



Contact: Brian Woodman, Producer
Tel. (612) 232-7806
email: brian@pruitt-igoe.com

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth

an Urban History

Documentary Film
Feature Length
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FILM SYNOPSIS

*50, 100, 250, and 1000-word
summaries of "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth"*

50 Words:

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth explores the social, economic and legislative issues that led to the decline of conventional public housing in America, and the city centers in which they were built, while tracing the personal and poignant narratives of several of the residents of the notorious Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex in St. Louis.

100 Words:

Destroyed in a dramatic and highly-publicized implosion, the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex has become a widespread symbol of failure amongst architects, politicians and policy makers.

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth explores the social, economic and legislative issues that led to the decline of conventional public housing in America, and the city centers in which they resided, while tracing the personal and poignant narratives of several of the project's residents.

In the post-War years, the American city changed in ways that made it unrecognizable from a generation earlier, privileging some and leaving others in its wake.

250 Words:

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth tells the story of the wholesale changes that took place in the American city in the decades after World War II, through the lens of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis.

At the film's historical center is an analysis of the massive impact of the 1949 Housing Act, which built Pruitt-Igoe and other high-rise public housing of the Fifties and Sixties. This critical piece of legislation also initiated the so-called urban renewal program and prompted the process of mass suburbanization, which emptied American cities of their residents, business and industry.

Those that were left behind faced a destitute, rapidly de-industrializing St. Louis, parceled out to downtown interests and increasingly segregated by class and race.

The residents of Pruitt-Igoe were among the hardest-hit. Their gripping stories of survival, adaptation and success are at the emotional heart of the film. The domestic turmoil wrought by punitive public welfare policies, the frustrating interactions with a paternalistic and cash-strapped Housing Authority, and the downward spiral of vacancy, vandalism and crime, led to resident protest and action during the 1969 Rent Strike, the first in the history of public housing.

And yet, despite this complex history, Pruitt-Igoe has often been stereotyped, with help from a world-famous image of its implosion, and used as an argument against Modernist architecture or public assistance programs.

The Pruitt-Igoe Myth seeks to set the historical record straight, to examine the interests in Pruitt-Igoe's creation, to re-evaluate the rumors and the stigma, to implode the myth.

FILM SYNOPSES

50, 100, 250, and 1000-word summaries
of “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth”

1,000 Words:

LOGLINE:

The Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex has become a widespread symbol of failure amongst architects, politicians and policy makers. This blanket condemnation masks the true complexities of public housing in America

SUMMARY OF TOPIC:

Public housing has a bad name.

While the reasons for this are complex, a few widely publicized projects have created a lasting impression in the minds of many Americans. One such project is the Pruitt-Igoe public housing development in St. Louis, Missouri. A famous image, circulated worldwide, of the implosion of one Pruitt-Igoe’s buildings has come to symbolize to many the failure of government-sponsored housing and, more broadly, government-sponsored anything.

Completed in 1954, the thirty-three eleven story buildings of Pruitt-Igoe were billed as the solution to the overcrowding and deterioration that was plaguing the inner city of St. Louis. Twenty years later, the buildings were leveled, declared unfit for habitation.

What happened in Pruitt-Igoe has fueled a mythology repeated in discussions of many urban high-rise projects. Violence, crime and drugs, so the story goes, plagued the housing project from nearly the beginning as it became a “dumping ground’ for the poorest city residents. According to one standard account, it was quickly torn up by its rural residents who could not adapt to high-rise city life.

A brief online image search of “Pruitt-Igoe” reveals this legacy. A building imploded. Vandalized hallways. Acres of broken windows. These images of destruction are periodically interrupted by images of a different kind: hopeful images of a massive newly-built housing complex in the mid-fifties, the scale and grandeur of the buildings reflecting the optimistic spirit out of which Pruitt-Igoe came.

The quick, unexamined transition from hope to disillusionment is the standard structure of the Pruitt-Igoe narrative. But there is another Pruitt-Igoe story, another approach, one simultaneously larger and smaller in focus.

It is a story of a city and its residents. The city is St. Louis, a city in many ways at the forefront of postwar urban decline. In the years of Pruitt-Igoe, St. Louis’ decline rivaled the fall of Rome in its abruptness and impact on the city, losing half its population and enormous prestige in a generation. An analysis of Pruitt-Igoe has to begin in this milieu, and yet it so rarely does.

A proper analysis of Pruitt-Igoe would take into account the ways in which public housing was used as a tool of racial segregation or as a justification for the clearance of poor and working-class neighborhoods. This analysis would look at the dominant culture of the time, which stressed uniformity and “hygiene” in the domestic sphere, political life, and neighborhood composition. And the priorities of the legislation that created large-scale public housing would come up for analysis as well.

1,000 Words (cont’d)

The individual stories of the residents’ struggles and successes have almost universally been ignored; the texture of life in the projects too often reduced to melodrama. The Pruitt-Igoe documentary has, at its heart, the experiences of its residents, adding a human face to a subject that has become so depersonalized.

The Pruitt-Igoe documentary tells of a declining city, a suburbanizing nation, a changing urban economy, a hope for the future and residents who fought back in their own ways, refusing to be passive victims of these larger forces aligned against them.

The documentary has two convergent goals. One is to inform and enhance the ongoing debate over public housing and government welfare programs. The film will use Pruitt-Igoe story as a lens through which a larger story about affordable housing and the changing American city can be viewed. It will untangle the various arguments about what went wrong in Pruitt-Igoe and dispel the conclusions based on simplification and stereotype that turned Pruitt-Igoe into a symbol of failure. Second, the film will illustrate how conclusions are dangerously and erroneously drawn when powerful interests control debate.

