⁵ With their low-rise profiles, careful landscape designs, and numerous amenities, PWA projects constitute some of the best government-backed housing ever built. Still, the PWA program proved too costly and slow to have any effect on the nation's critical shortage of decent, affordable housing.

After 1937, the USHA projects grew more austere in their designs, reflecting sharp cuts in funding through periods of depression, war, and recession. Projects such as the Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago, San Felipe Courts in Houston, Elyton Village in Birmingham, and Puerta de Tierra in San Juan arrayed relatively featureless buildings in barracks formations with minimal landscaping or amenities. Nevertheless, early residents routinely reported that the projects offered a substantial improvement in the quality of their living environment. Many experienced indoor plumbing, central heat, and on-site services for the first time.⁶

After World War II, many housing authorities in larger cities began to add high-rise tower blocks to their portfolio. While nearly three-quarters of all public housing units were distributed in low- and mid-rise buildings, the tower blocks garnered the most attention for their immense scale and stark transformation of the urban landscape. In Philadelphia, planners favored a mix of high-rise and low-rise buildings. By contrast, and with much national fanfare, St. Louis bundled all of its postwar federal allotment of fifty-eight hundred units into four massive high-rise projects.⁷ Officials in Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, and New York built dozens of new projects within the vertical tower block form.

Regardless of the design of projects, the selection of sites reflected an intensely local set of determinations. Cities like St. Louis, for example, used public housing to deepen racial segregation and to prevent what city planner Harland Bartholomew described as "Negro deconcentration" from inner core neighborhoods.⁸ Chicago officials saw public housing as a way to construct a great wall of exclusion that would amplify racial and class barriers along a north-south corridor of the city.⁹ In Philadelphia, on the other hand, the pri-

orities of officials shifted dramatically. Before World War II, housing advocates in Philadelphia succeeded in making slum clearance and decent affordable housing the key determinants of site selection. After the war, officials came to see public housing as a reservoir for sheltering families displaced from massive urban renewal sites; redevelopment, rather than public housing, emerged as their overarching priority.¹⁰

The St. Louis Program

As local officials sorted out their priorities for project development, the United States faced a mounting housing crisis. From the stock market crash of 1929 through the Great Depression and World War II, new housing starts plummeted to historic lows. After the war, with millions of GIs returning stateside and forming families, the need for new home construction became acute. Between 1932 and 1945, the USHA had managed to produce only two hundred thousand permanent units of public housing. But planners estimated that at least three million new units would be needed immediately. It was in this climate of crisis that Congress passed the U.S. Housing Act of 1949.¹¹

The St. Louis public housing program took shape in this context of urban population growth coupled with decades of boom and bust in housing markets. This combination resulted in overcrowded tenement neighborhoods and deteriorating conditions in the daily life of the city. For Bartholomew, the city planner in St. Louis, the chief solution to the problem was large-scale slum clearance to rebuild the city at higher densities with improved housing.¹²

The Housing Act of 1937 came just in time for Bartholomew and his fellow housing advocates; it seemed to offer the precise framework they needed to begin urban reconstruction. However, a series of local and state court challenges delayed the implementation of public housing in St. Louis. The St. Louis Housing Authority (SLHA) would not break ground on the first two projects, Clinton-Peabody and Carr Square Village, until 1940. Further delays followed when the United States entered into World War II, which diverted funds from public housing. It would take five years from the passage of the Housing Act of 1937 for St. Louis to complete its first two projects. A third project, begun in 1942, had to be halted after site clearance but before construction due to lack of funds. The site remained empty for the next decade.

Meanwhile, throughout World War II and the early postwar years, the city boiled under a pressure cooker of housing scarcity. In one survey conducted just before the end of the war in April of 1945, whites and blacks both faced a

MYTH #1

rental market with about 0.5 percent vacancy; 321 vacancies existed out of sixty-four thousand rental units for whites, and 108 vacancies out of twenty-two thousand rental units for blacks. St. Louis, like most cities in the United States, faced dire circumstances as families doubled up and rooming houses proliferated.¹³

To address the crisis, Senator Robert Wagner introduced a housing bill to Congress in 1948. Both Harland Bartholomew and St. Louis mayor Joseph Darst testified before Congress on behalf of the bill. Once passed, however, the Housing Act of 1949 differed from its 1937 predecessor in that it was not, at its core, about public housing. Rather, the law sought to expand housing production in a variety of ways. Title I of the act inaugurated "urban redevelopment," where federal dollars wrote down the cost of slum clearance for new residential, civic, and commercial construction. Title II authorized an increase of \$500 million for the FHA mortgage insurance program, largely to underwrite the rapid construction of private single-family homes on peripheral greenfield sites. Title III revived public housing with a commitment of 810,000 new units.

