Paper tigers and bad faith : re-evaluating modernism using method-based historical analysis

MATT DEMERS, University of Florida

Introduction: Pruitt-Igoe

The demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in 1972 was famously tied to the death of Modernism by architects in the 70's and 80's who searched for new guiding visions for the city. Charles Jencks (1981, p.9) famously summed-up this potent figure thusly, 'Modern Architecture died in St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grâce by dynamite.' The fact that there is an active ideology of the single, static frame with profound influence on how architects conceive the history and unfolding development of their field can be illustrated in the Pruitt-Igoe demolition taken as a figure: a single event in a particular space that somehow can act as a guiding concept, even though the act of Pruitt-Igoe's destruction was a series of several different events on a variety of sites at different times.

The Pruitt-Igoe figure sums up an entire stretch of architectural history with a *void*, an empty site within which little has been placed. Jencks, immediately after declaring the ruins left by the demolition to be a 'great architectural symbol,' recommends that the rubble should remain on the site, 'preserved as a warning.' (1981, p.9) This void of architectural possibility is easily filled today with environmental crisis, with concerns for making a sustainable built environment, a sustainable, indicating strictures and trajectories for contemporary practice. Yet so many of these trajectories lead back to projects and polemics of the *early modernists*- especially Le Corbusier's urbanisms. It was precisely this topic of architectural history that was the most frequently recorded casualty of the Pruitt-Igoe demolition.

The Pruitt-Igoe figure is a symptom for a condition that covered vast swathes of critical discourse of the built environment. To place the Pruitt-Igoe void in this larger context, we cite Reyner Banham, who wrote in 1971 that '[t]he failure rate of town planning is so high throughout the world that one can only marvel that the profession has not long since given up trying; the history of the art of planning is a giant waste bin of sumptuously forgotten paper projects.' (2009) This quote comes from Banham's book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, wherein he sought to re-imagine the conceptual structure for understanding urbanity. The 1970's and 80's were a time when to think of urbanism as a field of study meant to invent a conceptual framework to model the city as an object of study. Alternative conceptual frameworks from this time period abound: Rowe and Koetter's *Collage City* (1983), Venturi and Scott Brown's studies of signage and parking in Las Vegas and Pop-culture in sprawling American suburbs, Banham's ecologies, Richard Sennett's class sociology, structuralism (Aldo van Eyck) and linguistics (Gandolsonas), desire, etc, each representing an attempt to reform the epistemology of the city.

All these new directions share an initial point of departure- *modernist urbanism*, specifically as embodied in the propositions of CIAM and the *Athens Charter* written in 1938. The Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri, one of many slum-clearance and redevelopment projects supported by Truman's Housing Act of 1949, was initially lauded in the architectural press while still under construction in the 1950's before becoming a symbol of the "Death of Modernism" when demolished in

1972. Some early foundations for the later critical turn away from large-scale utilization of modernist urbanism were provided by famous early backlashes to slum-clearance, like Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and Team X's defection from CIAM, leading to the dissolution of the international Modernist group in 1959. The outcomes of this way-laying of modernist urbanism have been varied. One thing seems certain- proposing anything bearing the slightest relation to Le Corbusier's urban plans as a solution to an urban problem would be met with great suspicion.

Jencks was astute enough in forming his case for the death of modernism to reveal his conscious deployment of the Pruitt-Igoe figure as a didactic tool charged only with the obscurity of polemic pleasure, having little to do with substantive or logical discussion:

> *Rather than a deep extended attack on modern architecture, showing how its ills relate very closely to the prevailing philosophies of the modern age, I will attempt a caricature, a polemic. … to cut through the large generalities with a certain abandon and enjoyment, overlooking all the exception and subtleties of the argument. Caricature is of course not the whole truth. Daumier's drawings didn't really show what nineteenth-century poverty was about, but rather gave a highly selective view of some truths. Let us then romp through the desolation of modern architecture, and the destruction of our cities …bemused by the sad but instructive mistakes of a former architectural civilisation. After all, since it is fairly dead, we might as well enjoy picking over the corpse.* (1981, 10)

Jencks admits that the only way to kill Modernism is to oversimplify it, to reduce it to its figures and tropes for the sake of clarity. Caricatures are used to fight caricatures; figures are fought with figures in the irrational shadow-boxing ring that is the crucible of value formation.

