

PAWEŁ ŻUK*

WHAT HAPPENED IN PRUITT-IGOE?

CO SIĘ ZDARZYŁO W PRUITT-IGOE?

Abstract

Minoru Yamasaki was quite an unlucky architect. Besides the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center, he also designed the Pruitt-Igoe social housing project in St. Louis. Built in 1954, the modernist housing block estate had become completely devastated by its inhabitants in a few years, and became a nest of crime. These housing blocks were so bad that they were scheduled for demolition in 1972. It is not known whether it was the fault of bad architecture or the social situation in the United States at that time, or maybe the huge errors committed by the authorities of St. Louis. However, many believe that this was the final defeat of modernist urbanism.

Keywords: Minoru Yamasaki, Pruitt-Igoe, slums, Saint Louis, Modernism

Streszczenie

Minoru Yamasaki był dość pechowym architektem. Oprócz bliźniaczych wież nowojorskiego World Trade Center zaprojektował osiedle socjalne Pruitt-Igoe w Saint Louis. Zbudowane w 1954 roku modernistyczne blokowisko w ciągu kilku lat zostało całkowicie zdemolowane przez jego mieszkańców i stało się siedliskiem przestępczości. Te domy z wielkiej płyty okazały się tak złe, że w 1972 roku postanowiono je wysadzić w powietrze. Nie wiadomo, czy to była wina złej architektury, czy sytuacji społecznej panującej w Stanach Zjednoczonych w tamtym czasie, czy też może ogromnych błędów popełnionych przez władze Saint Louis. Wielu uważa jednak, że była to ostateczna porażka modernistycznej urbanistyki.

Słowa kluczowe: Minoru Yamasaki, Pruitt-Igoe, slumsy, Saint Louis, modernizm

* Ph.D. Arch. Paweł Żuk, Institute of Architectural Design, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology.

It's a job I wish I hadn't done.
Minoru Yamasaki¹

1. MYTHS

The history of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate is one of the most dramatic moments in the history of architecture. It was a housing estate built out of concrete slabs, which has become completely devastated by its inhabitants. A housing estate had been built that was so bad that the authorities decided to demolish it after only 16 years. It was assumed that it would be most sensible, and for sure the cheapest way out. The demolition of the Saint Louis housing project had been easier than the destruction of the myth that was created around it, writes Colin Marshall. This myth is that bad architecture was responsible for the social catastrophe of Pruitt-Igoe. Or, perhaps, the blowing up of the housing blocks in Saint Louis was easier than solving the problems of its inhabitants?

The ill-fated and at the same time mythical Pruitt-Igoe complex is most famous due to the fact that Charles Jencks claimed that it set the date of the death of modernism in urban design. He announces it pompously in 1977, at the beginning of the first chapter of his bestselling book – “The Language of Post-Modern Architecture”: “*The Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri in July 15, 1972 at 3.32 pm (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given final coup de grâce by dynamite.*”² Jencks succeeded in composing this striking sentence, perfect for the beginning of the widely read book, brilliantly summarizing the failure of modernism in urban planning. Perhaps he is right a little, but it seems that Jencks simplified the problem a little too much. He omitted several circumstances that lessened the role of Modernist architecture such as the social problems caused by racial segregation, the occurrence of White Flight, the economic crisis in the United States due to the war in Korea, the incompetence of local and federal authorities, as well as the lack of full control over key issues relating to architecture, such as the height of the buildings, by Yamasaki and his associate. According to Jencks, the full weight of the blame is on Modernism. Would the inhabitants of Pruitt-Igoe be happy, the crime rate low and the destruction averted altogether if Pruitt-Igoe had postmodernist architecture?³

In 1982 shots of blowing up Pruitt-Igoe appeared in the famous film “Koyaanisqatsi” by Godfrey Reggio. Wikipedia lists Koyaanisqatsi as a word of the Hopi Native American language, meaning 1. crazy life, 2. life without balance, 3. life in rush, 4. pursuit of disaster, 5. state which forces to reflect on the changing mode of life⁴. The film shows a time-lapse of the failure of modern civilization, the death of Pruitt-Igoe and the explosion of the Atlas-Centaur rocket are the peak points of this defeat. It is far from a glorious context. The dramatic images remain in the memory for a long time and we have to admit that the fame

¹ J. Bailey, *The Case History of a Failure*, Architectural Forum 12(126)1965, New York 1965, p. 22, tr. Author.

² Ch. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, Wydawnictwo Arkady, Warszawa 1987, p. 9.

³ C. Bristol, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, Journal of Architectural Education University of California, Berkeley 1991, p. 168.

