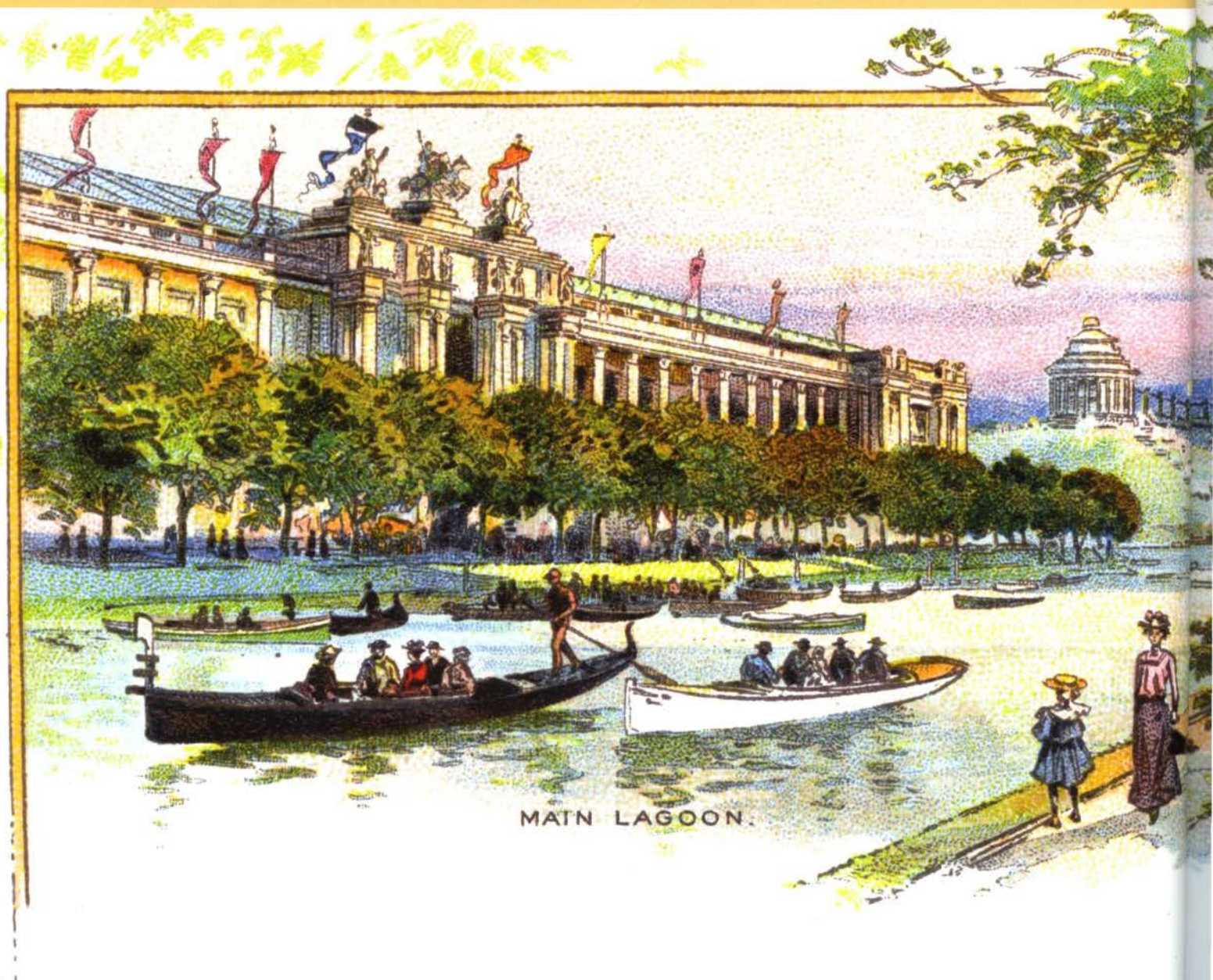


# THE WORLD'S FAIR, PRUITT-IGOE, AND THE MYTHS OF MODERNISM

BY TIMOTHY J. FOX





Missouri State Building.