If the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe killed the abstract presentation of Le Corbusier's Modernism, it left another tradition with many of the same precedents unscathed. Linking the failures of Pruitt-Igoe to a larger failure of modernism parallels the criticized linkage of architectural form to society that was the cause of modernism's fundamental problems. The massive failures of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, and other iconic post-war public housing projects like Cabrini Green in Chicago and Schuylkill Falls in Philadelphia, can just as easily be linked to a complex web of issues: bureaucratic incompetence, contractor profiteering, political feuds, and spiraling construction costs (Euchner & McGovern, 2003), as they can to 'purist language', 'rational "streets in the air"', and 'separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic' or various 'rational substitutes for traditional patterns'. (Jencks, 1981, pp. 9, 10) That the complex milieu of architectural Modernism has been rendered obscure by expectations fostered in minds conditioned to static and reductive concepts is of little concern if we want to find what survives in the void left by isolation and demolition.

The proliferation of new conceptual frameworks for treating the city since the 1970's has conferred richness on the study of our built environment. But, there is something curious about the contemporary urban condition. Many of the commonly examined problems in our built environment were once problems for which the Modernists sought solutions in the first half of the 20th century- things like wasteful sprawl, pollution, inefficient use of resources, and high construction costs. Le Corbusier's urban proposals like the *Plan Voisin* and *Ville Radieuse* were meant to

provide solutions for these problems. Because of the definitive fall from grace of the Modernism at the urban scale, the inventive work of creating new conceptual frameworks for understanding the city are rarely used to turn an analytical eye toward their modern precedents. Such analysis can unveil diverse modern urban methodologies, some of which may be more useful than the grand narratives of the death of Modernism now largely ignored.

The importance given to the Pruitt-Igoe demolition is one instance in the larger construction of a caricature of modernism, a "paper tiger" orthodox method used as a rhetorical stand-in for a great diversity of practices. What is sought in this paper is an alternative set of rhetorical tools describing an architectural historiography based on investigation and analysis of methods instead of products. This supplemental history of method-invention provides practitioners with a rigorous basis for evaluating precedents to determine their usefulness in application to contemporary problems, and its inspiration is found in the oldest sources.

Reworking precedents: Modernism as an incomplete method

The difficulty in pinning individual projects to a Modernism that produced them, or moving from specific instances to a general condition that describes them, has to do with the fact that the invention of a new method is usually a shot in the dark. Such an act of invention is not usually understood in such terms by the inventor(s) or those who follow them. The lack of correspondence between the chosen historical avatar of Modernism (Pruitt-Igoe) and its discursive record (CIAM and the *Athens Charter*, Le Corbusier's publications, etc.) echoes the divergence in the late works of Modernism's most influential purveyors from the fundamental principles of design they fought to establish decades earlier. This divergence was the root of anger and confusion amongst architects and critics when confronted with Le Corbusier's *Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Haut* in Ronchamp in 1955. James Stirling theorized that the differences in approaching modernist design in the U.S. as compared to post-war architecture in Europe were the result of a 'crisis in rationalism'. (Stirling, 1956) Le Corbusier's chapel was seen as the result of reaction, a degeneration of intellectual rigor in architecture fueling an escape to native, traditional, and above all 'popular' sensibilities in architecture. The result of this theory was a questioning of whether the chapel at Ronchamp should be considered modernist at all. (Stirling, 1956) Le Corbusier himself, on the other hand, saw his expressive, highly symbolic late works as a synthesis of diverse currents and a final culmination of the Modernism he first began delineating in the 1920's.

This gap between different expectations, between source and receiver, indicates radical problems in the propagation of Modernism as a method for producing the built environment. To qualify the discrepancy (a condition that implies a lack of correspondence between instances purported to be similar), we can compare Pruitt-Igoe with large-scale, working class housing development projects designed by Le Corbusier at around the same time. The five *Unités* built in Europe provide the perfect example: Marseille in 1948-9; Nantes-Rezé in 1952-3; Briey en Forêt and Meaux in 1957; and Berlin in 1958. (Benton & Cohen, 2008) Both the *Unités* and Pruitt-Igoe were meant to provide affordable housing with increased amenities in comparison to existing options, and both represent new building prototypes with novel formal vocabularies, industrialized and standardized materials and construction techniques,

and a critical divergence from traditional urban forms with increased efficiency achieved through clearly conceived programming. While working-class, the *Unités* were not largely targeted to impoverished communities, while Pruitt-Igoe was developed to replace extremely impoverished tenants of slum housing in St. Louis, Missouri. This significant difference alone can hardly explain the drastic differences in design.