⁴ pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koyaanisqatsi [06.2016].

gained by the film helped to fix the myth of Pruitt-Igoe: that of Modernist architecture as a civilizational catastrophe.

Another myth is the supposed curse of Minoru Yamasaki. We all remember September 11, 2001, when two passenger planes hit one by one the twin towers of the World Trade Center – another of Yamasaki’s projects. It was an amazing coincidence. Two huge disasters, in which architecture designed by Minoru Yamasaki played a significant role. After the failure of Pruitt-Igoe, critics accused him of being the embodiment of all the sins of the arrogant modernists – too haughty and supercilious to understand the ordinary people’s needs. Only few doubted: *“The myth that faulty architecture was wholly to blame had a racist tinge to it, with some (including the architects themselves) claiming that middle-class, white architects had designed a building without taking into account the ‘behaviours’ of its intended residents.”*⁵ Nevertheless, Yamasaki was an American of Japanese origin and grew up in an Asian ghetto in Seattle⁶. He had to understand at least some of the problems of Pruitt-Igoe’s residents. Although he did not get full control over the shape of its architecture, he felt that this project was his personal defeat. He complained about it in many statements, for example in an interview for the Architectural Forum magazine in 1965: *I never thought people were that destructive. As an architect, I doubt if I would think about it now. I suppose we should have quit the job. It’s a job I wish I hadn’t done*⁷. There is no doubt that Minoru Yamasaki was a tragic figure in the history of architecture.

In 2011, Chad Freidrichs directed the documentary “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth”. The film features archive footage of the complex and focuses on interviews with former Pruitt-Igoe residents, who were forced to live “better lives”, for which they were not prepared. Many of them admit that they were initially happy with the existing conditions, but these quickly deteriorated. Fredrich doesn’t blame architecture, he doesn’t judge at all, but he sees a complicated social situation of that time. The author also returns to the location of the complex in the central part of Saint Louis and notes with surprise that this place still has not been rebuilt⁸.

2. THE HOUSE

In 1955, on a 57-acre site in Saint Louis, Missouri, 33 identical 11-story concrete housing blocks were opened⁹. The complex included 2,870 apartments. The apartments were small, with undersized kitchen appliances. The “skip-stop” elevators stopped on every third floor, forcing residents to use the stairs more often. Horizontal circulation was provided by long, glazed galleries. Each corridor was assigned to 20 families, and instead of the expected integration of the residents, the galleries proved an excellent environment for local gangs. In addition, the buildings were equipped with laundry rooms, garbage chutes and municipal

⁵ awopbopalooop.blogspot.com/2010/10/pruitt-igoe-myth.html [06.2016].

⁶ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minoru_Yamasaki [06.2016].

⁷ J. Bailey, *The Case History of a Failure*, Architectural Forum 12(126)1965, New York 1965, p. 22.

⁸ archirama.muratorplus.pl/wideo-i-foto/mit-osiedla-pruitt-igoe-czyli-jak-upadly-idee-modernizmu,72_1137.html [06.2016].

⁹ It is surprising that in many Polish slab block complexes, just 11-storey blocks are criticized for quick social degradation.



- III. 1. Pruitt-Igoe, 04.1972. Author: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pruitt-igoe_collapse-series.jpg [06.2016]
- III. 2. Pruitt-Igoe, 3.03.1968. Author: USGS. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pruitt-Igoe_1968March03.jpg [06.2016]

halls, where women could spend time together to gossip or perform minor works, which were supposed to facilitate social activity¹⁰. In a short time, many of the buildings began to be plagued by technical difficulties. Elevators, plumbing and heating systems were out of order. The costs of the repairs grew quickly, although the residents complained about the lack of proper maintenance almost from the beginning. The quality was low, although quite decent in comparison to slum standards, initially providing the inhabitants with an acceptable standard of living. They were ambiguously called “the penthouses for the poor”¹¹. In the movie “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth” the residents remember this time with nostalgia, they believe that their standard of living has improved significantly, but admit that they were not prepared to live in the blocks, take care of the common corridors and courtyards. People that had been excluded from society, that had been actually marginalized, were gathered in a small area. The authorities did not provide the necessary social programs to prepare them for a new life. All this contributed to the development of crime and the gradual devastation of the housing estate. Police reports from that time mention a lot of crimes against property, gang activity, drug dealing, prostitution and murders. Heaters, toilets, garbage incinerators and electricity all malfunctioned, and at one point the faulty plumbing let loose floods of raw sewage through the hallways¹². The life of residents was vividly described by James Baile in “The Case History of a Failure”: *The undersized elevators are brutally battered, and they reek of urine from children who misjudged the time it takes to reach their apartments. By stopping only on every third floor, the elevators offer convenient settings for crime ... The galleries are anything but cheerful social enclaves. The tenants call them “gauntlets” through which they must pass to reach their doors ... Heavy metal grilles now shield the windows, but they were installed too late to prevent three children from falling out. The steam pipes remain exposed both in the galleries and the apartments, frequently inflicting severe burns. The adjoining laundry rooms are unsafe and little used. ... The storage rooms are also locked and empty. They have been robbed of their contents so often that tenants refuse to use them*¹³.