OFFICIAL SOUVENIR  
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CARD



Above — The Missouri Building at the Fair featured the sort of clean lines that Progressives envisioned as improving order in chaotic Gilded Age cities. Such buildings at the fair were designed to convey modernity and good taste. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

Left — The lagoon was part of a series of massive water features. World's Fair president David Francis' insistence on clean water in the fountains and features like this one compelled Mayor Rolla Wells to push efforts for a water purification system for the city of St. Louis. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

On April 30, 1904, about 200,000 people streamed into St. Louis's Forest Park to experience the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, or the 1904 World's Fair. There, they saw the latest of everything, from farm equipment to the decorative arts. Just 50 years later, a bold experiment in public housing called Pruitt-Igoe was completed near downtown St. Louis. It promised hope to the city's poor, many of whom were about to be displaced by the clearance of the Mill Creek Valley and other urban renewal efforts.

Neither event is as unique to the city as St. Louisans would like to hope, or fear. Many American cities have hosted world's fairs, and many American cities have experienced the failure of high-rise public housing. Some, like St. Louis and Chicago, have experienced both. Nevertheless, these two events hold very powerful positions in St. Louisans' civic consciousness, the one representing the city at its best, and the other the city at its worst. What does it mean that these antipodal events occurred in the same city only fifty years apart?

The 1904 World's Fair filled 1,271 acres of the park at the city's western limits and on land leased just across the city limits in St. Louis County. Intended to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the signing of the

# PHARRUS-MAP WORLD'S FAIR ST. LOUIS 1904.



The design of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition displayed the thinking of emerging urban planners with its curvilinear streets, panoramas, and visual features. It was the inspiration for the St. Louis City Plan of 1907. (Image: Library of Congress)

Louisiana Purchase (a one-year delay prevented hitting what would have been the actual centenary, 1903), the fair featured a “Main Picture” consisting of nine massive exhibit palaces, water displays, and statuary; an entertainment district called the Pike; and a large section devoted to the “rest of the world”—most notably, the forty-seven-acre Philippine Reservation.

The Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex was the result of St. Louis’s long efforts to accommodate its poor. Building on the ideas of the Swiss architect Charles Edward Jeanneret le Corbusier, St. Louis architects Hellmuth, Yamasaki and Leinweber designed the complex of thirty-three high-rise buildings that would occupy a fifty-nine acre site bordered by Cass, Twentieth Street, Carr, and Jefferson.

To save money, the design utilized elevators that stopped at only every third floor, a plan intended to provide opportunities for play and social interaction as residents traveled up or down stairs to reach their elevators. In reality, however, it mainly provided opportunities for crime. In addition, and in keeping with le Corbusier’s notion of the “City in a Garden,” a ring of greenspace, meant to serve as a recreation and aesthetic

area, separated the buildings from the remainder of the city. The first project, Pruitt, was intended for African American residents, while the second phase, Igoe, was intended for whites. Eventually, both projects would be almost entirely African American. The buildings, which could accommodate 12,000 people but never did, were demolished just twenty years after their opening, an abject failure that has been blamed variously on the architects, the government, the city, and the residents themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Architecturally, both the 1904 World’s Fair and Pruitt-Igoe were attempts to create public spheres that embodied the ideals of their planners. At the fair, for example, from the moment visitors entered the fairgrounds at Lindell Boulevard, they encountered what Robert Rydell terms a “symbolic universe” that represented a deliberately ambiguous past.<sup>2</sup> The buildings borrowed from such a panoply of classical architectural styles that they could not be classified as belonging to any one time period or geographic region. But accurate representation, just like at today’s theme parks, was not the point. Instead, the buildings offered only a sense of being in some sort of past, even if that past was largely the creation of the fair’s architects and planners.

Inside the exhibit palaces, the façade abruptly dropped away to reveal strictly utilitarian spaces featuring the latest and greatest advancements in mining, transportation, communication, agriculture, manufacturing—in other words, everything the new, modern world had to offer. Even the buildings’ exteriors were a sham. Carefully constructed to *look* solid and imposing, they had to *be* temporary, and thus were built with a material called “staff,” a mixture of plaster of Paris and hemp fibers attached to the buildings’ wooden framework.<sup>3</sup> Here, the pragmatism of the new world crashed into the idealized permanence and attention to craftsmanship of the old—a clash St. Louisans now echo in the phrase, “They don’t build ’em like they used to,” used, ironically, to refer to the city’s abundant World’s Fair-era middle- and upper-class housing stock.

