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## Urban Land - June 2005 - Special Section: Green City Leaders

### Pittsburgh Forges Ahead

by Michael Stern

Brownfields are becoming the economic drivers of a postindustrial landscape.

Once a hub of the American steel industry, Pittsburgh is reusing its industrial sites in sustainable and innovative ways. Municipal agencies and private investors are banking on the opportunities afforded by these fallow parcels of land, most of which are located along a stretch of the Monongahela River. Two decades after the steel factories ceased their operations, local groups are looking to these brownfields as economic drivers of a postindustrial landscape. These large-scale parcels of land—measuring 265 acres in the case of the Waterfront, a mixed-use project on the site of the former U.S. Steel Homestead Works—are giving rise to commercial, residential, recreational, and retail uses.

These initiatives are attributable to the city's long history of close cooperation between the public and private sectors. Starting just after World War II, Pittsburgh became one of the first cities to successfully combine the resources of municipal and private groups to plan urban growth. Mayor David Lawrence, working with financiers Richard and Paul Mellon and other business leaders in Pittsburgh, spurred the redevelopment of the central business district, located at the confluence of three rivers—the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio. The plan was funded by corporations and implemented by the newly created Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), which continues to act as the city's major agent of change.

Cleaning up air pollution was a primary goal of Renaissance I (as the project was known), a program that put Pittsburgh at the forefront of cities addressing environmental concerns. Industrial sites and rail yards were replaced by new commercial buildings and Point State Park, a major cultural amenity located at the tip of the so-called Golden Triangle, the place where the aforementioned three rivers meet. Improved access was provided by a new highway system that wrapped around the city's core. This public/private effort began the early postindustrial transformation of Pittsburgh and served as a successful example of how collective local efforts can converge.

The departure of the steel industry in the late 1970s and early 1980s radically altered local economic patterns, which had persisted for nearly 100 years, and caused enormous economic disruption. As these factories exited, they left large sites in their wake, which today make Pittsburgh prime for redevelopment and sustainable, managed growth. The URA and other public agencies have been actively engaged in transforming these large, centrally located sites into the seeds of new communities that build upon Pittsburgh's tradition of closely knit neighborhoods.

"When I became mayor of Pittsburgh in 1994, there were more than 1,200 acres of blighted and abandoned industrial property sitting vacant along the riverfronts, the final remnants of the city's industrial past," recounts Tom Murphy. "We made the decision to buy that property and do the work necessary to remove the environmental pollutants and then partner with the private sector to revitalize these properties. Today, Pittsburgh is among the nation's leaders in brownfield reclamation, and we have created thriving, vibrant new communities with housing, retail, entertainment, and trails where our steel mills once stood," he says.

Reclaiming brownfields has been easier in Pittsburgh than in other places because the factories there have yielded enormous expanses. Single ownership by companies such as U.S. Steel and LTV has also facilitated redevelopment, as these sites did not have to be painstakingly pieced together from numerous, privately owned parcels.

Many of these projects, while localized and not immediately accessible by highways, are regional in scope because they are attracting people from all over the city. A new neotraditional neighborhood called Summerset at Frick Park was spearheaded by Murphy as a way to keep residents in Pittsburgh, and has proven popular. The 238-acre community of 710 houses and condominiums is being developed by a conglomeration of Pittsburgh developers, including Rubinoff Co.; Ralph A.

Falbo, Inc.; EQA Landmark Communities; and Montgomery & Rust of Allison, Pennsylvania. Summerset is being built in phases atop a slag heap that served as a dumping ground for the steel industries. The Waterfront, a 2.4 million-square-foot development, straddles three municipalities directly across the Monongahela River from Summerset, and is located proximate to several city neighborhoods.

One of the first brownfield redevelopment sites in Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh Technology Center, is little more than an urban office park that is isolated from other city neighborhoods. By contrast, the 110-acre SouthSide Works is now being developed directly across the river from the Technology Center and accessible via the newly renovated Hot Metal Bridge. The Soffer Organization, a Pittsburgh developer, is replacing 34 acres of the former LTV steel mill with a lifestyle project with components that include 700,000 square feet of Class A office space, a hotel, a cinema, 84 residential units, and a riverfront pavilion that will host events for the symphony and opera. It also comprises more than 300,000 square feet of retail space that is helping to lure national chain stores to Pittsburgh for the first time.

Public investment has played a crucial role in terms of prioritizing the cleanup of these sites and in providing the infrastructure that has made them attractive to private developers. "Pittsburgh was handed a great opportunity to reanchor its neighborhoods to the waterfront with the abandonment of the steel mills and other riverfront industries," explains Jerome Dettore, executive director of the URA. "I believe that we have taken full advantage of those opportunities by growing the city's tax base through the resulting mixed-use developments and by creating memorable spaces along the riverfronts."