The architecture of the estate has been ironically commented by Charles Jencks: *Pruitt-Igoe was constructed according to the most progressive ideas of CIAM ... and it won an award from the American Institute of Architects when it was designed in 1951. It consisted of elegant slab blocks fourteen (sic!) storeys high, with rational “streets in the air” (which were safe from cars but, as it turned out, not safe from crime); “sun, space and greenery”, which Le Corbusier called the “three essential joys of urbanism” (instead of conventional streets, gardens and semi-private space, which he banished). It had a separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, the provision of play space, and local amenities such as laundries, crèches and gossip centres – all rational substitutes for traditional patterns*¹⁴. In 1977, when “The Language of Post-Modern Architecture” was written, this dramatic story had fit very well the author’s thesis that modernism was over. Jencks didn’t take into account any

¹⁰ C. Bristol, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, Journal of Architectural Education University of California, Berkeley 1991, p. 168.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² C. Marshall, *Pruitt-Igoe: the troubled high-rise that came to define urban America – a history of cities in 50 buildings, day 21*, The Guardian, 22.04.2015.

¹³ J. Bailey, *The Case History of a Failure*, Architectural Forum 12(126)1965, New York 1965, p. 22–23, tr. Author.

¹⁴ Ch. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, Wydawnictwo Arkady, Warszawa 1987, p. 9.

of the mitigating circumstances: the economic crisis, the social and racial situation, the incompetence of municipal and federal authorities, or the lack of full control over key issues by designers. The federal government forced the designers to double the initially assumed density of the complex. Yamasaki's original concept assumed that the estate would be a mix of high-rise, mid-high and low-rise buildings. That version of the design was not accepted by the local authorities, however, as it exceeded the maximum cost per unit. In the face of the outbreak of the Korean War, high inflation and shortages of construction materials, the federal government insisted on the construction of high-rise buildings with lifts. There are some inaccuracies in the sentences written by Jencks. He is wrong on the number of floors. In fact, the constructed blocks had 11 rather than 14 floors. This is an important fact because, according to many, the number of stories was one of the reasons for the project's failure. Jencks, the critic of modernism, was wrong on another point. The project of Pruitt-Igoe was never given an award. He probably mixed it up with Cochran Gardens, a different project designed by the same architects, which won 2 awards. Anyway, Jencks made the Pruitt-Igoe the icon of the fall of modernist architecture and urban planning¹⁵.

Pruitt-Igoe is also called sometimes the failed version of Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse (as if there had ever been a successful version!) in which large residential towers were meant to be self-sufficient so that their residents never had to leave them. Le Corbusier hated living on the streets and walking to the store in the neighbourhood¹⁶. With the vision of the Pope of the modernists, Pruitt-Igoe inherited its inhuman scale, but these houses were never fully self-sufficient, like Unité d'Habitation was.

Pruitt-Igoe housing reached its peak settlement of 91% in 1957, which fell below 35% in 1971, when only 600 people remained in the complex of 17 buildings that had not been boarded up. Supposedly the most persistent residents managed to create a kind of community; however, it was still hard to say that living in Pruitt-Igoe was normal. Saint Louis authorities considered various scenarios on how to rectify the situation, including reducing the height of buildings up to 4 storeys. Here the obstacle was the technology of the slab blocks, because the costs of making the changes were too high. At the end of the 60's the few residents were encouraged to leave the settlement. A radical solution was implemented – that of blowing up the complex. This took place in several stages. The explosions began on 16 March 1972 and the first part of the demolition lasted until the 15th of July 1972. The rest of Pruitt-Igoe was demolished over the next three years¹⁷.

3. THE CITY

Located in the central part of the United States, the industrial city of Saint Louis was the fifth largest city in the country before World War II. It even hosted the Olympic Games in 1904. During the great migration in the first half of the twentieth century it was the goal for many African-Americans from the South who sought a better future. In 1950, the population

¹⁵ C. Bristol, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, Journal of Architectural Education University of California, Berkeley 1991, p. 169–170.

