

An Ecology from Absence: In Place of Pruitt-Igoe

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? ...

There is shadow under this red rock
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock)
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922)

BETWEEN 'WASTE' AND 'LAND'

"A true creator is necessity, which is the mother of our invention.¹" As the proverb alludes, scarcity is commonly understood as the catalyst to creativity. But scarcity would lack its edge without the threat of absence. Resources that are scarce threaten, ambiguously, to be absent, and absence is an almost inconceivable idea in architectural discourse. It appears only allusively, formally, in the fragmentary work of the Deconstructivists, metaphorically in the drawings of Peter Eisenman, provocatively in Kahn's writings on silence.

The absence that this paper encircles is sociological, political, and economic long before it is ever architectural. Metaphorically, it is the absence between the two main, titular words of T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* (1922). This absence, an intentional gap that the poet places between the words 'waste' and 'land,' indicates the distinction between what is discarded, or the act of discarding, and the fertile ground, full of potential beginnings or renewals.² It is in this in-between space that the past, present, and speculative futures of the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing project fit. Here, in this absence, the word *waste* takes on double meaning. It suggests both a state of desolation, of emptiness—as the site exists today, the remaining 33 acres of the original 57 now a dense volunteer forest given over to no civic or private use save dumping—and it also suggests the opposite, the poor management of resources—as evidenced in the cinematic implosion

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Figure 1: United States Geological Survey, air photo, March 3, 1968

of building C-15 on April 21, 1972, an act that still symbolizes the demolition of all thirty-three buildings less than eighteen years after they were first inhabited.

The former site of Pruitt-Igoe can be as difficult to assign meaning to as Eliot's long, modern poem. It has been argued that the meaning of this poem is not determined by external reference, but by the relations between elements in its overall system and structure.³ This poem, in other words, comprises an ecology, its meanings arising out of the relationships that can be drawn between the written things, perhaps precisely the "house, dwelling place, habitation," that Haeckel had in mind.⁴ This paper will examine the dwelling places that have emerged from this absence on the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing project—both the real and the speculative. If, as Heidegger writes, absence is concealed being, then revealing what lies beneath this absence may write into history the new life emerging here.⁵

BUILDING ABSENCE: THE DEMOLITION OF PRUITT-IGOE

The Pruitt-Igoe housing project was originally designed as two, the M-4 and M-5 projects, later known as Wendell Oliver Pruitt Homes, for African American residents, and William L. Igoe Apartments, for white residents. Through the interventions of a Supreme Court order mandating racial integration in housing, and the St. Louis Housing Authority's omission of an originally proposed scheme that included row houses alongside high-rises, the project became a seemingly homogenous series of thirty-three eleven-story towers served by elevators. However, a closer look at the site plan reveals one road running through the site, perhaps the vestigial trace of the original attempt at a distinction between the homes and the apartments. It is from this absence between the two sides—the now-absence that was once Dickson Street—that the world watched the demolition of tower C-15. (Figure 1)

Here we are, on the afternoon of April 21, 1975, observing from a building across Dickson Street, through the lens of a CBS news camera, while photographers from *Life* magazine and film crews are located on the ninth floor of an adjacent building, to document the demolition of Building C-15.⁶ The wreckers, the Loizeaux family, who would become famous for this implosive demolition technique, have just drilled sixteen-inch-deep holes in concrete pillars on the ground and first floors and in two small basements, fitting delayed percussion caps and dynamite in place. The only signs of human life that once occupied this vacant site are the broken windows of the structure, the thin layer of grass, and the steel frame of a swing-set on the playground that foregrounds the building—a double module 360 feet in length, a ripe symbol of the scale of this project. Elsewhere out of view, 800 people occupy the towers that surround C-15—some of whom were moved out of it for this event. They watch and, also at home, St. Louisans all over the city watch through this mediated lens of the camera as 152 charges are sequentially fired from within the building. The base supports of the building explode, the floor plates pancake and the brick facades cascade down as a giant cloud of dust and debris blossoms up from the ground.

