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Modern Architectural Principles in The Pruitt-Igoe Failure as The End of The Modern Architectural Era

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ABSTRACT

Over a hundred years ago, modern architecture was developed in response to the fundamental changes in society's view of the world brought about by the industrial revolution. The aim was to find solutions to the new problems created by these changes. Pruitt-igoe was built in the post-war world, when there was a housing shortage, and was completed in 1956. The project was initially thought to be a sign of the success of modern architecture. Initially, Pruitt-Igoe was designed to contain a variety of housing types for different population levels. However, due to changes in the cost budget, the design had to be altered to maximize units by eliminating and lowering the quality of the original plan. The architect on the Pruitt-igoe project, Yamasaki tried to apply Le Cobusier's design method by creating green spaces and public spaces within. However, this was hindered by the responsible agency for intervening so that in the end Yamasaki removed or minimized many of the main features of the Pruitt-Igoe project. Pruitt-Igoe as a reflection of modern architecture is certainly very close to the doctrines of modern architecture. Modern architecture generally focuses on function, efficiency, and the use of modern materials and technology. However, the implementation of this design faced several problems, such as a lack of attention to the social and psychological factors of its inhabitants. The failure of Pruitt-Igoe shows that the application of modern architectural doctrines is not enough, and it also gave birth to a new era in architecture, the postmodern era. Thus, Pruitt-Igoe provides an important lesson that modern architecture needs to pay attention to social and psychological aspects in its design.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over a hundred years ago, modern architecture was developed in response to the fundamental changes in society's view of the world brought about by the industrial revolution. The aim was to find solutions to the new problems that arose as a result of these changes (Aziz Amen, 2017). Modern architecture, which emerged as a response to the 19th century style, has given many different meanings to the built environment by featuring elements such as glass surfaces, open layouts and functionality. With the help of various art schools, actions, and organisations such as constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, and CIAM, modern architecture gained strength and wide acceptance in the 20th century (Beyaz & Erçin, 2023). The Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri, has become an important symbol in the history of modern architecture as it raised awareness of the complexities and challenges of designing sustainable urban environments. Built after World War II, Pruitt-Igoe reflects the great ambition of the modern architecture movement to provide affordable, functional, and modern housing for rapidly growing urban communities. However, the project, which was originally expected to address the city's pressing housing problems, turned into a painful story of failure. Over time, the complex came to symbolise the systematic failure and neglect of the community needs that the project was supposed to fulfil. Pruitt-Igoe, with its modern architectural approach, provides an interesting perspective on the application of innovative principles in urban design (Birmingham, 1999). In this context, the aim of this research is to discover and understand more deeply the principles of modern architecture used in the design and construction of Pruitt-Igoe and how these principles contributed to its failure. As such, this research not only provides an in-depth analysis of the failure of Pruitt-Igoe, but also provides a critical view of the future direction of architecture, especially in the context of growing urbanisation. By understanding the mistakes of the past, it is hoped that we can learn to make wiser and more sustainable decisions in designing future urban environments.

2. METHOD

The method used in this research is a descriptive qualitative method conducted by searching and reviewing previous research as a literature study. Using this method is expected to result in the presentation of a more in-depth and contextual understanding of the principles of modern architecture and their relationship to the failure of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Pruitt-Igoe was built in the post-war world, when there was a housing shortage, and was completed in 1956. The project was initially thought to be a sign of the success of modern architecture (Shllaku, Visar, 2020). However, as it progressed and reached the end of its life, the events that occurred at Pruitt-Igoe according to Charles Jencks marked the death of modern architecture, and post-modern architecture was born (Barliana, M. Syaom, 2021).