In beginning to analyze the differences between Le Corbusier's application of modernism and the interpretation of his doctrine across the Atlantic, we should point out that the Pruitt-Igoe project designed by Leinweber, Yamasaki and Hellmuth in 1950 was decidedly different from the housing project that was demolished in 1972. The original design commissioned by the St. Louis Housing Authority responded to the specified site, unit total and density with a mixture of housing typologies in high-rise, mid-rise and walk-up formats. (Bristol, 2004, p. 354) Pruitt-Igoe was meant to feature a considerable amount of diversity in housing types and visual language and offer a decent degree of engagement between interior and exterior spaces for social interaction and safety. The famous elevators that only stopped on every third floor at communal gallery spaces to allegedly promote the formation of 'neighborhoods' within the buildings were not part of the initial proposal for this affordable housing scheme. But the proposed plan exceeded the federal government's maximum allowable cost per unit for public housing, and drastic changes were made by various representatives of the federal Public Housing Administration to cut costs. These changes had little to do with unrealistic proposals by the architecture firm, but rather were a result of the outbreak of the Korean War leading to inflation, changes in fiscal policy, and rising costs due to materials shortages. (Bristol, 2004, p. 354)

So, the grid-iron of 33 identical high-rise buildings with monotonous housing program and lack of diversity destroyed on the site of Pruitt-Igoe had little to do with the rationalist ideology of the architects who designed it. This application of modernist planning principles shares little similarity with the process that produced Le Corbusier's own modern large-scale housing projects. The *Unité d'habitation de Nantes-Rezé*, for example, was commissioned not by a government housing authority but by its future occupants, a local port workers' organization. (Le Corbusier, 1955, p. 170) The cost of the project was in fact, like Pruitt-Igoe, strictly controlled by national government policy, but difference in response to these strictures was definitive: the *Unité* is expressive and diverse, while Pruitt-Igoe's built form was 'pared to the bone and beyond to the marrow.' (Meehan, 1975, p. 35) Even more to the point, unlike the *Unité* at Nantes-Rezé, the inhabitants who later had such trouble living in Pruitt-Igoe were not the ones for whom the project was intended; instead of working-class families led by an employed adult male, most of the housing was occupied by families headed by women making lower wages and unable to afford the costs of the housing, and more than one third of the units were occupied by families in which no one was employed. (Hall, 1988, p. 237) This was the result of demographic changes in the St. Louis area due to the rise of new inexpensive housing in the suburbs and a corresponding increase in housing options available for working-class families still living in the city. (Bristol, 2004, p. 355)

In light of these details, any linkage between Pruitt-Igoe's failures and Le Corbusier's modernist urbanism seems superficial. The *method* that produces the *Unités* bears little resemblance to the methods used to produce modern housing

schemes in the U.S. or other contemporaneous developments in France, such as the famous *banlieues*, sites of significant social unrest in the late twentieth century and today. If criticism of developments like Pruitt-Igoe comes from a well-intentioned desire to avoid similar disasters through changes in practice, then we should take a close look at the methods used to produce these projects, for only a method-based investigation will indicate the proper changes in practice to avoid problems today and in the future.

Ulterior histories: tactical histories

Luckily, the work of Michel de Certeau provides us with a guide toward a history of practices, found in his distinction between strategy and tactics. (de Certeau, 1988) According to de Certeau's representation of a classical military distinction, *strategy* is possible when the subject can be isolated from its environment and assume a proper place defined as its own. This proper place, or *propre*, serves the subject as a basis for conceiving relations with a distinct exterior, the objects of research. (de Certeau, 1988, p. xix) A tactic is activity that cannot utilize a *propre*, where there is no clear borderline to use in distinguishing an exterior other party, or when the activity must take place in the territory of the other. (de Certeau, 1988, p. xix)

In tactics, fragmentary and heterogeneous elements are continuously manipulated to assemble opportunities. Thus, tactics must rely on temporality to construct relative victories that cannot take place in a unified and stable space. Strategy, on the other hand, relies on the continued existence of a proper space with identifiable boundaries. Through this distinction, de Certeau presents us with an opportunity to reconsider the actions we perform in our field of study, indicating the possibility for a discourse that examines the multifarious production of 'ways of operating'. (1988, p. xix) For our purposes, a tactical discourse is suited for studying the production of methods, and is far more appropriate for such a task than the object-based conceptual tools of history and criticism. To find examples on which to base a tactical inquiry of method, we can go back to the very beginnings of historiography: Herodotus' *Histories*.