Yet beyond the visual spectacle of the collapse of C-15 are details that make resulting narratives problematic: the fact that the building is only 18 years old, and its reinforced slab construction—concrete made from river-bottom crushed stone—will prove resistant to demolition methods and require years of wrecking crews using the decidedly less cinematic headache ball; that the Department of Housing and Urban Development still owes \$32 million to bondholders from the construction costs; and that even after these implosions, the St. Louis Housing Authority will remain convinced that this act will “save” Pruitt-Igoe. The Loizeaux family, after all, had not been contracted to demolish Pruitt-Igoe, but to try their hand at a “carefully controlled cost analysis that may lead to the radical rehabilitation of the development.”⁷ After the blasts, all that is left is a pile of brick thirty feet high, and “a general outpouring of crowds cheering at the success.”⁸ Absence, it seems, is the answer.


Today, the most widely circulated images of Pruitt-Igoe’s demolition are a series of four photographic frames circulated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Figure 2). As C-15 falls over these four frames, the St. Louis Gateway Arch becomes more evident in the background. In a strange way, it highlights what we have never really acknowledged—that the towers and the arch are twins. Both were conceived as aspirational symbols—the arch, memorializing Thomas Jefferson’s Louisiana purchase, and the towers, memorializing Mayor Joseph M. Darst’s desire to rebuild St. Louis as a vital and growing urban center—Darst would, for the years leading up to Pruitt-Igoe’s construction, maintain an intense infatuation with Manhattan, inviting New York real estate developers, insurance executives, and Nelson Rockefeller to contribute to the redevelopment of St. Louis. Both the arch and the Pruitt-Igoe towers required the federal acquisition of private land and homes through eminent domain and the leveling of acres of ground that left many St. Louisans homeless, and sat vacant for years.⁹ That the arch out-lived the towers is a testament to its success as a memorial. Indeed, St. Louis has invested in maintaining and expanding this site—launching the CityArchRiver plan for 2015, a redesign by Michael van Valkenburgh Associates that will knit the arch-grounds to the downtown. This is a private-public partnership that includes the City of St. Louis, the National Park Service, the Missouri Department of Transportation, and other agencies and groups on both sides of the Mississippi River. Just two miles away, the site of Pruitt-Igoe has remained vacant since demolition crews completed their work by wrecking ball in 1976. The Gateway Arch rising up in the background of the falling building is a reminder of the greatest failure of Pruitt-Igoe, which was the failure “to transform St. Louis into a gleaming, growing, modern metropolis,” which was, after all, “why they built Pruitt Igoe.”¹⁰

But for the purpose of this paper, the cinematic blast does not mark the end of modern architecture, nor the end of the site as a built environment—it does not even mark Pruitt Igoe as a failure. Rather, it inspires the beginning of the site as an ecology from absence. Absence inspires. Scarcity is a catalyst containing the seeds of possibility, but absence is the open territory out of which whole worlds emerge. Out of the absence of Pruitt-Igoe on this site



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Figure 2: April 1972. The second, widely televised demolition of a Pruitt-Igoe building that followed the March 16 demolition. United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.



emerges an ecology that has been forty years in the making. Two kinds of worlds emerge. One is very real, though just off the site proper and in the adjacent neighborhood. The other is entirely speculative, and rooted deeply within the Pruitt-Igoe site.

ABSENCE, APIARY CULTURE, AND THE REBUILD FOUNDATION

Writing for the City Plan Commission in 1947, Harland Bartholomew warned, “We cannot have a city without people.” Bartholomew was responding to the fact that St. Louis had declined by six thousand people in the decade from 1930 to 1940, making it one of just four cities in the U.S. to have lost population—and its proportion of total metropolitan population was plummeting.¹¹ This loss of population continues to be true. The U.S. Census Bureau released the 2010 Missouri census results in February, 2011, revealing that the city has been losing population steadily since the 1950s, even though in the last decade, like many other post-industrial Rust Belt cities, it has been pushing an ambitious agenda of growth and development. After all the public investment and tax incentives intended to spur economic growth, the 2010 census recorded the city’s lowest population in 140 years, at 319,294.