Figure 1. Luke Fiederer, "AD Classics: Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project/Minoru Yamasaki", 2017

Source: [ArchDaily](#)

2.1 FACTOR CAUSING THE FAILURE OF PRUITT-IGOE

The collapse of Pruitt-Igoe was not due to a single cause but a culmination of architectural, economic, political, and social factors. The rigid application of Modernist planning principles, the failure of mass housing strategies, rising crime rates, economic mismanagement, and broader socio-political neglect all contributed to the project's downfall. Each of these factors exacerbated the others, creating a feedback loop of decline that ultimately rendered the complex uninhabitable. Pruitt-Igoe was considered a failure from the start because it prioritised the number of units too much. Initially, Pruitt-Igoe was designed to contain a variety of housing types for diverse population levels (Cherniawsky, Jack, 2020). However, due to changes in the cost budget, the design had to be altered to maximise units by eliminating and reducing the quality of the original plan (Shllaku, Visar, 2020). The design change changed the number of towers to 33 towers with 11 floors each.

One of the core reasons for Pruitt-Igoe's failure was its adherence to rigid functionalist design principles. The high-rise structures, designed to maximize density, lacked the human scale necessary for fostering community interaction (Jacobs, 1961). The absence of mixed-use development meant that residents had limited access to commercial spaces, social institutions, and recreational areas within the complex (Alexander, 1977). The uniformity of the design eliminated diversity in housing typologies, leaving little room for individual expression or modification by residents. Furthermore, the interior layout of the buildings, with long, dimly lit corridors and poorly maintained elevators, created unsafe environments that encouraged criminal activity (Newman, 1972). The design changes left only one public building as the 'community centre', resulting in an isolated community with no space for interaction between residents (Cherniawsky, Jack, 2020). In addition to the large amount of space eliminated, the quality of materials and furniture inside is also lowered, making it vulnerable to damage. There is also a new design innovation, the skip-stop elevator system, to reduce costs.

In 1949, the US government issued a new housing policy. During this time, approximately 15 million veterans returned to America as it was in a post-war situation. The housing regulations that were issued regulated the provision of decent housing for citizens. Pruitt-Igoe was built in an area that was previously a slum area which was then relocated. However, this policy ultimately resulted in a change in people's lifestyle. From living in the city centre, people began to move to the suburbs as city land became expensive. The rising price of urban land is also due to the government's practice of indirectly making urban land

an 'economic investment'. There is also a government policy on operational costs that are borne by residents, in addition to high rental costs, this makes the Pruitt-Igoe complex increasingly abandoned. People tend to move to areas around Pruitt-Igoe that have lower costs but create new slums.

Le Corbusier's vision of high-rise living as a "machine for living" failed in the context of public housing (Le Corbusier, 1927). Pruitt-Igoe's design did not account for the socio-economic realities of its intended residents. Unlike some European social housing projects that integrated mixed-income communities, Pruitt-Igoe was exclusively occupied by low-income residents who lacked the economic mobility to sustain the complex (Goldhagen, 2000). This segregation intensified poverty and unemployment within the community, leading to accelerated physical and social deterioration (Vale, 1992). Buildings that house low- and high-income residents have different maintenance or maintenance origins (Shllaku, Visar, 2020). Pruitt-Igoe, which over time has been dominated by low-income black racial groups, with a government policy that requires residents to pay their own maintenance costs. The building's neglected facilities and many vacant units made the building even more neglected and rundown.



Figure 2. Chad Freidrich, Pruitt-Igoe Slum Building, 2011

Source: [The Pruitt Igoe Myth](#)

The spatial isolation of Pruitt-Igoe contributed to social alienation and increased crime rates. Poorly maintained common areas, dark stairwells, and dysfunctional public spaces made crime easier to perpetrate and harder to prevent (Rainwater, 1970). Studies have shown that well-designed urban spaces incorporating "eyes on the street" principles help deter crime, yet Pruitt-Igoe's design lacked visibility and natural surveillance (Jacobs, 1961). By the mid-1960s, crime rates had escalated to over 300 serious incidents per 1,000 residents annually, making Pruitt-Igoe one of the most dangerous housing projects in the U.S. (Vale, 1992).

