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Why did the 1971-1973 Development Plan for Pruitt-Igoe Fail?

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Introduction

Majority of public housing in the United States is a failure of cyclical nature as a result of government policy. Historians have examined the collapse of public housing either at a local level via the examination of a specific housing project or through a federal level by researching HOPE VI, the current federal housing policy since the 1990s that encourages demolishing and privatization of public housing. Up until the 1990s, demolition wasn't as common as it is today, and became more normalized after the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe in 1973. Pruitt-Igoe is one of the more notable examples of how badly public housing can fail. However, the first ever closure of a public housing project could have been completely prevented. The failed redevelopment of Pruitt-Igoe occurred from 1971-1973, and failed because of cost, lack of city commitment, and conflict between government entities over the vision of Pruitt-Igoe.

Methodology

This research uses archival research from the State Historical Society of Missouri and Washington University Archives to establish the timeline and examine the failed redevelopment of Pruitt-Igoe. Materials include newspapers from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, correspondence between Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), St. Louis Housing Authority (STLHA), and the Mayor's office, reports, and proposals.

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Archival Collections

The State Historical Society of Missouri
Health and Welfare Council of Metropolitan St. Louis
Pruitt-Igoe Action Program Report
Washington University Archives
A.J. Wilson Papers
Newspapers
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
New York Times

Results and Conclusions

1971 Pruitt-Igoe was a public housing project that accepted its first residents in 1954. However, by 1958, the housing complex faced rapidly deteriorating conditions because of vandalism, lack of maintenance, and increasing vacancy. The Civic Alliance for Housing, a coalition of public housing tenants and community leaders in St. Louis, created the first redevelopment proposal. The first plan called for the complete demolition and rebuilding of Pruitt-Igoe.



Whitman, Arthur, 1954. *Public Housing Projects, Pruitt-Igoe, Surrounding Deteriorated Neighborhood*. <https://digital.shsmo.org/digital/collection/imc/id/43202/rec/7>

The first redevelopment plan proposed by the Civic Alliance failed. The plan failed because HUD believed it was politically unfavorable to demolish a housing project and it would set a precedent. Officials also stated it cost too much money to raze and rebuild. Finally, HUD officials believed there was a lack of total commitment by the city to redevelop the entire area around Pruitt-Igoe.

1972 Mayor Alfonso Cervantes, and AJ Wilson, Mayor Cervantes's executive secretary, formed the Pruitt-Igoe Task Force. The Task Force consisted of members of HUD, STLHA, the mayor's office, and residents of Pruitt-Igoe. The goals of the Task Force consisted of choosing a demolition company and an engineering company to develop a new redevelopment plan. The second proposal, named Pruitt-Igoe Action Program, called for partial demolition, the introduction of mixed-income families, the creation of an urban center for better management, maintenance, and security training, and the construction of parks in newly created spaces.



Pruitt-Igoe Action Program Plan, *The State Historical Society of Missouri*

The Pruitt-Igoe Action Program also failed because of a cost dispute over the plan between HUD and the mayor's office and a lack of city commitment to redeveloping the entire area of Pruitt-Igoe through something such as a convention center. HUD secretary George Romney caused conflict with the mayor's office through the withholding of promised rubble removal funds and accusing Mayor Cervantes and AJ Wilson of playing "fast and loose" with federal funds.

1973 1973 marked a shakeup in HUD. Secretary George Romney, the main instigator of the conflict between HUD and the mayor's office, had resigned, but a freeze in HUD funds occurred on January 1, 1973, by President Richard Nixon. The freeze affected the funding for projects, such as the redevelopment of Pruitt-Igoe. Mayor Cervantes tried to reconvene the task force and bridge a relationship with the new housing secretary James Lynn.

Projected Savings For Closing Pruitt-Igoe

	Pruitt	Igoe	Total
Total Operating Expenditures	\$25,000	\$17,850	
Inflationary Projection	\$10,000	\$2,000	
Credits		Rental Income	\$150,000
Debts		General Expenses	\$135,000
TOTAL COST TO REMAIN OPEN			-\$1,250,000

The third attempt to submit a redevelopment plan for Pruitt-Igoe did not come to fruition. The cost to keep Pruitt-Igoe was rising, and a lack of ending of the HUD freeze slowed progress. After examining the deficit that Pruitt-Igoe was creating, newly elected Mayor John Poelker, STLHA, and HUD decided to close and demolish the rest of Pruitt-Igoe in August of 1973.