It’s the absence in population that is the catalyst for Juan William Chavez’s *Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary*, begun in January, 2010. The Guggenheim fellow’s work on the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing complex revolves not around rebuilding the site as architectural, but rather cultivating it further as an ecology through the introduction of a bee colony. Informed by his research of the Luxembourg Garden in Paris, France, which contains the oldest beekeeping school in the world, the Rucher Ecole, Chavez’s proposal for apiculture on the site revolves around the notion that the first community to be re-introduced to this site of absence might best be one that can sustain it. He has therefore been building a bee sanctuary in the backyard of his home studio less than a mile from Pruitt-Igoe. “I went to my studio, and I started to stack the hives. I pushed one back and it was right in front of me. There are the Pruitt Igoe buildings.”¹² Inspired by the St. Louis population census, Chavez found a parallel relationship with the sudden and alarming decline in the bee population in recent years. His metaphoric repopulation of the site with an apiary culture mirrors a desire to reintroduce humans to the site to productive ends. With a Graham Foundation grant in 2011, Chavez has continued his research, and indeed has developed a proposal for the future of the site—a speculative proposal—including a bee sanctuary that builds hives in a scaled down version of the towers that comprised Pruitt-Igoe, alongside other forms of urban agriculture and a garden as memorial to the legacy of the housing complex.

The neighborhood surrounding Pruitt-Igoe to the north, east, and west is known under the general name Northside St. Louis. The area directly to the site’s south is downtown St. Louis, marking these remaining 33 acres of the Pruitt-Igoe site as a critical hinge between two entirely disparate worlds. Northside St. Louis has an historic, brick building stock from the site’s past as Bremen, a German immigrant town established in 1844. Over generations, the German immigrants and European populations seeking work came

to be replaced by other incoming populations seeking work, and by the late 1940s, Bremen was populated by the postwar influx of an African American population from the American south. St. Louis' redevelopment efforts never touched these neighborhoods, and today entire blocks stand in stunning disrepair, vacant, burning and toppling onto sidewalks and into streets, victim to squatters and brick-eaters.

While most large-scale redevelopment (or, the promise of) has happened through the engagement of a few key developers who are lured by the financial incentive of tax credits and the opportunity to rebuild cheaply and profit from neighborhood development, Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates has built a career out of redeveloping this area as an art practice. His Rebuild Foundation is a not-for-profit creative engine that focuses on cultural and economic redevelopment. After purchasing affordable spaces in systematically under-resourced communities in cities such as St. Louis, Detroit, Omaha and Chicago, Gates enlists entire teams of artists, architects, developers, educators and community activists who work together to integrate the arts into what he describes as "alternative entrepreneurship." These community-driven processes eventually lead to neighborhood transformation.

Gates and his collaborators first installed themselves on Mallinckrodt Street in the Hyde Park neighborhood of St. Louis and, later, in a series of buildings on the corner of Salisbury and Blair Streets. Obtaining buildings by working with the local alderman to determine which buildings had owners that had defaulted on property taxes, Gates and his collaborators purchased the buildings, and began renovating them by going to local building sites and carrying away construction materials that were the discard or refuse from new building sites in more affluent parts of St. Louis. Hiring architects, such as Charlie Vinz, to build within and onto the buildings out of the refuse of more affluent construction projects has resulted in a bricolage of material worlds that serves as the background for intensive arts programming—artist-in-residence spaces populated by international artists and scholars who come to St. Louis to contribute to a community well-positioned to engage in the genre of social practice that has become Gates' fare.

