Reflection: St. Louis Needs To Unravel The Lessons Of Pruitt-Igoe

By ROBERT W. DUFFY

Going into the inner city and taking a hike through the abandoned Pruitt-Igoe public housing site could be regarded as a lark, but once the hike is finished, a visitor realizes it is considerably more than that. Pruitt-Igoe is forbidden fruit, but going in is all the more delicious because one is not supposed to be there. Plus, from the outside it looks dangerous, and that quality makes adventure even more appealing. Beyond those easily transgressed wires stretched across old, worn down streets, there is a place of rare beauty and of serenity.

But the site is also a lingering problem. It is an urban tragedy, an embarrassment. It is a vessel filled with deceptions, myths, lies, speculation and horror.

Because Pruitt-Igoe was and is such a big problem, and probably an anomalous situation on the contemporary urban American scene, it is a magnet for study and discussion. For writers such as this one, it is fodder for those who stand ready to observe and opine.

And so, on a recent golden and blue summer morning, a group of the seriously interested took off on a hike, not a lark but a journey into a thicket of disillusioning history. The artist Mary Miss devised the tour.

The vision of Mary Miss

Miss was here from New York to work at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation with a lively group of co-contributors on various innovative projects as part of the Marfa Dialogues. The focus of the dialogues was on urban sustainability and livability, qualities that Pruitt-Igoe can manifest only in negative. And so, while the hike through Pruitt-Igoe was at once informative it also was vexatious. At every turning the question had to be raised: What happened here specifically and in our society in general to bring about such as catastrophe? Further: What can we learn from the disaster that was Pruitt-Igoe to help to bring about the revival and reinvention of the American city, our city in particular?
Miss is among those who are confident they have important pieces of the answer to contribute to the processes of revival and reinvention. She is a visionary artist with a commitment to work of lasting value to address the problems of American cities. She has both first-hand experience with their – our – problems, and she presents ideas of modest scale that she believes bring illumination into gloomy corners. She works in many media, and with men and women representing other disciplines to create this work.

Most assertively and conspicuously, she creates installations that braid together and give material form to ideas about urbanism and sculpture and architecture. These constructions make references to and derive meaning from marriages entered into with the public spaces in which they exist. They also exist on a human scale, and engage and stimulate those who visit or encounter them. I’m convinced her beliefs and commitment have enormous potential and genuine merit.

We’re lucky in this region to have a now-vintage Miss project, “Pool Complex: Orchard Valley,” created in the early 1980s at in the eastern woodlands of Laumeier Sculpture Park in Sunset Hills. In the 1990s, Miss also developed a thoughtful and thrifty idea for the block just east of the federal courthouse downtown. This work of art would have made organic and material references to the history, geography and biology of St. Louis.

But like many good, imaginative projects proposed for the region, it was nixed, in this case by the architects of our phallic-y joke of a courthouse. They found Miss’ plan aesthetically distasteful: “a junkyard in the front yard of my building” is how one architect dismissed it. It took a while, but the idea of creating a regionally referential work of art and landscape design finally came into exquisite bloom at Citygarden, now celebrating its fifth year of abundant life.

**Pruitt-Igoe was cursed**

Pruitt-Igoe was built in the 1950s. Its architect was Minoru Yamasaki, who designed the terminal building at Lambert Field as well as the World Trade Center in New York. The housing project initially was hailed as a grand achievement – a huge, complex machine for living that would provide clean, efficient, decent housing for the poor as well as a hedge against the increasing depopulation of the city of St. Louis.

Sixty years ago, Pruitt-Igoe’s 33 11-story buildings offered 2,870 “affordable” dwellings, and at its maximum occupancy the project housed about 15,000 people. Built in a complex effort to solve all sorts of problems the city faced at mid-century, it was a government effort to lift the poor out of the squalor of slums and transfer them into efficient and hospitable housing. But in retrospect, everything that could go wrong did go wrong, and the project had a lifespan of fewer than 20 years.