One of the design factors in the Pruitt-Igoe development was to minimise costs by reducing communal spaces and using skip-stop elevators. In addition to the reduction of communal spaces, the vertical living system was not familiar to residents who previously lived in houses directly on the ground. They found it difficult to keep an eye on their children who were playing. At first, the system of communal space was responded positively by residents. However, after 1968 the response became negative (Major, M. D. 2021). It can be seen from the Pruitt-Igoe site design that it pays less attention to human behaviour, especially prospective residents so that they often feel uncomfortable.

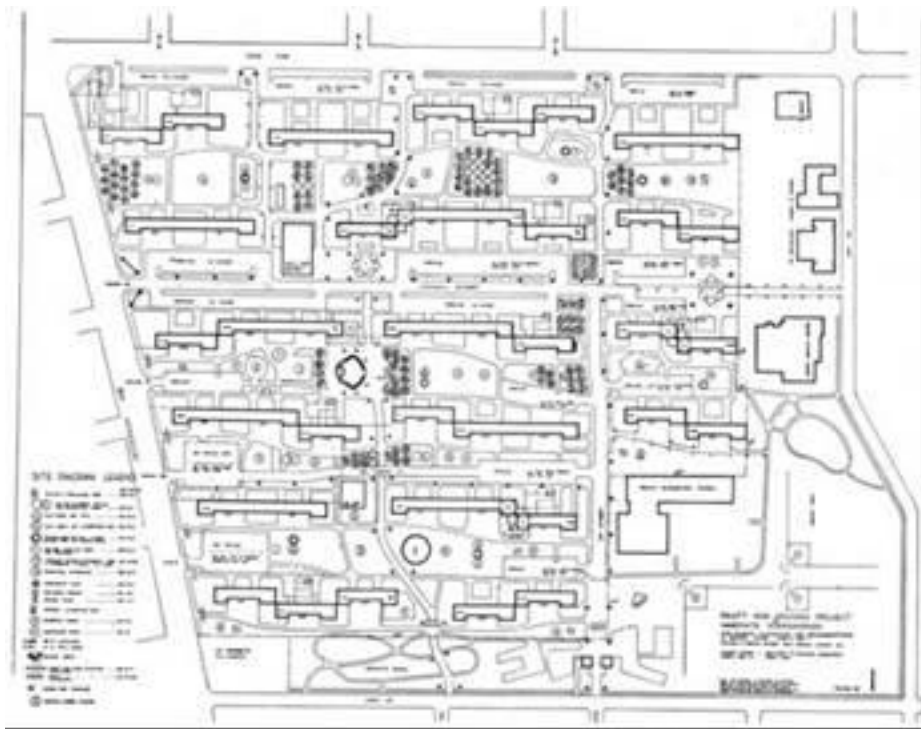


Figure 3. Luke Fiederer, Pruitt Igoe Site Plan, 2017.

Source: [ArchDaily](#)

The elevator system that uses a skip-stop system in Pruitt-Igoe has received a negative response from residents from the beginning. Skip-stop elevators in Pruitt-Igoe stop every 3 floors only. That means not all floors are skipped by the elevators. Residents whose units are not bypassed by the elevators have to go to their units using the fire escape. Besides being inconvenient, this is also dangerous and can increase the crime rate because the fire escape is closed and not easily visible to the public.

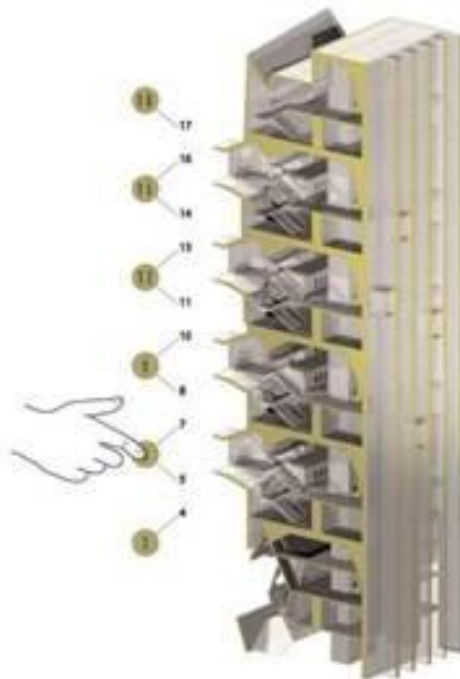


Figure 4. Helmut Yawn, Skip Stop Circulation

Source: [Pinterest](#)