In July 2012, Chicago-based artist Dayna Kriz operated a day camp for children of low-income households whose options for summer activities were limited by their parents' income. By incorporating play space, niche space, and installations of unusual materials into the rebuilt interiors of these old buildings, design and resourcefulness become common language and parlance in the community. With renewed approaches to old buildings—including 2010 Mallinckrodt Street, which is slated to become a design residency space and arts campus for the neighborhood grade school, Holy Trinity School, these buildings operate as a home-base for programs that improve under-resourced districts, bridging the creation of art with renovation and adaptive reuse, recycling of building materials, and community-driven initiatives for neighborhood revitalization. Following upon Gates' regenerative efforts and successes on Dorchester Street in Chicago, the St. Louis project has engaged with Washington University's Sam Fox School of Design





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Figure 3: *Double Moon*. Clouds Architecture Office. An artificial moon hovers over the site; the double moon orients inhabitants at night, and in the day is an auditorium.

and Visual Arts' Department of Architecture—instrumental in renovating 2010 Mallinckrodt—proving that the speculative efforts of artists can transform an architecture curriculum.

THE SPECULATIVE PRUITT IGOE

The Pruitt-Igoe Housing complex stood for less than twenty years. What the towers ultimately succumbed to were social, economic, political and racial pressures that they did not address—indeed, what architecture can? In the lamenting words of Minoru Yamasaki, “Social ills can’t be cured by nice buildings.”¹³ Yet, when tower C-15 was symbolically demolished, it was architectural theorists and architects themselves who actively disseminated the idea that the failure of the project was one of an architectural nature. In place of Pruitt-Igoe’s thirty-three towers, architectural theory and mass media built the myth of bad architecture—see *Architectural Forum* (December 1965), Oscar Newman’s *Defensible Space* (1973), and Charles Jencks’ *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977). Only Katharine Bristol’s 1991 essay “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth,” opened up the possibility that Pruitt-Igoe was not an architectural failure, but a failure to see that architecture is only a symptom of culture, of thought, of policy, of science, of technology. The towers were no match for a meager budget from the Federal Housing Authority, inflated building costs (60% higher than the national average at the time of their construction), entrenched urban practices of racial segregation, the political economy of post-World War II St. Louis, rapidly changing social housing policies that made Pruitt Igoe financially insolvent¹⁴, or the absence of people—vacancy rates fell steadily from 9% the first year of its occupancy in 1957, to 16% by 1960, to 65% by 1970.¹⁵

While the efforts to transform the site of Pruitt-Igoe and its surrounding neighborhoods are slow, methodical, and quite real, in July 2011, an ideas competition opened that was intended to generate speculative ideas for the site quickly. The competition *Pruitt Igoe Now* closed on April 21, 2012, the fortieth anniversary of the first building implosion. The hundreds of submissions received and juried suggest what Pruitt Igoe is, now—both literally, as competition entries propose a new future for the site and, unavoidably, metaphorically—as nearly every proposal advances a new, utopian framework to replace the old, utopian framework that failed.¹⁶ Of the 31 finalists selected by the jurors, none prioritized architecture. Rather, in these proposed interventions into a site within which the absence of 33 towers has so much presence, what was made scarce was architecture. Buildings played a minor role, if any. Instead, these finalists prioritized agriculture, recreational gardening as a means of phyto-remediation for the site, wetlands, community-based frameworks, the production of bricks or other building materials, and even the construction and inhabitation of an artificial ‘moon’ on the site (Figure 3).

Reinhold Martin argues, even today, that no architectural typology is more emblematic of the allegedly failed modernist utopia than American public housing. And no American public housing failed as publicly as Pruitt-Igoe. It is perhaps because of this that for those contributing proposals to the competition *Pruitt Igoe Now*, the site became a place for the implementation

