

Look at history before making changes

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=606#more-606>

Since the City of Tulsa is revising its Comprehensive Plan, and it undoubtedly will contain plans for mixed-use, high-density zones, I thought it would be good to demonstrate what can go wrong with these types of developments with an example.

The massive Pruitt-Igoe apartment complex was constructed in St. Louis in 1956, and less than 20 years later, this massive, award-winning icon of architectural design was declared a miserable failure and was imploded to the ground.

Like all good social engineering projects, Pruitt-Igoe began with a problem and good intentions. At the end of World War II, St. Louis had lost a significant amount of its population and St. Louis was eager to draw people back to the city.

So in 1947, the low-income, mixed race Desoto-Carr neighborhood in St. Louis was condemned, and its buildings were razed for a new project that was originally going to consist of several two and three-story row-type apartment buildings and a large public park.

By 1950, architects George Hellmuth and Minoru Yamasaki completed the first formal design for the project, called Cochran Gardens, whose design had by then evolved into high-rise buildings of a post-modern design.

Later the scheme was expanded again under the name Pruitt-Igoe. It contained a total of 2,870 apartment units in thirty-three 11-story buildings.

When the Public Housing Authority obtained bids for the construction of the project, they were far higher than expected. The PHA refused to provide additional funds, but they still wanted all 2,870 apartment units. Instead of reducing the number of buildings to meet the budget, their solution was to reduce the apartment sizes and to remove amenities.

The final outcome of the project was a cramped, overcrowded and poorly designed set of buildings that resembled the dark, sterile apartment buildings that the Soviet Union is famous for.

Not just wanting to increase its population, the PHA also planned to use the project to conduct some social engineering. Their theory was that if low-income, badly behaving people were placed in an environment better than they had come from, their behavior would elevate to the better environment.

One of the innovations that won the designers of the project their awards included something called “skip-stop” elevators. Every third floor of each building had an area called a “gallery,” where they wanted residents of the building to interact socially. The skip-stop elevators would stop only at the floors with the galleries, in an attempt to force residents into contact with each

other. From there, they had to walk up or down stairs to their apartments. As a result, the galleries quickly became crime-ridden, and a fearful place to be.

Outside, green areas had been designed between buildings to create a light, airy, pleasant place for children to play away from traffic. But when the buildings were finally constructed, they were so close together that it was anything but green or safe. To make matters worse, restrooms on the ground floor of each building that were there specifically for children to use while they played outside were cut from the budget, so elevators and stairways quickly became their restrooms.

The complex itself was as large as a small city in population, and since there was no effective police force for the complex, it did not take long for Pruitt-Igoe to become a place where no one wanted to live. Even the poorest of the poor did their best to leave it as quickly as they could afford to do so, and as soon as they vacated their apartments, other residents stripped them of their materials to sell for drug money. Eventually, so much copper pipe had been stolen that the water was turned off.

In 1972, three of the buildings were dynamited to the ground. By the next year, even after pumping millions into the rest of the project in repairs, the remaining buildings were razed.

The sad irony of the project was that it had been doomed from the very beginning for a couple of reasons.

First, there was an assumption made that buildings and the environments within them and around them can alter human behavior. The failure of the project clearly demonstrates that this assumption was wrong.

Second, they tried this on a very massive scale, so the failure was massive.

If we indeed are going to change Tulsa to be mixed-use and high-density, I hope our planners will have the wisdom to look at history first.

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Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-664-7957, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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