The fair’s buildings thus established a quasi-history that overwhelmed fairgoers, softening them up for the fair’s real agenda: the selling of a mythical modernist future that promised unlimited technological Progress and urban growth, unrestrained western advance, and unabated subjugation of the Others who were placed on display in St. Louis that summer.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the Pruitt-Igoe buildings, with their

sleek surfaces, concrete slab construction, and skip-stop elevators, wore modernity on their sleeves. Rather than creating an imagined past, they created an image of a future scraped clean of any sort of past, a future as full of possibilities as the fair visitors must have thought theirs was. “Modern Architecture,” architecture critic Charles Jencks famously wrote in his 1977 book, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, “died in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme . . . were given the final coup de grace by dynamite.”

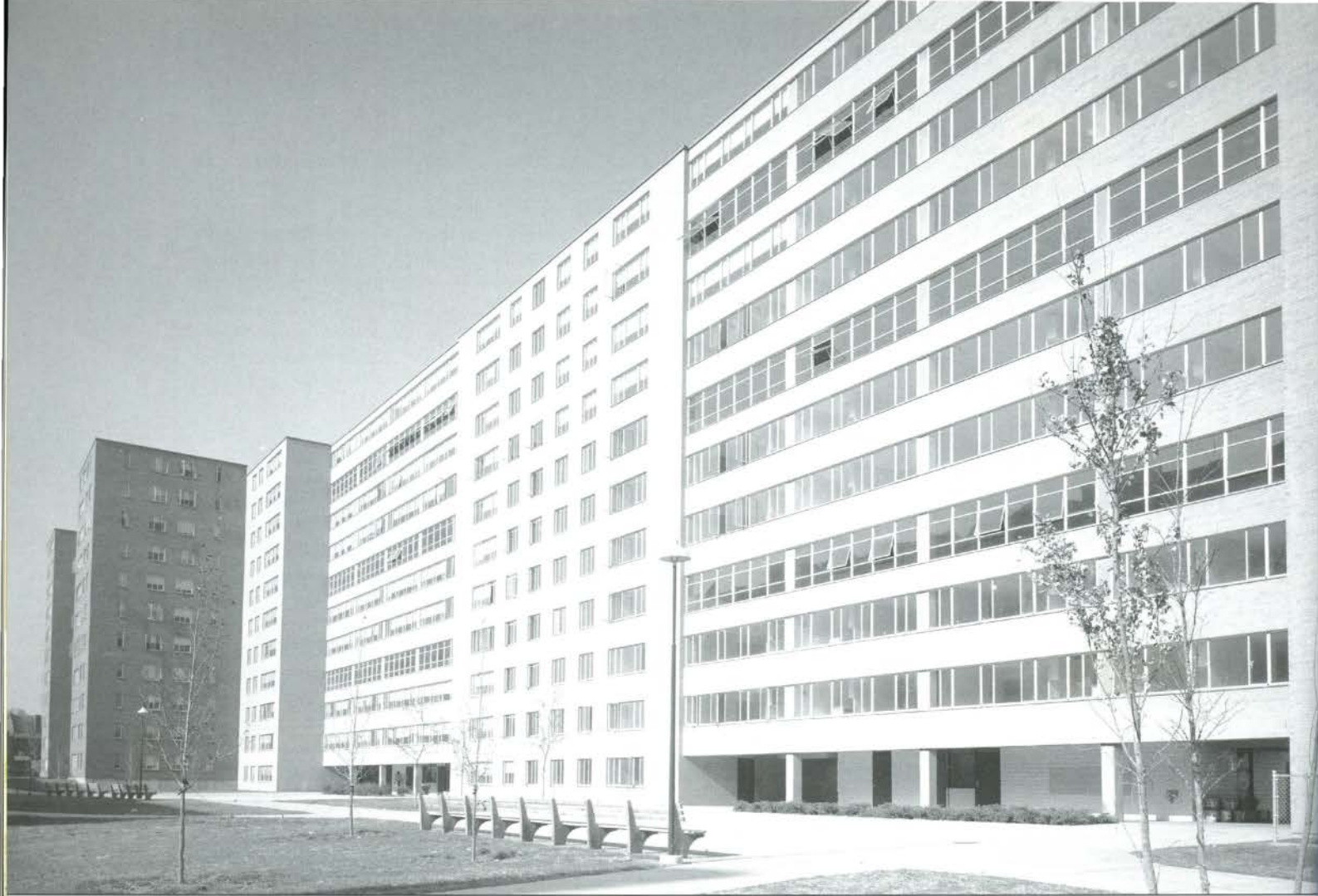
But it was not just “modern architecture” that died with Pruitt-Igoe, Jencks explained, but a whole modernist worldview that fed it: “Its Purist style, its clean, salubrious hospital metaphor, was meant to instill, by good example, corresponding virtues in the inhabitants,” he writes, a goal he attributed to the “philosophic doctrines of Rationalism, Behaviourism and Pragmatism.”<sup>5</sup> “Social idealism,” he had written earlier, led quickly to “social catastrophe,” with the results “undercut[ting] the ideology of Modernism.”<sup>6</sup>

