Stories about Houses: Architecture’s New Vantage on American Public Housing

Public housing and suburbia are uncomfortable subjects for contemporary Architecture. They rarely take center stage in today’s design studios, architecture history surveys and public lecture series. Yet they are not fringe issues; they have been the defining and prevailing built environments of metropolitan life in America for sixty years. Given their central significance in mainstream culture their relegation in Architecture culture to the niche of Urban Studies is concerning.

There is nothing natural or inevitable about this disengagement. It is a historically constructed artifact of the postwar era and stems directly from the perceived failure of modern Architecture’s robust engagement in public housing on the one hand, and the weakness of its role in the suburban environment on the other. The new film The Pruitt Igoe Myth (2012) and the book The Buell Hypothesis: Rehousing the American Dream (2011) offer hope for re-engagement in the form of new discursive terms. They tell stories about houses. These stories reframe the postwar and contemporary moment, repositioning the discipline vis a vis public housing across the metropolis. This new disciplinary position, by turns more ambitious and more modest than the postwar blueprint it supersedes, is an opportunity for American Architecture to articulate a social project for the new century.¹

¹ The notion of the social project references historian Kenny Cuppers’ recent presentation “The Social Project of Architecture,” recently presented as part of the Taubman College Emerging Voices lecture series on February 23, 2012.
Chad Freidrichs’ *The Pruitt Igoe Myth* was described by a *Times* reviewer as “shattering” of the widespread cultural perception that towers-in-the-park public housing projects were necessarily “Alienating, penitential breeding rounds for vandalism and violence”\(^2\) by design. It debunks the myth that the failure leading to the 1972 demolition of St. Louis’ Pruitt Igoe housing was primarily a problem of architecture. In the aftermath of the demolition architectural theorists, lead by figures such as Oscar Newman and Charles Jenks\(^3\), leveraged this iconic failure of American public housing toward a broader critique of modern architecture. In recent decades theorists of the Congress for New Urbanism have made their own use of this myth as a straw man to attack while making the case for smaller “traditional” urbanism as a solution for public housing. The degree to which the public accepts Pruitt Igoe and its peers as failures of architectural modernism is perhaps best illustrated by the federal government’s turn toward promoting “traditional principals” of urbanism in Hope VI public housing projects since 1992.\(^4\) This seemingly rock-solid interpretation is indeed shattered by the story that Freidrichs tells.

Through the memories of former residents and the reflections of urban historians *The Pruitt Igoe Myth* reminds us that architecture is not deterministic of any social outcome, good or ill, and is only one among a complex web of actors operating under larger social and economic contingencies. The film shows that despite many residents’ fond memories of Pruitt Igoe in its early years, the subsequent migration of jobs and the middle class to the suburbs left the project in a debilitating state of isolation. Further, despite the progressive architectural and public policy aspirations that surrounded its construction, the film argues that a perennial lack of

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maintenance funding drove the cycle of deterioration that has previously been blamed on the architecture and the residents of the project. Finally, the film implicates government welfare policies in Pruitt Igoe’s failure, recalling a family-breaking policy that forbid able-bodied men to reside in the towers with women who were receiving cash assistance. Residents speak of happy Christmases in early Pruitt Igoe and also of fathers hiding under beds from welfare inspectors, contributing to a new story about the architecture of public housing. These stories matter. As Reinhold Martin argues in The Buell Hypothesis, the knowledge that informs architecture and public policy has “a narrative character,” and changing the narrative opens new opportunities for design to engage. If the discipline and the public accept that architecture and modernism didn’t precipitate the urban crisis, but rather participated in a larger social tragedy that was not principally architectural in nature, a space for socially ambitious architecture in the present begins to open.

Narrative reframing can also rehabilitate architecture’s engagement in working and middle class housing through the suburbs. This is where the myth of the American Dream prevails. It supports an ideology of self-sufficient independence that is posed in opposition to the dependence and collectivity implied by public housing. Just as Friedrichs used the myth of public housing as a point of departure for his narrative, The Buell Hypothesis begins to tell a new story by undermining the prevailing myth: that of the “private” suburban house. Echoing recent metropolitan historiography, Martin argues that in light of the massive government subsidies of private automobility, long term mortgages, and homeownership tax write-offs that underwrite the suburbs “the American Dream is not a private dream but a public one.” If the narrative of private property, long supportive of homebuilders’ formulaic suburban monopoly, was rewritten, a greater space for design engagement might be established. “Change the dream,” Martin argues, “and you change the city.”

The first test of this “hypothesis” is currently underway in MOMA’s exhibition Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream. Curator Barry Bergdoll describes Foreclosed as a response to the devastating home-foreclosure crisis underway since 2008 and to the marginalized roles that

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design and the public sector play in the discourse surrounding American suburban housing. Five design teams were commissioned to develop new, public-minded visions of the suburban landscape with *The Buell Hypothesis* as their design brief. At their best the projects are, as noted by U.S. Secretary of Housing Shaun Donovan, sensitive to their cultural contexts and interdisciplinary in their approach. For example, Jeanne Gang’s vision for the largely immigrant Latino/a immigrant suburb Cicero, IL responds to a culture of upward class ambition by creating a more dynamic combination of “living, working and play” on the site of a former factory. Its team included specialists in ecology, transportation, finance and cultural studies. The project is premised on a new dream or a new story for the suburb that is more sympathetic with this community’s desire for sociability and job opportunities close at hand.

While the transformative potential in these stories should not be underestimated, the resiliency of the old narratives is formidable. Reuters finance blogger Felix Salmon dismissed the work exhibited at *Foreclosed* in a recent article for *Architect* magazine, saying “Congratulations on reinventing the city. Now, what are we going to do about the suburbs?” He argues that the architects have not responded to the cultural imperatives of suburbia and have rather imposed their own urban bias by proposing large-scale multifamily developments for suburbs like Cicero, which cuts “against the very impulses that drive people out of the city and into the suburbs in the first place.” Salmon relies on the myth of the American Dream of suburban independence in his formulation, which is misleading in two important ways. As *The Buell Hypothesis* shows this ideology of independence is not borne out on the ground, where suburban life is propped up on the city.

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11 Ibid
up by public subsidy. More importantly though, as Studio Gang Architects’ working class Latino/a site reveals, the mythic white middle class exclusivity that we reflexively associate with suburbia does not stand up to the diversity of class, race and ethnicity of today’s suburbs. It remains to be seen whether in the discipline, and in culture at large, the city can be changed by changing the dream.

MOMA is a leader in architecture culture but its call for engagement with housing will mean far less if the issue is not advanced in schools of architecture. If the social project of “public” housing across the metropolis is to again become central to the discipline it will happen in the design studio, the history survey and the lecture series. It requires new stories about the houses that we live in and those that we dream of living in. It also requires that we learn the lesson of The Pruitt Igoe Myth, and see the discipline’s social potentials not in simple formal determinism but in active engagement across disciplines and in rich, specific contexts.