While each of the three titled programs ran largely independent of the others, over time they exerted a cumulative, often crossed-purpose impact on the American metropolis. The "suburban" Title II, with its higher initial investment and longer-term commitments, dwarfed the "urban" Titles I and III. Between 1945 and 1965, the FHA-backed home building industry constructed twenty-six million new homes. Public housing, meanwhile, constituted only 3 percent of new home construction in the same period. To date, the FHA has insured over thirty-four million mortgages, predominantly in new single-family home construction outside of central cities. Along with the GI Bill, the FHA mortgage insurance system dramatically expanded single-family home ownership and democratized private housing as an asset class.¹⁴ It reshaped the American city, pulling millions of mostly white middle-class families to newly built tract housing in peripheral subdivisions.

Nevertheless, officials in cities around the United States welcomed the "urban provisions" of the Housing Act. Immediately after its passage, the SLHA resurrected plans for its third public housing development, now called Cochran Gardens. Unlike the first two projects, which took shape as two-story row houses in barracks formation, Cochran Gardens was the first to deploy high-rise towers, in a mix of four-, six-, and twelve-story buildings. Moreover, the SLHA continued the practice of segregated development. Carr

Square Village and Clinton-Peabody had been constructed for black and white occupancy respectively, Cochran Gardens for white occupancy.¹⁵

Armed with federal appropriations for fifty-eight hundred units, St. Louis officials made the dramatic announcement that they would bundle all of these into "four vast projects." The first of these would come to be known as Pruitt-Igoe. The Wendell O. Pruitt Homes, the city's fourth project, and the William Igoe Apartments, the city's fifth project, were sited adjacent to each other. Designed by Minoru Yamasaki, they took shape as a regiment of thirty-three nearly identical eleven-story tower blocks, with over twenty-seven hundred apartments on fifty-seven acres of land. Together, they were the largest of the nation's postwar housing projects to date, receiving significant attention in the press.¹⁶

At the same time, the SLHA continued the practice of racial segregation in site selection and occupancy of public housing. They conceived Pruitt for black families and Igoe for white families, introducing a radical separation of whites and blacks in a neighborhood that was racially mixed. However, even before tenants moved in, the certainty of segregation unraveled with the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. As a result, white residents fled or dropped off the waiting lists, and Pruitt-Igoe was effectively rendered an all-black development.

The city's sixth project, the Vaughan-Taylor Homes, rose up next to Pruitt-Igoe in 1957 on the city's north side. While not officially segregated, the adjacency to Pruitt-Igoe meant that white families avoided Vaughan-Taylor, and it rapidly became an all-black project. Likewise, the seventh project, Darst-Webbe, located on the predominantly white south side, was effectively an all-white project when it was completed in 1962. Finally, the city's eighth and final conventional project, Blumeyer Homes, was located on the near north side—an area that in the late 1960s was transitioning rapidly to a predominantly black neighborhood.¹⁷

After the national termination of the conventional public housing program by the Nixon administration in 1969, the SLHA constructed several more small and mid-sized projects, mostly through the Turnkey Program organized by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD); Turnkey is a proposal-based method of public housing rehabilitation and/or construction that awards federal funds to local PHAs; these PHAs, in turn, select private developers based on submitted proposals outlining their work plans. But the vast majority of SLHA tenants lived in the large conventional projects, which

MYTH #1

by the early 1960s housed some eighteen thousand people in fifty-five hundred apartments. Even at this height of occupancy, however, cracks in the system began to show, as Pruitt and Igoe both began to post troubling vacancy rates. Was it evidence of a problem internal to the public housing program, or did it signal a deeper set of shifts in the urban condition?