While it may seem oblique to discuss Herodotus in the context of re-evaluating the legacy of architectural modernism, idiosyncrasies in the representation of value decisions guiding urban planning and design practices since the 1970's indicate the presence of issues in discursive object formation that date back to the invention of historical prose writing in Greece in the 5th century BCE. The obviously oversimplified characterization of an orthodox Modernism that can be killed-off through the demolition of one failed housing project in St. Louis is an example of discursive reification: the objectification of diverse materials, concepts and events for purposes of inquiry and argument. The rhetorical manipulations of Jencks, Rowe, Koetter, Stirling, and an entire generation of architects were strategic in nature; through the ritualized killing of Modernism, practical urban problem-solving could commence and remain safe from previous mistakes that had now been moved to an exterior location and rendered profoundly *other*.

Mirroring our contemporary discussion of Modernism as method, Jencks as its engaged interpreter, and de Certeau offering an alternative tactical reasoning, is a Greek trio whose works reveal that these maneuvers are ancient and the alternatives just as old. Herodotus' *Histories*, or roughly translated as 'inquiries' from the Greek

word *ἱστορία* (Connor, 1996) presented his investigation of the causes of the cataclysmic war between the Persians and the Greeks and possible explanations for the Greek victory in 490 BCE. (Lateiner, 1989, pp. 7-9) Herodotus' methods were revised by his successor Thucydides, who sought greater rigor in the presentation of truth through historical inquiry in his own *History of the Peloponnesian War*, isolating Herodotus and characterizing his writings as suspect. (Lateiner, 1989, pp. 211-14) The third member of the group is Xenophon, whose *Anabasis* offers an alternative, tactical practice present at the origins of historical research.

Herodotus traveled, questioned people of different Mediterranean cultures and gathered their stories together along with accounts of his experiences to produce a text that he called "a demonstration of his research". (Lateiner, 1989, p. 7) In this aspect, Herodotus' 'history' is strategic, an examination of other people and their cultures in the context of events that must remain external to the investigator due to their location in an unseen past. The nature of many of Herodotus' movements in gathering his material was also strategic, taking the established format of the *periplous*. (Hartog, 1988, pp. 42-3) For the ancient Greeks, the periplous was a circuit around the Mediterranean, beginning and ending in the same place, generally a safe port or the traveler's home. This is a kind of journey with a high degree of order and deliberation, and like any useful and identifiable typology, it is communicable and repeatable, and its format typifies its manner of dissemination. 'It is concerned to identify and locate: to identify the various points (places, towns, or peoples) and locate them in relation to one another, linking them concretely by specifying how long it takes to travel between them, but also connecting them linguistically through the interplay, within the discourse, of everything by means of which place is indicated (the use of prepositions and prefixes, the order of words, and so on).' (Hartog, 1988, pp. 342-3)

The periplous structure objectifies gathered information. Descriptions of Herodotus' own experiences or stories related by other informants, each element is placed in a specific physical location, relative to other elements as well as a unified, Ionian geographic and cultural space. This objectifying tendency was common amongst Classical Greek historians, who privileged the solidity of the viewed object over the ephemeral quality of words, whether spoken or written. (Hedrick, 1996, p. 18) For early prose writers interested in documenting established truths, objectification was conceptual tool that allows the author to sidestep the distrust of the word. It is along this tangent of objectivity that later generations of Greek historians would take the development of their craft, following the example not of Herodotus, but the empirical rigor of Thucydides, who 'generally avoids the history of the uncertainly known past, regarding all periods before his lifetime as incapable of reconstruction in any detail.' (Lateiner, 1989, p. 17) Thucydides attempted to remove uncertainty from historical method, focusing on his own personal experiences as a general in the Peloponnesian War. Cultural history, as attempted by Herodotus' inquiries into how and why the different cultures of Greece and Persia came to war, was abandoned as a project for at least a century after Thucydides redefined the field of study as political and military history.