of various systems of remediation. The “ecological production line” envisioned by Heather Dunbar and Xiaowei R. Wang was the first-prize winning proposal, an inventive vision for an urban horticultural production line centered on the vacant 33-acre site. The proposal synthesized approaches to vacant land reclamation and urban agriculture found through the competition’s entries, while offering an expansive program that could sequentially grow to develop surrounding vacant land in north St. Louis. What they envisioned served as both “a memorial and a beginning for the current site to be absorbed and integrated into the surrounding urban fabric.” Turning the abandoned wasteland into plots of reclaimed land that, in turn, are ecological and economic generators for the city of St. Louis, they used the existing “ecology of absence” to plant nurseries of native tree species on the site, estimating that the generation of plant life could supply up to 13,000 acres of park land in St. Louis. Drawing on St. Louis’ history as a manufacturing and industrial heart along the Mississippi, and the 1987 plan for the Pruitt-Igoe site to become the center of an industrial warehouse complex, Dunbar and Wang created an “ecological production line,” where the output is what an ecologist would call a “natural capital,” biological diversity for the surrounding urban fabric.

Aroussiak Gabrielian and Alison Hirsch, second-prize winners, envisioned the communal experience of eating ice cream as a path to the site’s future. In the designers’ words, “A recipe is not only a list of ingredients but a set of instructions guiding a process. Following a recipe, which leaves room for improvisation, yields a sensory delight that is collectively enjoyed. By cultivating milk and honey, through apiculture and urban husbandry, the Pruitt-Igoe site yields ... ice cream. Rather than hiding the scars of history that represent not just an event but perpetuating social inequities still palpable in the surrounding environment, the footprints of the buildings are excavated and planted with gardens.” The emerging landscape is reframed as a “hidden garden” that recognizes the site’s past while embracing a possible new future that cultivates sustenance (Figure 4).

Social Agency Lab, self-described as an urban ideas collective, did not propose a static, permanent design for their third-prize winning design, but rather a multi-year process through which Northside youth could debate, explore, and shape the future of the site, entitled “The Fantastic Pruitt Igoe!”. By connecting with eighth-grade classes throughout the city of St. Louis, Social Agency Lab proposes that each class of students would submit a proposal to change Pruitt-Igoe through the addition of a temporary architecture, a year-long workshop or activity, and a temporary workshop or activity—these three initiatives would be sorted by adult facilitators, and presumably funded by an advisory board of designers, non-profit organizers, and community leaders in order to be implemented.

For Jill Desimini, the urban landscape—formerly shaped by industry and human occupation—was proposed not as a productive tool to regenerate biological growth throughout the urban fabric, but rather as a memorial itself. Her proposal, ‘Pruitt Igoe National Forest,’ sees the act of preserving Pruitt-Igoe as the wild urban woodland it currently is as an affront to “the



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Figure 4: *Recipe Landscape*. Aroussiak Gabrielian and Alison Hirsch, Foreground Design Agency. Urban agriculture, environmental stewardship, and cultural rituals of food preparation and consumption transform the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing complex into a place of production, growth and sustenance—via ice cream.

