

## CASE STUDY

### **Pruitt-Igoe, East St Louis, Missouri, USA: an ill-fated public housing project (1950; proposal to remodel, 1956; demolished 1972)**

Pruitt-Igoe, a Modernist public housing complex was a total urban design. It was built on a 55-acre (22-hectare) site and consisted of 2740 units in 33 eleven-storey buildings (see Figure 7.20a). It was the first 'racially integrated' public housing development in the city of St Louis. Twenty buildings were for Afro-Americans and thirteen were racially integrated. It had the capacity to house about 11,000 people but the occupancy rate was often only about 60%. The population density was lower than that of the Barbican (500 people per hectare as against 750) because of the amount of open space between the buildings (220 feet minimum was the requirement based on sun angles). A 'river of trees' was designed to flow through the site. The client for the project was the St Louis Housing Authority and the construction cost was 1960 \$US57 million funded through mechanisms provided by the United States Housing Act of 1949.

One design team carried out the whole project on behalf of a public agency. Harland Bartholomew was the planner and the architects were Hellmuth, Yamasaki and Leinweber. The complex was modelled on aspects of Le Corbusier's *Unité* in Marseilles (see Figure 6.11) and 100 Memorial Drive apartments at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Montgomery, 1966). Although the Public Housing Authority insisted on much cost cutting, the scheme was built pretty much as designed.

The buildings had skip-stop elevators that halted only on the fourth, seventh and tenth floors (see Figure 7.20b). Access to the other floors was by staircases from spacious

galleries on the stop-floors. These galleries were designed to be playgrounds for children and gathering places for adults. In 1951, the scheme received high praise in an *Architectural Forum* editorial for saving 'not only people but also money'. The editors of the journal saw the complex as being a worthwhile design paradigm for the future. The reality proved to be different.

The household mix was not what was expected. Single-mother, welfare-dependent households overwhelmingly inhabited the complex. In 1965 only 990 of the 10,736 residents of Pruitt-Igoe were adult males. Many of the features praised in the *Forum* were sources of frustration for the residents of the project. The grounds were perceived to be and were unsafe. Access to the buildings could not be controlled. Women had to go on errands and shopping in groups. There was little for children and adolescents to do. Antisocial behaviour followed. The supposed rivers of trees were trashed with glass and rubbish. The mailboxes on the ground floor – a potential informal meeting place – and community rooms were vandalized and the corridors, lobbies and stairs became feared places. Rubbish got stacked up against the malfunctioning chutes. The lack of toilets on the ground floor meant that the children urinated where they could. Pipes burst in winter.

A \$US7 million proposal was made in 1956 to remodel the scheme by turning the galleries into conventional corridors. By the mid-1960s the project was in poor shape while the Housing Authority reputedly still owed