Pruitt-Igoe is named after Wendell O. Pruitt, a black pilot, and William L. Igoe, a white congressman. These two underlie the name of the complex for the black and white races. The building for the black race is Pruitt, and Igoe for the white race. This separation creates a gap between the two races. One of the factors of the racial divide that occurred was the relocation of black residents away from their workplaces in the city centre. In fact, the result of this government policy was called 'Negro Renewal' by them (Freeman, R. 1996). The racist practices that were in place at the time were exacerbated by the inappropriate expectations when these two races were brought together. This social issue added to other problems, namely, violence, destruction of facilities, and vandalism making the neighbourhood even more rundown. Even in the documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, 2011, the violence that occurred in the Pruitt-Igoe complex led to a tragic death. It is a nightmare for everyone who has ever lived in Pruitt-Igoe. The squalor of abandoned buildings over time has led to an increase in crime. Lack of communal spaces, poor lighting systems. Due to the large number of empty units, many units in Pruitt-Igoe are rented out at low prices so that many are used as criminal dens with their slum conditions (Hasibah, S. H., Oktaviani, E. B., & Fadilah, S, 2021).

2.2 PRINCIPLES OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN THE PRUITT-IGOE FAILURE

Pruitt-Igoe as a reflection of modern architecture is of course very close to the doctrines of modern architecture. Modern architecture generally focuses on function, efficiency, and the use of modern materials and technology. This is reflected in Pruitt-Igoe's buildings, which were designed to fulfil the needs of circulation, storage, recreation, and community building.



Figure 5. Five Alive, Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe in Planning, 2018

Source: [Plan A Magazine](#)

Pruitt Igoe is supposed to fulfil all the functions as described by the architect, Yamasaki, such as circulation, storage, recreation and community building. Although contrary to CIAM (Congres Internationaux d'Architecture) recommendations, Yamasaki followed American practice, the Pruitt Igoe buildings are really just vertical residential stacks with no roof terraces or common areas on the ground floor. Yamasaki elevates the buildings by opening up a section of the first floor of the buildings, creating a breezeway that highlights the modern construction of the buildings and provides a circulation path through the section. Above that area, the concrete frames of the buildings are covered with simple brick walls that have square and rectangular windows. Yamasaki attempted to achieve variety within the complex by changing the colour of the bricks, thereby creating structures with different lighting levels and giving each building a unique identity.



Figure 6. Pruitt-Igoe's Open-Plan Ground Floor View

Source: [wikiarquitectura](https://www.wikiarquitectura.com/en/ Pruitt-Igoe)

The buildings were designed to have as much open space around them as possible. To achieve that goal, Yamasaki tried to reduce the monotony of the towers by adjusting the spacing and landscaping. Each building was placed 200 feet away from its neighbours to create a sense of openness. Yamasaki proposed a green 'river' of grass and playgrounds meandering through the site to offset the rigid formality of the buildings. This was in line with Bartholomew's plan to create a 'river park system' in the poorly maintained areas around St. Louis' central business district. The Pruitt-Igoe buildings are aligned along an east-west axis in line with the street pattern of the neighbourhood to more easily connect with the existing utility network. Even so, the layout of the buildings was slightly warped (the Housing Authority rectified this at the end of the design phase). (Merkel, Jayne, 2021).