Jencks’s comingling of “modern architecture” with “modernism” suggests a parallel to the great fair and Pruitt-Igoe. As evidence of St. Louisans’ allegiance to the fair, consider that in June, July, and August of 1996, after

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The first families moved into the Pruitt-Igoe complex in 1954; it was completed two years later. It was comprised of 33 buildings, each 11 stories tall. Originally lauded as a new approach to urban subsidized housing, Pruitt-Igoe began to decline before the end of the decade. (Image: Missouri History Museum)





Pruitt-Igoe cleared 57 acres of slum and stood at the southeast corner of N. Jefferson and Cass avenues in St. Louis. Today, the area is empty. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

the exhibit *Memory, History, and the 1904 World's Fair* opened at the Missouri Historical Museum, attendance increased by 92 percent over the same period of the previous year. Meanwhile, a major civic endeavor, St. Louis 2004, identified goals for the city to reach in time for the centenary of the fair in all areas of urban life, from sprawl and race relations to environment and culture. Of course, no one suggested that 2004 also marked the golden anniversary of the completion of Pruitt-Igoe.

The fair remains fascinating to St. Louisans because the public sphere it presented created an ambiguous, artificial past into which a fantastic future could be (literally) placed. Though these buildings functioned on one level to overawe visitors into a state of acquiescent acceptance of modernity, the buildings' contents served as a negation of the European past they were meant to evoke, not a validation of it. Meanwhile, juxtaposed against these massive palaces with their technological marvels were the foreign exhibits displaying the "hierarchy of man" and W. J. McGee's Phillipine Reservation, located, symbolically enough, on the fair's western margins.

With the narrative of European supremacy debunked, the fair planners quickly provided new narratives to supplant

it, narratives of inevitable technology and inescapable imperialism. The fair represents an interstitial cultural moment, with one toe dipped in the past of the Filipinos, Ainu, and Eskimos, one toe dipped in the shaken belief in European narrative, and a fist thrust firmly in the imagined future and holding on for dear life.

Of course, when the fair was over, many people mourned the passing of the large buildings and the stunning vistas, but few were upset that the National Cash Register Company's display, for example, would be gone for good. This sense of loss continues even today, but the fair's impermanence was its most defining feature. If the buildings were still in the park today, we might not have the fantastic, romantic notion of the 1904 World's Fair and the time that produced it. Instead, we might argue over how to use the massive structures, who should pay for their maintenance, how to route light-rail trains around them, and so forth. The fair, rather than being St. Louis's most powerful image of the best the city can be, would likely be an albatross around our necks.

Instead, the image of Pruitt-Igoe coming down is our albatross. Urban historian Dennis Judd writes, "In addition to the [Gateway] Arch, probably the most



Miroru Yamasaki, who designed Pruitt-Igoe, also designed both the World Trade Center and the St. Louis Lambert Airport. The housing complex was a response to terrible living conditions in St. Louis slums. In 1951, the St. Louis mayor said, “We must rebuild, open up and clean up the hearts of our cities. The fact that slums were created with all the intrinsic evils was everybody’s fault. Now it is everybody’s responsibility to repair the damage” in his call for new public housing. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

famous and enduring symbol of St. Louis is the photo of the Pruitt-Igoe complex imploding into the dust.”<sup>7</sup> The failure of the buildings, as Jencks had noted, shook modernist assumptions to their core—another narrative rejected.