After the popularity of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* led to its widespread influence amongst historians in the 4th century BCE, historical accounts became annalistic, or focused on highly localized, singular events. (Lateiner, 1989, p.

215) But the inclusion of the third member of our ancient Greek trio provides us with a gambit, a way out of this polarization between a scientific and wholly proper Thucydidean history or the wandering, digressive, and heteroclite Herodotean example. Xenophon's *Anabasis*, written in the 4th century BCE, uses Thucydides' format of the first hand account to textually represent the movements of his army. But Xenophon's movements and their subsequent representation are exemplary for us in that they are almost entirely *tactical.*

Xenophon's *Anabasis* tells the tale of how 'The Ten Thousand', a group of Greek mercenaries hired by Cyrus the Younger to help overthrow his brother and take the Persian throne, made it out of enemy territory after Cyrus's defeat in battle. The title of the work ties the text to the precarious situation of the men themselves, *anabasis* meaning a movement inland away from the coast. Unlike the *periplous* format, which stays along or close to the coast of the Mediterranean, the *propre* cultural space of the Greeks, *anabasis* as movement away from the known territory of the sea implies a venture into the unknown. *Anabasis* is mysterious, tactical, and profoundly inventive.

Thálatta! Thálatta!

I propose a tactical reading of history, whereby we read Herodotus' *Histories* as an *anabasis*. This desire is constructive because, instead of the ordered and deliberate movements of the *periplous*, in the *Histories*, 'digression is the general rule in the journey and also a rule of the discourse.' (Hartog, 1988, pp. 343-4) Herodotus' research and writing methods were heterogeneous to cast a net large enough to capture the peoples and cultures of the known world. This lends a similarly heterogeneous quality to the resulting text that has confused and angered readers ever since. (Momigliano, 1958) But this manner of opportunistic and experimental activity is necessary for the inventor who struggles to find a new path reaching into the unknown. We all perform *anabasis*, but this does not mean we are doomed to wander aimlessly.

'Thálatta! Thálatta!', 'The sea! The sea!', is what the ten thousand Greek soldiers with Xenophon shouted when they finally caught sight of the goal of their wanderings, the Black Sea. The sight of this sea meant they were near the colonial Greek cities strung along its coast, and they were one step closer to being out of enemy Persian territory, and ultimately going home. It seems ironic that the majority of Xenophon's story of anabasis actually recounts movement *toward* the sea, or *katabasis.* But it is the tactical nature of the movements recounted that typifies the story: Xenophon documents the dynamic development of a 'how to', and in the process provides his readers with a manual for 'how to move' through enemy Persia effectively. Similarly, the value of Herodotus' immense work is not in its documentation of 'what happened', but rather 'how one finds it'. Herodotus, like Xenophon, is our guide through a territory so strange and harrowing that one must follow quite closely to reconstruct the journey. (Purves, 2010, p. 124, note 17) When Alexander the Great invaded Persia in the 4th century, Xenophon's *Anabasis* was used as source material for military movements and ultimately for the writing of a new text documenting them: Arrian's *Anabasis.* (Rood, 2004, p. 306) To follow only selectively, loosely picking and choosing material as on sees fit, as did Thucydides and Alexander, will produce a *different* path, and a new method.

Casting de Certeau's desire for a productive discourse based in tactics in the ancient terms of the fathers of history hopefully provides us with a deliberately evocative but eternally relevant series of concepts for understanding our uncontrollable capabilities for invention. We must take responsibility for our creations. To bring us back to the sea (here it is architecture), if we wish to find constructive methods for solving contemporary problems, we must make certain to understand exemplary precedents as well as our necessary *divergence from them.* Sometimes we move strategically like Jencks and Thucydides, reducing existing precedents in order to hone and clarify, attempting detachment from our milieu in order to gain a unified perspective. But more often, we move like Herodotus and Xenophon, and the early Modernists who sought solutions to the pressing new problems of a rapidly industrializing society. Out of necessity, we gather and mix, we experiment, and unerringly we invent.

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