The Flight of Capital and People

While the older industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest underwent large-scale reconstruction through urban renewal and public housing in the 1960s, they also began to lose population as qualifying families moved to new suburban developments, and as American demographic growth shifted to the South and the West. Detroit, for example, lost 20 percent of its population between 1950 and 1970. The population of St. Louis fell by 27 percent over the same period as 60 percent of the white population fled the city, while the suburban population more than doubled. Philadelphia, Cleveland, Baltimore, and many other cities also lost substantial numbers of people in the decades after World War II.

The systematic dislocation of capital from central cities is a long-term process with roots in the early twentieth century. However, after World War II, industrial facilities began a rapid decampment from the urban core, spurred on by the rise of the trucking industry, new highway and road systems, stable fuel prices, and new flexible manufacturing technologies. This process resulted in staggering losses of well-paying industrial jobs that once sustained working-class families, along with a steep decline in the corporate tax base. As white middle-class families fled cities in search of better employment and housing opportunities, they took their wages and taxes with them. As a result, cities found themselves struggling to support an increasingly poor and elderly population with fewer and fewer resources.¹⁸

St. Louis experienced these dislocations more acutely than most cities. While the loss of manufacturing jobs and population from the urban core was not greater than that experienced in other industrial cities like Detroit or Philadelphia, the peculiar division between the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County meant that the city's urban core suffered more acutely from these losses. The City of St. Louis was a county in its own right (a condition established in 1876), hemmed in by St. Louis County and, therefore, prevented from expanding. It received no share of taxes from St. Louis County, where much of the new industrial and residential development occurred after the 1950s. Thus, unlike

many cities, it could not use annexation to chase population loss or new industrial areas.¹⁹

Meanwhile, FHA-backed white flight from St. Louis and other cities opened up residential opportunities for black families in neighborhoods once off limits. At the same time, the push by African Americans and civil rights groups for fair and open housing challenged the racial covenants, steering, and redlining that had long kept black urban dwellers trapped in segregated neighborhoods. These tensions culminated in Title VII of the 1968 Civil Rights Act. As black families spread out into the metropolis, they created new succession processes. By the 1960s, for example, black middle-class families could increasingly secure housing in formerly all-white St. Louis neighborhoods—and even in the suburbs of St. Louis County. Working-class African Americans, in turn, moved into the neighborhoods once occupied by the black middle class.²⁰

This metropolitan-wide succession chain eventually created a shift in residential options for black families that filtered down to public housing. According to the Rand Corporation's 1973 report on St. Louis, the acute housing shortage that once propelled officials to construct projects had reversed—and it did so in St. Louis before most other cities, largely due to the relationship between political boundaries, population and manufacturing decline, and the structure of housing markets.²¹ Consequently, the St. Louis Housing Authority began to see increasing vacancy rates in some of its projects well before other cities. Since the maintenance of projects had to come from tenant rents, vacancies spelled looming disaster for public housing in St. Louis. And the amount of annual contributions provided to housing authorities could no longer cover the gap.

Thus, beginning in St. Louis in the 1960s and spreading to other cities in the 1970s and 1980s, housing authorities were forced to defer maintenance, resulting in the acceleration of project decline. In cities such as Boston and New York, where population losses were relatively small, housing authorities could still cover most of their operating costs, albeit with some deferred maintenance, well into the 1980s and 1990s. However, in St. Louis, with its dramatic population loss, the vacancy rates rose so rapidly that the projects spiraled into severe physical dereliction. As federal commitments to public housing declined after 1968, cities around the country began to experience what St. Louis already knew well: the rapid deterioration of conventional public housing.²²

MYTH #1

Slouching toward Pruitt-Igoe

There have been many attempts over the past three decades to understand “what went wrong” with public housing. Much of U.S. housing policy today, from Section 8 to Low Income Tax Credits to HOPE VI, has emerged from efforts to isolate and identify the causes of public housing’s decline. Nowhere was this effort more intense than around the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project. Beginning in the mid-1960s, scholars, journalists, and activists mounted a critique of public housing that drew largely on Pruitt-Igoe as a touchstone. Most of these critiques sought causes internal to Pruitt-Igoe and the public housing program.