Unlike those of the fair, Pruitt-Igoe’s buildings were intended to be permanent. They represented a modernist, government-sponsored solution to the problems of poverty and urban blight. By setting the (mostly) African American poor adrift on their own urban island, separated from the rest of the city and even the most basic amenities by a “moat” of greenspace, planners hoped to contain the buildings’ residents. The architectural community thought it was a great idea. *Architectural Forum*, for example, praised the plan in 1951 as one that “saves not only people but money” by providing “vertical neighborhoods for poor people.” The economy, according to the *Forum*, was partly a result of the skip-stop elevators that allowed “neighborhoods” (that is, additional floors) to be simply added to the stack, like pancakes, rather than “enlarged.”<sup>8</sup>

The design, of course, failed. The planners’ modernist faith in what David Harvey has called the “Enlightenment Project” of “linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders” did not account for underlying problems of racial and class-based inequities.<sup>9</sup> However, it was exactly these ideals—Harvey’s “linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders,” Jencks’s “Rationalism, Behaviourism and Pragmatism”—that had been displayed so carefully at the fair.

The fair thus serves as a literal example of “planned obsolescence”—built at great expense to be consumed and torn down in only seven months. Pruitt-Igoe, on the other hand, was built to be permanent, but no one treated it that way. It is best described by the subtitle of Eugene Meehan’s book about the project, “programmed failure.”<sup>10</sup> When it came to Pruitt-Igoe, the careful monitoring of funds revealed in David R. Francis’s *Universal Exposition* were played out on a perverted scale;<sup>11</sup> with its poor construction throughout, Pruitt-Igoe, only fifty years after



The Philippine village at the World's Fair was designed to display different levels of "civilization" of the Philippine tribes. It was a stark statement about the goals of American and European imperialism and its sense of superiority, as these images suggest. (Images: Library of Congress)

the fair, took the fair's Model Street—a feature of the fair's Department of Social Economy designed to be a “practical, suggestive exhibit of street equipment and city arrangement, in which every feature is to be planned with reference to its relation to the community, its fitness and its beauty”<sup>12</sup>—and turned it completely on its head.

In an article about Pruitt-Igoe, Katharine Bristol has written about the “myth” of the project. The myth of Pruitt-Igoe, Bristol writes, is that it failed because of bad design. Instead, she argues, it failed because of fiscal mismanagement and crisis among the St. Louis housing authorities—the architects were, to use her word, “passive,” hamstrung by penny-pinching, shortsighted bureaucrats. The result is that we have been blaming the wrong people for Pruitt-Igoe's failure, and we have not been looking at the broader social causes that produced it: racism, classism, economic inequality.<sup>13</sup>

More recently, Joseph Heathcott has taken this line of thinking one step further by writing that Pruitt-Igoe represents an even larger myth than the buildings' design failures or poor funding. “Pruitt-Igoe had been conceived and built for an overcrowded city, where future growth in population and industrial employment was assumed,” he writes. “Unfortunately, by the time the first tenants moved into the project, that imagined city of the future was already beginning to unravel.” As jobs and capital flowed westward away from the city in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pruitt-Igoe became “a canary in a coal mine,” predicting the failure of not just public housing but of the city writ large.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the fair's imagined, mythical future of inevitable urban growth and progress was already in decline as the Pruitt-Igoe buildings rose over downtown St. Louis.