Through the URA, the city has spent millions of dollars to clean up contamination in preparation for the conversion of formerly industrial areas into sustainable communities. Funding for infrastructure has been provided by state, county, and municipal agencies. "Pittsburgh has great opportunities," says Damian Soffer, president and CEO/owner of the Soffer Organization, "but it is impossible to do brownfield projects without the city, because they can get the funds that developers need." Public and private investment in the SouthSide Works totaled \$60 million, including the renovation of a bridge, utilities, streetscaping, and new municipal parking garages.

The most aggressively environmental and far-reaching project is Summerset, where the URA spent \$20 million to remove 600,000 cubic yards of slag. The project is also reclaiming Nine-Mile Creek as a major recreational asset and adding over 100 acres to Pittsburgh's Frick Park.

Major public commitment has enticed out-of-state investors such as the Columbus, Ohio-based Continental Real Estate Companies at the Waterfront, whose infrastructure was funded by Allegheny County through a tax increment financing (TIF) agreement that made it feasible. In such arrangements, government agencies sell revenue bonds to provide immediate financing to developers who pay back the public sector from future property taxes. According to Barry Ford, president of development for the Pittsburgh office of Continental Real Estate Companies, the Waterfront's location and size made it ideal for development. "It was a large development parcel that could be acquired close to a market and in a very good location at the center of Allegheny County," he explains. "The fact that it was a brownfield was almost irrelevant."

These projects are also sustainable because they bolster the inner-city neighborhoods that form the city's collective backbone by following their existing urban patterns and shoring up their social assets. Summerset extends the adjacent residential community of Squirrel Hill and provides easy access to downtown via Route 376. Houses and condominiums are designed around "parklets," and future amenities include a swimming pool, a playground, a basketball court, and other recreational spaces. SouthSide Works extends the original street grid to the waterfront just north of the commercial East Carson Street corridor. The new precinct has a pedestrian-oriented, low-scale character that blends in with the community around it.

These projects are also designed to be economically sustainable, bringing new uses (and, in many cases, a vital mix of functions and services) close to Pittsburgh's central core. Summerset is integrated with the existing residential character of the neighborhoods it abuts. While SouthSide Works connects to the commercial and residential neighborhood around East Carson Street, it also brings more retail—particularly upscale retail—to a city that has long been underserved. Likewise, the Waterfront brings big-box retailers—such as Target and Lowe's—close to inner-city communities.

Expanding the city along its three rivers was the focus of the Pittsburgh department of city planning's 1998 downtown plan. Other industrial sites have also been redeveloped in recent years. Although it was not a brownfield, a new project along the North Shore has taken shape atop landfill that was formerly filled with industry, warehouses, and parking lots.

As a commercial venture, the North Shore development makes logical sense as a way to extend the Golden Triangle across the Allegheny River to the north. The most recent project for the North Shore, which has weathered many redevelopment schemes over the years, reestablishes a traditional street grid of destination retail and commercial buildings between the city's two stadiums, which anchor opposite ends of the site. The Sports and Exhibition Authority of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County hold the development rights to the site, and Continental Real Estate Companies is the lead developer for the 14 acres between the stadiums. New commercial buildings pull development out to the waterfront, which is lined by a new riverfront park. Pedestrian linkages connect with the existing neighborhood around the site and a walking bridge to downtown Pittsburgh.

The North Shore underscores the power of public investment. Although its redevelopment required

a \$63 million investment in infrastructure, including some federal funding, North Shore office buildings are now reportedly commanding the highest commercial rents in Pittsburgh and have allowed businesses like Equitable and Del Monte to consolidate their operations near downtown. While the new commercial development has been criticized for competing with the central business district, the development of the North Shore has prevented businesses with large space requirements from relocating to the suburbs.

Demand for the first phase of Summerset was so strong that first-phase buyers had to be selected by lottery. The Cheesecake Factory at SouthSide Works has become popular and the residential units are 90 percent occupied, before many of the retailers have even opened shop. The story of the North Shore is still being played out, as only three out of 12 development parcels have been completed so far, and talks are underway to bring in a new retail developer.

Two decades after the demise of the steel industry, Pittsburgh is actively reinventing itself by implementing a number of new projects. Since many of these developments are still in progress, only time will tell how successful they all will prove to be. Still, all of them have been implemented in spite of a soft market in a city with modest economic growth. The city and private investors are hoping to turn this trend around, pumping dollars into sites that once pumped out steel. As models for a sustainable future, these projects suggest that Pittsburgh seems destined to forge ahead.

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