Some observers saw in Pruitt-Igoe a story of good intentions gone awry, while others concluded that public housing was doomed from the outset by its own policy shortcomings.²³ Still others felt that Pruitt-Igoe declined because its modernist design precluded the direct surveillance necessary for preventing crime and promoting security.²⁴ Most critics found in Pruitt-Igoe a cautionary tale about the hubris of liberalism, the shortcomings of the welfare state, or the failure of modern architecture and planning.²⁵

Debates over the causes of public housing decline have intensified over the years, as more scholars weigh in with improved data, deeper analyses, and sharpened arguments. Arnold Hirsch’s landmark book *Making the Second Ghetto* (1983) placed public housing’s troubles in the longer history of racial segregation and white hostility toward residential integration—a thesis reinforced by subsequent scholarship.²⁶ Leading housing policy experts have pointed to the legacy of shortsightedness built in to the original Wagner-Steagall law—for example, in requiring operation and maintenance costs to be covered by tenant rents, or in the burden of the annual appropriations process.²⁷ Others have documented the corrosive impact of drugs, crime, police surveillance, and violence on project residents and on public housing programs generally.²⁸

All of these factors, varying by time and place, have played a role in the seemingly intractable problems related to public housing. But they cannot alone or even in combination explain the fate of the conventional public housing program. Indeed, most accounts have sought to identify causes of decline from within the specific policies, designs, populations, or environments of the projects. Several key internal themes emerge from this literature.

The most common internal theme is that Pruitt-Igoe declined because of its uncritical adoption of modernist tower block design by architects enthralled with the Corbusier vision.²⁹ Writers like Charles Jencks argued, without even

the barest evidence, that the identical regiments of buildings created inhuman environments that fostered anger and anomie among residents. Other critics such as Oscar Newman focused on specific design choices employed at Pruitt-Igoe and other projects, such as skip-stop elevators, the lack of lavatories on ground floors, and broad galleries meant to create "streets in the sky." Newman argued, with some justification, that the high-rise configuration, skip-stop elevators and galleries exacerbated crime because they prevented easy surveillance, while the absence of bathrooms on the ground floors led children to pee in the stairwells.

However, architects differed widely in their embrace of international style modernism, and not all of them employed tower block design out of aesthetic conviction. Pruitt-Igoe architect Minoru Yamasaki, for example, did not favor the high-rise approach. His initial concept for the project included a mix of low-rise townhouses, medium-rise garden apartments, and a few high-rise towers.³⁰ Several factors intervened, however, none of which were intrinsically about design. Federal cost cutting during the Korean War and the subsequent recession of July 1953 through May 1954 reduced the amount of funds available for housing projects around the country; the solution at Pruitt-Igoe and elsewhere was to go vertical. This dovetailed with the interests of the local political regime, who had far more power to make design choices than the architects did. Bartholomew favored high-rises because they would provide the maximum number of units on the minimal amount of land. Mayor Joseph Darst embraced the high-rise design for St. Louis projects because their dramatic profiles gained his city and administration a great deal of attention and provided a visible symbol of progress.³¹

The design of high-rise public housing—however flawed some of its innovations might have been—was never inherently problematic; rather, it was made problematic by circumstances that had little to do with design as such. Indeed, architectural historian Katharine Bristol suggests that the deployment of Pruitt-Igoe as a symbol in the assault on modernism had much more to do with an Oedipal crisis in the architectural profession than with any kind of evidence-based account.³² As early as 1973, critic Jane Holtz Kay dismissed the reigning idea that modern design caused the failure of Pruitt-Igoe. Writing against the grain, she argued that Pruitt-Igoe was being used as a scapegoat to legitimize new design approaches. "How easy it is," she quipped in *The Nation*, "to see failed architecture as King Kong and new architecture as Moses."³³ In his exhaustive study of the St. Louis public housing program, policy analyst

MYTH #1

Eugene Meehan found “no consistent pattern linking building height and patterns of occupancy.” Throughout the St. Louis public housing system, for example, he noted that “upper levels in the taller buildings had better occupancy rates than lower floors.”³⁴ And the infamous galleries, pilloried by architectural critics such as Oscar Newman, actually worked as intended for at least the first ten years of the project, until rising crime rates rendered them unsafe.