History is a contested space. It becomes used politically and culturally. Arguments become flattened, rather than expanded; available evidence discarded, rather than sought. Pruitt-Igoe has become a victim of this tendency, a victim of an implosion image which says, “we tried that, and here’s what happened,” the booming reports of dynamite endlessly repeated in an echo chamber of failure.

This is why Pruitt-Igoe matters – why we are making this documentary. So much of our collective understanding of cities and government and inequality are tied up in those thirty-three high-rise buildings, informed by the demolition image. Too much of the context has been overlooked, or willfully ignored, in discussions of public housing, public welfare and the state of the American city.

It’s time to get the facts straight and present a proper story for Pruitt-Igoe that will implode the myths and the stigma. Pruitt-Igoe needs to be remembered and understood – in a different way than it has been – because the city will change again.

To this day, most of the 55-acres of the Pruitt-Igoe site are vacant, overgrown with trees and bushes, a constant visual reminder in the north side of St. Louis of this infamous “failure.” It has been easy – too easy – for academics, politicians and interest groups to write off Pruitt-Igoe to bad policy, bad architecture or bad people. But those are not the whole story, or even the primary factors in what led to Pruitt-Igoe’s demise. This is why a Pruitt-Igoe documentary is needed now. This documentary’s ultimate goal is to show a wide audience that there is no easy explanation for the problems of Pruitt-Igoe and other urban public housing developments.

The city will change again, and affordable housing will continue to be an issue. When that happens, the complex lessons of Pruitt-Igoe must be remembered by society and by the architects, developers and public officials we will task with solving future housing issues.

But what sticks is the label failure.

1,000 Words (cont’d)

But public housing got a bad name. Large public housing projects became, to many observers, synonymous with the perceived failure of the era of progressive federal policy launched with the New Deal.

The irony

In 1972, the televised implosion of one of the 33 11-story buildings that comprised the Pruitt-Igoe public housing development created a lasting symbol of failure in the collective American memory. The word “failure” is used over and over in connection with the Wendell O. Pruitt and William L. Igoe Homes, the infamous public housing project that was leveled in 1974 after just 18 years of existence. More than 25 years later, Pruitt-Igoe continues to appear in discussions of urban planning, public policy, federal welfare funding and architectural design. It is employed to say that government doesn’t work, as an argument for personal responsibility or the benefits of the private market. The interests that use Pruitt-Igoe in this manner are grossly oversimplifying the issues surrounding its demise and ignoring many key factors.

The film will examine key issues in the Pruitt-Igoe story, including its modernist inception and design, federal legislation, economic conditions of St. Louis and other industrial cities, and the post-war American housing boom. Most importantly, the film will allow the former residents to tell their Pruitt-Igoe experiences, dispelling myths about the inhabitants of urban public housing that persist even today.

Pruitt-Igoe was one of many urban high-rise public housing projects created through funds made available by the 1949 Housing Act. Its story is representative of many of these developments’ fates. Though the 1949 Housing Act had little concern for public housing, these “failures” have been pointed to continually in the past three decades by those opposed to federal welfare programs and bottom-up economic development.

Pruitt-Igoe was designed in 1951 by architect Minoru Yamasaki. Inflated construction bids combined with the perceived necessity of building high-rises to achieve requisite density levels on valuable inner-city land ultimately led to the spaced superblocks of Pruitt-Igoe’s 33 11-story buildings. Pruitt-Igoe’s failure, and the extent to which it was caused by its high-rise design, continues to be a significant debate in architecture today. Many still point to implosion of Pruitt-Igoe’s first building in 1972 as the end of modern architectural movement.

Pruitt-Igoe was also used by city planners to reinforce racial segregation. In the original plans, the Pruitt homes would be for minority residents, with the Igoe homes reserved for the white population. When the *Brown v. Board* decision struck down segregation in 1954, just as Pruitt and Igoe were opening, both projects had to integrate. Whites fled the city, making the occupants of the projects’ combined 2,870 units 90% African-American.

The largest factor in the demise of Pruitt-Igoe was the legislation itself, but not in the way people usually talk about the legislation as a failure. While the Housing Act of 1949 is often cited as initiating the federal public housing program, this was not its primary goal. Following World War II, giant rings of poverty and inner-city decay surrounded the central business districts of most major Eastern and Midwestern cities. Leaders believed that clearing the slums and redeveloping the urban core would stimulate the floundering construction industry and the overall economy.

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1,000 Words (cont'd)

In terms of priorities of the 1949 Housing Act, public housing was a distant third, lagging behind slum clearance and construction stimulation. This was reflected in the allocation of federal money: there were funds for clearance and development, but maintenance costs were to be paid by rental income, which was capped intentionally low so as not to interfere with the private real estate market.

Capped rents meant there was never enough money for maintenance, leading building conditions, and occupancy rates, to plummet. Vacant buildings became havens for criminal activity, causing even more families to flee and rental income to drop even further. It was a vicious cycle, with residents and administrators finding only sporadic success in combating. A 1969 resident-led rent strike led to some improvements, but by then the heroin trade had moved in, and there was no turning back.

Just three years later, an earth-shattering explosion shook the grounds as the first federal housing project to be officially abandoned lost one of its buildings to a stack of dynamite. By 1974, all residents had been relocated and the remaining buildings were leveled. Receiving worldwide media attention, the destruction of Pruitt-Igoe served to reinforce the prevailing conception of the failure of public housing and, by extension, the whole American social welfare program.

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