Furthermore, the design technique applied to Pruitt Igoe's buildings is the 'alternate corridor', which was commonly used in flats in the 1950-1970 era. In this design, there are key features such as skip-stops, doorsteps, and escape pivots. Based on the beliefs of the modern movement in architecture, architects believed in promoting design innovation using this technique. Initially, the main goal was to reduce construction costs by creating spatial systems that were considered efficient. However, in the application of this design technique, many problems of social organisation occupy Pruitt-Igoe, which is supposed to be an alternative corridor that aims to improve relations between different groups of people (Pérez-Duarte & Penna, 2021).



Figure 7: Pruitt-Igoe's Corridor

Source: [stltoday](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/ Pruitt-Igoe)

The architect of the Pruitt-Igoe project, Yamasaki tried to apply Le Corbusier's design method by creating green spaces and public spaces within it. However, this was hampered by the responsible agency for intervening so that in the end Yamasaki deleted or minimised many of the main features of the Pruitt-Igoe project (Shllaku, Visar, 2020). On the other hand, according to the author Cepi Sabre in 2016, in his critique, some residents there feel alien to modern architectural forms and cause discomfort. The modern architectural forms in question are form follows function, less is more, and ornament is a crime, which then for some people the architecture of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings looks simple but boring (Hasibah S. H., Oktaviani E. B., Fadilah S, 2021).

The demolition of Pruitt-Igoe in the early 1970s became emblematic of the failure of Modernist urban planning. Charles Jencks (1977) famously declared its destruction as "the day Modern architecture died," marking a shift toward Postmodernist critiques that emphasized contextualism, community engagement, and flexible urban design. Pruitt-Igoe's failure underscored the need for participatory planning approaches that integrate social, economic, and cultural factors into architectural design, rather than relying solely on abstract functionalist principles (Jencks, 1991).

The failure of Pruitt-Igoe does not mean that the doctrines of modern architecture are entirely wrong or right. Modern architecture strives to create buildings that are simple, functional, and aesthetically pleasing by considering order, user behaviour, and function. However, the failure of Pruitt-Igoe shows that the application of these doctrines alone is not enough. Pruitt Igoe paid little attention to the psychology of its residents (Salihoglu, 2022). Pruitt-Igoe is a broadly symbolic project in the discussion of the extent to which architecture can achieve social change, it is fundamental to avoid entrenched dogmas and to glimpse that social and political structures have greater power than architectural design (Rosero, 2017). According to Charles Jencks, an architectural historian, the building's demolition is considered the moment modern architecture died. The building was originally expected to blend the two races, but instead there was an economic and social divide. This shows that Pruitt-Igoe is proof that the design norms of modern architecture are no longer relevant. It also gave birth to a new era in architecture, the postmodern era.

4. CONCLUSION

The post-war construction of Pruitt-Igoe gave hope to the community and even signalled the success of modern architecture at the time. The Pruitt-Igoe project was planned to be an affordable, functional, and modern complex that solved the problems of the time. However, things changed when these modern architectural principles were no longer relevant. This can be characterised by the events leading up to the destruction of Pruitt-Igoe. The demise of Pruitt-Igoe was not just about the architecture, every factor was interrelated. Social, economic, design, maintenance, and even psychological factors were intertwined and led to Pruitt-Igoe's eventual demolition in 1976. Pruitt-Igoe is a reflection of modern architecture that focuses on function, efficiency, and the use of modern materials and technology. Pruitt-Igoe's buildings were designed to fulfil the needs of circulation, storage, recreation, and community building. However, the implementation of this design faced several problems, such as a lack of attention to the social and psychological factors of the residents. The design techniques applied, such as the 'alternate corridor', also raised issues regarding the social organisation of the complex. In addition, there was criticism of modern architectural forms that were considered simple but boring to some residents. The failure of Pruitt-Igoe showed that the application of modern architectural doctrines was not enough, and this also gave birth to a new era in architecture, the postmodern era. Thus,

Pruitt-Igoe provides an important lesson that modern architecture needs to pay attention to social and psychological aspects in its design.

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