¹⁶ friesian.com/qatsi.htm [06.2016].

¹⁷ W. G. Ramroth, *Planning for Disaster: How Natural and Man-made Disasters Shape the Built Environment*, Kaplan Publishing, New York 2007, p. 165.

of Saint Louis reached 850 000. The city became overcrowded, “something out of a Charles Dickens novel.”¹⁸ This caused huge social problems and the formation of districts where poverty was the norm. At that time, Saint Louis has also been affected by the phenomenon of White Flight. It was a mass escape of the white middle class population to suburban areas. Between the years 1950–1960 the city lost more than 60% of its population in this manner. The houses abandoned by whites became dilapidated and became settled by blacks, causing further districts to turn into slums. In 1949 the city introduced the Housing Act, which allowed the co-financing of municipal social housing by the local authorities. In 1950, the city of Saint Louis had been ordered by the federal government to finance 5800 units. The municipal authorities were planning to acquire large areas of black ghettos to sell them later at a reduced price to private developers, which would encourage the white middle class to settle within the city. At the same time, low-rent apartments were being constructed, which were intended for the African Americans from the ghettos. The first housing complex, Cochran Gardens was completed in 1953 and was designed for poor whites. Designs were developed to construct additional ones: Pruitt-Igoe, Darst-Webbe and Vaughn. Pruitt-Igoe was planned to fill the 57-acre site in the northern part of the black ghetto. The location was bordered by Cass Avenue from the North, North Jefferson Avenue from the west, Carr Street from the south and North 20th Street from the east. Saint Louis entrusted the design to the Leinweber, Yamasaki & Hellmuth design firm. It was planned in two stages: the first was named after an African-American pilot of World War II – Wendell O. Pruitt. It provided cheap housing for rent to black people. The second part, reserved for the white middle class was named after former Congressman William L. Igoe. On the 3rd of July 1964, President Lyndon Johnson finally abolished racial segregation, which prevented the complete separation of the tenants because of their race. It was also found that members of the white American middle class didn’t want to live together with black residents displaced from the slums and subsequently left the estate, which later became again a black ghetto. Pruitt-Igoe turned one type of black slums to another¹⁹.

Known for her critical attitude to modernist urbanism, Jane Jacobs, in her book “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”, not even once writing directly about the Pruitt-Igoe, almost predicted the collapse of the residential complex²⁰. She claimed that such architecture is doomed to collapse because of its scale, the huge amount of useless spaces and the lack of diversity, she also foresaw the indolence of planners and politicians wanting to make “impossibly deep changes using impossibly superficial means for this purpose”. Jane Jacobs noted similar tendencies in many American cities, as there were many areas similar to Pruitt-Igoe – called chronic poverty districts, in which short-term revitalization programs created a vicious circle, as after a slight improvement of living conditions had been provided, it was almost always followed by the stagnation and degeneration of such places. The key is to understand the problems of the inhabitants of poverty-stricken areas, instead of organizing, in a patronizing way, a better life for them. Building new residential complexes and populating them with slum dwellers does not interrupt the ongoing

¹⁸ L. H. Larsen, Kirkendall R. S., *A History of Missouri: 1953 to 2003*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2004, p. 60.

¹⁹ C. Bristol, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, Journal of Architectural Education University of California, Berkeley 1991, p. 164.

²⁰ artofcitybuilding.blogspot.com/2014/02/modernism-revisited-was-jane-jacobs.html

process of the outflow of those families that were successful. The effective regeneration of poverty areas occurs when their inhabitants want to remain there of their own will, and decide to stay when they create a true community that gives them a sense of security and the possibility of meeting their life's needs. Each time the process is long and in addition provides no guarantee of success²¹. Unfortunately, the Pruitt-Igoe revitalization program was ineffective. We can even say that it did more bad than good. Instead of eliminating it, it worsened the problem of racial segregation in Saint Louis. It has served as an argument against the use of federal funding to revitalize cities. In the end, it became an icon of the failure of the utopian ideals of modernist urbanism, the final blow that caused them never to return to their former glory.

Nowadays, in 2016, when we look at aerial photographs of Pruitt-Igoe, we can see a large green trapeze in the heart of St. Louis. It is not even an ordered park. A high school and primary school were built on a small part of it. The rest is a big empty plot, overgrown with oak and hickory trees.

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²¹ J. Jacobs, Ł. tr. Mojsak, *Życie i śmierć wielkich miast ameryki*, Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2014, p. 253–330.