It was cursed. You have your pick of the reasons why: miscalculations of public policy as it applies to architecture and design; misunderstandings of the needs of the poor; Modernism; the removal of essential amenities by chainsaw value engineering; greed;
white flight and segregation; gross mismanagement; gross misconduct; fecklessness; carelessness. You name the urban demon and it had a lease on space in Pruitt-Igoe.

Pruitt-Igoe was a colossal, tragic, multi-million dollar failure, and it has become a synonym for theoretical hubris.

The buildings were blown up serially in the 1970s, and eventually all 33 of the 11-story vacant and vandalized buildings bit the dust. Once cleared of the resulting debris, the intended, unsecured site devolved into a massive, undoubtedly toxic, y’all-come dumping site for decades.

Many plans have been advanced for a profitable use of it. The land, plus additional contiguous acreage, is being considered as a possible new home for the St. Louis facility of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, now in South St. Louis. More than once, “Leave it alone” has been proclaimed, or in more institutional fashion, establish a college of errors there, a place where urban-catastrophe lessons might be studied, and theories for change developed.

**Into an urban forest**

The morning hike began not very far in space but in an economic and emotional world away from downtown St. Louis. The Pruitt-Igoe site, a couple of miles from the Arch, began as a 77-acre parcel; it is now down to about 33 acres with land having gone for school buildings. Its boundaries are Jefferson and Cass avenues and 20th and Carr streets.

Mary Miss and her multi-talented Marfa Dialogues associates, one of whom was a poet, met other participants on the north side of Cass Avenue where it meets 23rd Street. We crossed Cass and went around or over a wire stretched across one of the entrances to the largely abandoned site.

Today the land is covered by a dense and formidable urban forest – quite amazing really – a tangle of volunteer oak and hickory trees and trees of heaven, a tour-de-force of biological infiltration. Although there may be human inhabitants, they’re not in evidence. You hear talk of wild dogs; I’ve never seen one there. Birds love it, and so do butterflies and black flies and mosquitos, creatures not great, particularly, but certainly small.

For those hikers who’d never been into the site, it was stunning to find such a huge, dense forest growing unattended in the middle of the city. For those of us who visit frequently, it offers strange, concealed attractions, including telling physical remnants of its populated past.

For example, as we were leaving Pruitt-Igoe proper through a break in the fence, my friend, the professor-artist Bob Hansman, and I experienced together a moment of epiphany about the place. Just off the path, concealed in the jungle, there sat in squatty isolation a common urban infrastructural
appliance: a water hydrant. If you look hard at the accompanying picture you can see the top of it, just barely. It is absolutely ordinary, yet in the context of Pruitt-Igoe, the hydrant was archaeology of the most revelatory sort, like discovering evidence of the Mound Builders in your own back yard.

Here’s the basic message of the hydrant: People Lived Here.

Here’s the epitaph: Pretty soon, all of them were gone.

After the excitement of visiting a ruin such as this wears off, certain heartbreaking verities begin to make their impact.

**When dreams broke**

In the 1960s, malignant circumstances scrubbed whatever optimistic luster remained from Pruitt-Igoe. Euphemistically, we might say certain systems failed. In fact, as decay became the status quo, gangs and drugs and crimes -- petty and violent -- ran riot. Building materials and the buildings they formed began to crumble. Trash piled up. Elevators, designed to stop at every other floor, worked erratically. Tenants tried to work together to recreate the dreams, and they met with what looks now like criminal indifference from the housing authority. Tenants who remained were burdened not only with the increasingly heavy baggage of broken dreams and fractured families but with the actual correction and mopping up of all sorts of messes, water-related ones included, with no cleaning supplies provided by authorities.

Water, by the way, poured out to form a climactic moment in the history of the failure of Pruitt-Igoe. In February 1968, a KMOX-TV report by Fred Porterfield, available on YouTube, showed the disaster of flooding at Pruitt-Igoe. Water from burst pipes froze and ice hung like bunting from window sills. Then the water thawed and floods ensued.