Most problematic for the “decline by design” theme, however, is the simple fact that physical dereliction has never been limited to public housing. Modernist high-rise projects might very well have housed anomic and angry residents, but was that the result of design or of the broader urban conditions—poverty, segregation, crumbling schools, police brutality, and loss of employment and opportunity—that seemed to affect all inner city residents? The riots that erupted in Watts, Detroit, and Newark were by no means limited to housing projects: they were general revolts of inner city residents fed up with the conditions in which they lived. Public and private neighborhoods in North St. Louis deteriorated alongside one another, despite their radically different design histories. And they deteriorated for much the same reasons: deferred maintenance, abandonment, neglect, and loss of fiscal base caused by massive population loss.³⁵ Meanwhile, in New York City, many middle-class families lived in apartments very much like the housing projects that exist throughout the city. Apart from subtle landscaping differences, for example, it is difficult to tell middle-income Stuyvesant Town from the nearby Jacob Riis Houses or Campos Plaza. Indeed, many people around the world continue to live in high-rise apartments, public and private alike, with varying degrees of success.³⁶

Another common internal theme is that Pruitt-Igoe declined because of crime, vandalism, and the character of tenants. Henry Schmandt and George Wendel argued that at Pruitt-Igoe, the tenant selection process saddled high-rise projects with families that supposedly lacked the “urban skills” necessary to live in such environments.³⁷ Again, Meehan disputed this notion and criticized many of the studies by sociologists that focused on tenants’ lives in the projects rather than the structural conditions of public housing.³⁸ Moreover, police reports from the 1960s indicate that violent crime rates were no higher—and were often lower—in Pruitt-Igoe than in many of the low-rise neighborhoods on the city’s north side. The crime rates at Pruitt-Igoe began to spike only in the late 1960s, when the SLHA started to move tenants out of

high vacancy buildings, resulting in an increasingly abandoned project landscape. In the end, the crime and vandalism plaguing public housing in the 1970s and 1980s was never all that distinct from the crime and vandalism that residents experienced in many older, low-rise neighborhoods.³⁹

Finally, one of the most persistent internal themes holds that public housing declined because of weak policy and bad management. For many scholars, journalists, and pundits on the left and the right, public housing policy was always inherently flawed. For some, it undermined "self-initiative," corroded social relations, and distorted otherwise naturally occurring free markets. With no small amount of hyperbole, for example, Manhattan Institute scholar Howard Husock labeled public housing as "America's trillion-dollar policy mistake."⁴⁰ For others, public housing policy was a "programmed failure" due to its own internal contradictions.⁴¹ Even Henry Cisneros, the secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President Bill Clinton, reproduced this narrative as a way to burnish his administration's record in overhauling public housing's "past failures" through the HOPE VI program.⁴²

To be sure, the public housing program in America suffered from many policy deficiencies, from the formative practice of racial segregation in occupancy, to the time-consuming and inefficient annual appropriations process, to the requirement that operating and capital replacement costs be paid out of tenant rents. But the bigger policy failure had less to do with the public housing program per se, and more to do with the contradictory outcomes of the broader landscape of U.S. housing policy. That we do not refer to the massive FHA-backed suburbanization of America as a kind of public housing is merely a convention of language—after all, both were heavily subsidized, and both made considerable profits for large developers. And in any case, public housing projects can hardly be blamed for keeping poor people dependent on federal relief; that has much more to do with massive, even global shifts in the industrial economy and the staggering loss of good-paying jobs in the urban core.⁴³

Public housing performance has differed from city to city, from project to project, and even from building to building within projects. In the case of Chicago, for example, historian Bradford Hunt has exposed a long history of mismanagement and poor decision making that exacerbated the local conditions of an already compromised federal program.⁴⁴ However, Nicholas Bloom's work on the case of New York City finds that, despite problems and missteps by the New York City Housing Authority over the years, the public housing program was relatively well managed, even in the face of the city's fiscal

MYTH #1

collapse.⁴⁵ And within the St. Louis program, Eugene Meehan found that "levels of occupancy in the twelve-story buildings at Cochran Gardens were far better than occupancy in the eight-story buildings at Vaughan," and that the more severe austerity practiced at Pruitt-Igoe resulted in the use of inferior hardware and other cost-cutting measures that contributed to the project's dramatic decline.⁴⁶ Further studies have shown that the older stock of public housing built by the Public Works Administration fared better than much of the stock built after the passage of the 1937 Housing Act.⁴⁷ And despite the dramatic decline at Pruitt-Igoe in the 1960s, there is no evidence of mismanagement by Housing Authority director Irving Dagen; on the contrary, Dagen brought a far more progressive approach to managing the public housing program than his successors. But even the best management could not have succeeded under the stark social and fiscal conditions that beset programs in St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and other cities in the Rust Belt.