The myth of the fair, which has been developed by Rydell and others, is similar. Yes, putting Filipinos and other ethnic peoples on display was awful. Yes, when the marathon runner Thomas Hicks was forced to compete

in 95 degree heat while drinking egg whites, strychnine, and brandy, Harvey's “linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders” had gone too far.<sup>15</sup> When Rydell writes, “World's fairs performed a hegemonic function precisely because they propagated the ideas and values of the country's political, financial, corporate, and intellectual leaders and offered these ideas as the proper interpretation of social reality,” it is tempting to read such a statement and think, “Thank goodness we know better now!”<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, our public sphere today is not “free” of the modernist sensibility of “Progress” and racial hierarchy that overwhelmed the 1904 World's Fair and informed, if not inspired, the funding, design, and demolition of Pruitt-Igoe. Evidence of this sensibility can still be seen in theme parks, television, and news magazines, while the clinical detachment with which we study both events reveals that we are still working in a modernist mode. We have turned the fair into an artifact that, while morally repugnant, is distanced from us, just as the Filipinos, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Ainu, the Patagonian Giants, and the Pygmies were distanced from fairgoers, or the impoverished residents of Pruitt-Igoe were distanced from the city. We want to blame the fair's treatment of Others on the fair's planners, just as Bristol argues we have been tempted to blame Pruitt-Igoe on architects rather than people not unlike ourselves; people motivated by and working within powerful cultural forces.

“In order to survive,” Umberto Eco has written, “a culture must be able to recognize and criticize itself.”<sup>17</sup> The same holds for the culture of criticism. As people attempting to make sense of the *meaning* of past events, not just narrate their facts, we should be willing to make value judgments secure in the knowledge that we are doing so, and with a willingness to see shadows of ourselves in the actions we find most abhorrent.



By the late 1960s, Pruitt-Igoe had become a symbol of violence and decay in high-density public housing. The federal government authorized razing the complex in 1971; the buildings were imploded starting in 1972, with destruction completed in 1976. (Image: Missouri History Museum)



## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Rumin Bauar, "LaClede Town: An Analysis of Design and Government Policies in a Government-Sponsored Project," Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 1994, 29.
- <sup>2</sup> Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 2. Rydell borrows the term from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Lackmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).
- <sup>3</sup> For details of how the main palaces were constructed, see Timothy J. Fox and Duane R. Sneddeker, *From the Palaces to the Pike: Visions of the 1904 World's Fair* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997), 18–20.
- <sup>4</sup> Ignoring the fair's technological displays, William Everdell judges the 1904 Fair to be very traditional in terms of the fine arts, music, architecture, and other cultural features on display. I agree with him to a point, but would say that those traditional features served to make fairgoers more comfortable with the technology on display, rather than making the fair an anti-modern statement. See Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- <sup>5</sup> Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977; rev. ed., 1981), 9–10.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1973; 2d ed., 1985), 372.
- <sup>7</sup> Dennis Judd, "Mean Streets, Cultural Assets: St. Louis Is a Tale of Two Cities," *St. Louis Journalism Review*, 27:193, 1.
- <sup>8</sup> *Architectural Forum*, April 1951.
- <sup>9</sup> Harvey quoted in Walter Truett Anderson, ed., *The Truth about the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World* (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Eugene Meehan, *The Quality of Federal Policymaking: Programmed Failure in Public Housing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979).
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, "Construction," in David R. Francis, *The Universal Exposition of 1904* (St. Louis: Louisiana Purchase Exposition Company, 1913), 104–16, es 104–12.
- <sup>12</sup> Howard J. Rogers, "Social Economy," *Universal Exposition of 1904: Exhibits, Architecture, Ceremonies, Amusements* (St. Louis, 1904), 48–49. This volume is a collection of articles reprinted from the *World's Fair Bulletin*, the fair's promotional organ published between 1901 and 1904. For a summary of design problems in Pruitt-Igoe, see Bauar, "LaClede Town," 30–31.
- <sup>13</sup> Katharine Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth," *Journal of Architectural Education*, May 1991, 163–71.
- <sup>14</sup> Joseph Heathcott, "Pruitt-Igoe and the Critique of Public Housing," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 78:4 (2012), 450.
- <sup>15</sup> Harvey quoted in Anderson, *The Truth about the Truth*, 4. For Thomas Hicks, see Fox and Sneddeker, *From the Palaces to the Pike*, 209.
- <sup>16</sup> Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 3.
- <sup>17</sup> Umberto Eco, "Does Counter-culture Exist?" in Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed*, ed. Robert Lumley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 124.