ENDNOTES

1. *The Republic, Book II*, 369c, Plato
2. For these observations of the distinction between 'waste' and 'land,' I am indebted to Harriett Davidson's beautiful introduction to the essay "Absence and Destiny in *The Waste Land*," the first chapter of her *T.S. Eliot and Hermeneutics: Absence and Interpretation in 'The Waste Land'* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).
3. Harriett Davidson, *T.S. Eliot and Hermeneutics: Absence and Interpretation in 'The Waste Land'* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 1.
4. The origin of the word ecology is *ökologie*, as coined by Ernst Haeckel, from the Greek *oikos*, "house," and *logia*, "study of."
5. Harriett Davidson, *T.S. Eliot and Hermeneutics: Absence and Interpretation in 'The Waste Land'* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 3.
6. Jeff Byles, *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition* (New York: Harmony Books, 2005), 205
7. *Ibid.*, 203.
8. Theodore P. Wagner, "Pruitt-Igoe Building Crumbles in Seconds," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 22 April 1972.
9. The city cleared 82 acres of waterfront industrial land for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in 1940, although the park and the Gateway Arch were not completed until 1965.
10. Alexander von Hoffman, "Why They Built Pruitt Igoe," in *From the Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth Century America*, edited by John F. Bauman, Roger Biles and Kristin M. Szylyan, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 202.
11. *Ibid.*, 185.
12. <http://temporaryartreview.com/pruitt-igoe-bee-sanctuary-a-conversation-with-juan-william-chavez/>. Accessed August 3, 2012.
13. Sara Rimer, "Minoru Yamasaki, Architect of World Trade Center, Dies," *New York Times*, 9 February 1986.
14. In 1969, Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts had the housing laws amended so that no tenant would pay more than 25% of his/her income toward rent.
15. Alexander von Hoffman, "Why They Built Pruitt Igoe," in *From the Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth Century America*, edited by John F. Bauman, Roger Biles and Kristin M. Szylyan, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 200.
16. <http://pruittigoenow.nfshost.com> documents the results. Accessed August 3, 2012. The jury was comprised of seven architects, academics, artists and activists: Teddy Cruz (University of California, San Diego and Co-Founder, Center for Urban Ecologies), Sergio Palleroni (Portland State University and Founder, BASIC Initiative), Theaster Gates, Jr. (University of Chicago and Founder, Rebuild Foundation), Diana Lind (Next American City), Bob Hansman (Washington University), Joseph Heathcott (The New School), and Sarah Kanouse (University of Iowa).
17. Eisenman refers here to a series of projects he called the *Cities of Artificial Excavation*, experiments from 1978 to 1988 enacted upon specific sites—Venice, Berlin, Paris, Long Beach—requiring the supplementation of authors and authorities from Le Corbusier to Shakespeare, to the sites' own histories.

right of the present generation to the fullest necessary use" of the site. Rather, she proposes the creation of a National Park at the Pruitt-Igoe site to balance its cultural and ecological significance, while opening it to active visitation. She writes:

The conservation is not of pristine lands, but of a rich and layered 'fourth nature' imbued both with important environmental benefits and historical human use. With an eye to the importance of maintaining and encouraging ecosystem services in the city, parts of the forest are left to evolve ecologically. Here, the woodlands take over. Other areas are cleared, mowed twice yearly with sheep. Picnicking and camping platforms at the locations of some of the old building footprints, elevated walks through the woods, a lookout tower, a visitor center, and parking organize the user experience. The site remains a nationally significant site of cultural heritage, with numerous activities dedicated to the past, present and future lives of the former Pruitt-Igoe residents.

The speculative visions described address the history, contemporary context, and rich potential futures of this site. However, the long history of plans that have been proposed to the city prioritize architecture, and they prioritize the generation of capital for private gain. These proposals have ranged from a scheme for a business park unveiled in 1989, to a golf course and residential project called Gateway Village released in 1996. Currently, the site is proposed for inclusion in a 1,500-acre project called Northside Regeneration by developer Paul McKee, who has been the subject of much scrutiny for slow progress on the hundreds of acres that he has already acquired. In February 2011, McKee purchased from St. Louis the \$100,000 option to submit a serious proposal for this site—this proposal must be submitted by February of 2014, or the city makes the site available for purchase by anybody.

"THE STORY OF ST. LOUIS. THE STORY OF AMERICA."

This is the headline of one of the links for St. Louis' City River Arch website. The thirty-five years that the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing project has been largely abandoned outnumber the nearly 18 years during which the project existed whole on this site. Despite the marked absence of progress on the site, the past five years have seen projects both real and speculative emerging within and around the site, conspiring toward a conclusion. Architects rarely speak of absence—perhaps because we are so focused on the presence of the things that we build, rather than the absence, the void and silence around them, which the things that we build will affect. Peter Eisenman, however, gives the following definition of absence: "that which cannot be."¹⁷ What will come next, what will negate the absence of Pruitt-Igoe, "that which cannot be," must mediate between what has been discarded, and a new beginning—between *waste* and *land*. ♦