Even while architects, journalists, planners, and policy analysts honed the internal themes outlined above, a few scholars began to look beyond the projects for clues. Among the first to do so was architectural educator Roger Montgomery. As early as 1966, he dismissed the overdetermined power of architecture to solve the residential problems of poor people. In an exchange with sociologist Lee Rainwater, Montgomery argued that architects' capacity to improve housing conditions through design was limited.⁴⁸ In an important though much-overlooked essay, Montgomery shifted the analysis of Pruitt-Igoe's demise from design, management, and programming to the structure of the St. Louis housing market.⁴⁹

Montgomery and his supporters noted that Pruitt-Igoe had been built for a city of 850,000 people facing a massive housing shortage. But even before it was completed, white middle-class and working-class families began their long flight from cities, opening up new housing opportunities for blacks through residential succession, and eventually through the application of fair housing laws. This loosening of housing markets undermined the very premise of public housing, which had been built on the expectation of inexorable urban growth and the specter of the overcrowded city. By 1970, that spectral city no longer existed. St. Louis had lost over two hundred thousand people, with plummeting real estate values and rising rates of vacancy and abandonment. Increased vacancy rates in housing projects led to a rapid spiral of decline: fewer tenants meant less rental income, which resulted in smaller operating and maintenance funds, which led to physical deterioration, which in turn pushed more

tenants out. In the last days of Pruitt-Igoe, drug sellers and crime networks from other parts of St. Louis began to carve up the nearly empty project. Subsequent studies that positioned Pruitt-Igoe in the context of the local political economy support Montgomery's conclusions.⁵⁰

The core problems that beset public housing in the twentieth century were always the same as those faced by cities more generally. Cities could not keep capital and people from flowing out of their boundaries. And cities could not unilaterally fix broken federal policies that worked at cross-purposes: on the one hand, slum clearance, urban renewal, and public housing were meant to improve cities, but the massive subsidies of suburban housing, expressways, and cheap fossil fuels gradually eroded the wealth base of cities—and, in St. Louis, dramatically reduced the number of people who relied on public housing for their principal shelter. Meanwhile, the deterioration of St. Louis city services such as schools, street repairs, fire protection, and trash collection made the difficult conditions of Pruitt-Igoe and its surrounding neighborhoods even worse.⁵¹ What is clear from the relatively short career of project-based public housing is that its varied successes and failures resulted from an interwoven set of contingent circumstances, major and minor policy decisions, geographic locations, and political and economic conditions well beyond the control of any housing authority.

Conclusion

The fate of Pruitt-Igoe was a canary in the coal mine, but not in the way it is often portrayed. Rather than embodying the failure of modernist design, federal policy, or the social welfare state, the challenges faced at Pruitt-Igoe signaled massive seismic shifts under way in northeastern and midwestern cities through capital flight, disinvestment, suburbanization, and population decline. These shifts registered first at Pruitt-Igoe because the scale of population and job loss in St. Louis was so severe and rapid there, and the tools available to planners and officials to mitigate the disaster were so limited by the city's fixed boundaries. The same processes gripped Chicago and New York, for example, but at a slower rate, allowing for more adjustments over time.

Through all of these transformations, Pruitt-Igoe doggedly remained a symbol of failed government policies, and the blast image made its way into dozens of textbooks in planning, policy, social science, and architecture. It became the classic cautionary tale, the go-to symbol either for the failure of modern urban planning and design or for the shortcomings of the welfare state.⁵²

MYTH #1

In 1992, when HUD secretary Jack Kemp and President George Bush announced the initiative that would become HOPE VI, they made explicit reference to Pruitt-Igoe as an example of failed liberal policies of the past. The critical discourse surrounding Pruitt-Igoe, then, informed the winding down of conventional public housing as well as the programs created to replace it.

In the end, the architectural and spatial distinctiveness of public housing has long obscured the fundamental ways in which the projects are woven into the fabric of their cities. Pruitt-Igoe had been conceived and built for an overcrowded city, where future growth in population and industrial employment were assumed. Unfortunately, by the time the first tenants moved in to the project, that imagined city of the future was already beginning to unravel. In the most important ways, then, the fate of public housing in America has always been closely tied to the politics, economies, and cultures of the cities in which it exists. If we do not pay attention to these factors, we are bound to repeat the problems that beset public housing in the first place.