Pleas for help from residents to housing officials were ignored. At 2311 Dickson Street, a rupture in a sewer line sent raw sewage flowing out into the street. Porterfield described it as a malevolent spring. If you hike through the site today, the battered asphalt of Dickson Street provides a pretty good path. If you follow along, you might walk right by the malevolent ghosts of all this at 2311 Dickson. On our hike, we did.

A range emotions and a welter of memories come into play in the middle of Pruitt-Igoe. For some who actually lived there, bittersweet memories of what was once home
dance in their minds, memorializing spaces that not only housed families but also hope.

One tenant described her apartment as a poor person’s penthouse. Eventually that spell was broken. For those of us who lived outside Pruitt-Igoe but looked in, it was chaos and conflict and danger. And for those of us who bought intellectual stock in Corbusian public housing notions, which were an inspiration for Yamasaki’s plan for Pruitt-Igoe, the failure was not only a shattering of beliefs and an occasion of grave sadness, but also a whopper of a narcissistic blow. How could we have been so naïve?

Whatever was left of my naïveté disappeared when I went to Pruitt-Igoe in late 1969 with a limousine-liberal friend. He was a member of a program called Block Partnership that paired churches and synagogues with poor families, ostensibly to help them survive Pruitt-Igoe. ... My friend had bought a new television set, so we took his used television set and delivered it to a needy family in Pruitt-Igoe. We felt threatened and frightened by another kind of malevolence, a malevolence presented by the angry faces of young men hanging out by the entrance to the building. These looks quickly disabused me of the idea that I was doing something generous and worthwhile. Today, in fact, that notion is risible. I was hated.

The television gesture – and that is all it amounted to -- defined futility but has use as metaphor. Pruitt Igoe, after all, had descended by that time from the realm of the miraculous into a Stygian, squalid darkness, one nothing could illuminate, much less a television set. Our well-meaning Lords Bountiful adventure, in microcosm, was much like Pruitt Igoe itself. As a used television couldn't possibly help a family, an unmanaged and unmanageable high-rise development couldn't help the poor -- or to help to save a shrinking city.

**In search of salvation**

After looking at the Pruitt-Igoe site and thinking not about particulars but about what its failure means fundamentally, it is clear in its grand and dramatic pathology that we must go back over the evidence and re-evaluate it to figure out what went wrong there with some precision. Then we must apply that knowledge as we work to do reinvent the threatened organisms that are so many American cities.

Mary Miss and her City as Living Laboratory strive to create works of art that try to give tangible form to sustainability. She is joined in this work by other artists and scientists, writers, urban planners and by us, if we are willing, to work to correct the stack of problems that confront us, demoralize us, afflict us and often leave us paralyzed in despair.

Some participants said with deep conviction that salvation can be as simple as keeping our individual nests clean and working to encourage others to do so. By connecting these microcosmic efforts in personal urban renewal and sustainable behavior, the argument goes, the macrocosm will be strengthened.

At a panel discussion on community activism sponsored by St. Louis Public Radio’s Young Friends organization and NPR’s Generation Listen Thursday at the Schlafly Tap Room, 24th Ward Alderman Scott Ogilvie said pretty much the same thing. Rather than going after big projects, we need to think small, concentrating on our own pieces of the big urban puzzle.

Hansman, who saw the light in the hydrant in the thicket, is famous for working to save the world by reclaiming one fragile or forgotten child at a time. Maybe, just maybe, his successful process is applicable to the goal of urban redemption, and that by employing it, the big, fragmented puzzle will be put together and take sustainable form by connecting one small piece of it at a time.

It is certainly worth a try.

**TAGS:** Pruitt-Igoe (/term/pruitt-igoe) development (/term/development)
Bob Duffy's account of the Pruitt-Igoe is vivid and hopeful even in these turbulent times. To study what went wrong there is to acknowledge the human capacity to create and to destroy while being oblivious to the need of people to work through their own hopes and fears. Is such a tour available to the public?