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On Top of Mt. Slag, Homes Sprout

Once shunned wastelands are groomed for housing.

By LYNN ERMANN

PITTSBURGH

A NEWLYWED couple, Ryan and Michele Stulak, built their house on top of a 25-story industrial slag heap here, and did so knowingly. Residing with them on 50 years' worth of steel byproducts is a growing community of settlers, the first wave at the development known as Summerset at Frick Park. Most are Pittsburgh natives who, as they used to drive by the black slag mountains, could not have imagined making them their home. "I never in a million years thought I would," Mr. Stulak said.

What was once unthinkable — luxury housing on industrial sites — is now becoming more common across the country. Houses in Summerset are being priced at $200,000 to $700,000. When the project is finished — in 10 years, if all goes according to plan — the slag heap, a 238-acre former industrial area, will be covered with greenery and 710 houses built as Village, Cottage, Townhouse and Estate models.

Ari Gilig, who moved here with his wife, said: "It really looked like an area that was bombed in the war. You had to really believe in these guys and just take your shot, get in on the ground floor." The couple bought a two-bedroom Cottage for $154,000.

Other developments under construction include Victoria by the Bay, on the site of a former petroleum refinery in Hercules, Calif. In Painesville, Ohio, Lakeview Bluffs will have waterfront homes, a golf course, a vineyard and a nature preserve on the spot where a former coke and petroleum processing plant once stood. In the Meadowlands of New Jersey, a project to build a golf-course community on 1,300 acres of landfill is expected to start this summer. Mark Johnson, the editor of Brownfield News in Chicago, which covers the development of brownfields sites like these, says that projects like Summerset and Washington's Landing, a development built on a polluted site in Pittsburgh, have been the test cases.

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EARTHWORK Ryan and Michele Stulak bought a house at a development built on land reclaimed from a Pittsburgh slag heap, inset.

Photographs by Scott Goldsmith for The New York Times; inset, Michael Harlan

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By LYNN ERMANN MARCH 6, 2003

A NEWLYWED couple, Ryan and Michele Stulak, built their house on top of a 25- story industrial slag heap here, and did so knowingly. Residing with them on 50 years' worth of steel byproducts is a growing community of settlers, the first wave at the development known as Summerset at Frick Park. Most are Pittsburgh natives who, as they used to drive by the black slag mountains, could not have imagined making them their home. "I

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Ari Gitig, who moved here with his wife, said: "It really looked like an area that was bombed in the war. You had to really believe in these guys and just take your shot, get in on the ground floor." The couple bought a two-bedroom Cottage for $254,000.

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Brownfields include abandoned petroleum processing plants, old mills, defunct gas stations, garbage landfills and disposal sites for industrial byproducts, and are distinct from the toxic-waste sites that are subject to Superfund cleanups. A shortage of land close to cities has led to a reassessment of the sites, which are in many cases more ugly than dangerous or can be cleaned up adequately to be given a second life. "There are a preponderance of

brownfields close to existing neighborhoods," said Niall Kirkwood, a professor of landscape architecture and technology at the Harvard Design School. "So these lands are being looked at for residential development." So popular has the idea become, he said, that companies specializing in brownfields development have sprung up, like Hemisphere Development, which is to build Lakeview Bluffs. The federal Environmental Protection Agency says that 500,000 to one million sites around the country could be considered brownfields. Legislators in Michigan, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania have guaranteed that developers will be released from future liability if they clean up their sites to meet current state standards. The federal government has authorized $200 million in support payments to developers of brownfields this year.

Pittsburgh's steel industry, once mighty, left behind an abundance of mills, factories and dump sites. Summerset is just part of a plan to transform "a city really defined as one of the most environmentally degraded in America to a city that really could be defined as an environmental success story," said the mayor, Tom Murphy.

Mayor Murphy proposed that the city itself buy the slag heap through its Urban Redevelopment Authority and bring it up to state environmental standards. Slag is a fairly benign byproduct of steel making, a combination of lime and impurities from the steel, but digging into it raised concerns in the surrounding communities. One risk was the manganese at the site, which was at levels that were higher than acceptable and could be dangerous to breathe.

The site, originally called Nine Mile Run after a polluted stream that ran through it, is just five miles from downtown Pittsburgh. A neighborhood group called Citizens for the Responsible Development of Nine Mile Run scrutinized every aspect of the

development, and sent out regular reports on environmental points in what they called Slag Bulletins.

One environmental concern was that additional chemicals might have been dumped on the site. Developers agreed that earthmovers would wet down the slag as they worked, to keep down dust carrying things like chromium and manganese.

What Mayor Murphy saw in Summerset in 1997 was a chance to help keep urban professionals from leaving the city for the suburbs. "Where else could you find 238 acres to build on?" said Murray Rust, a builder of the Summerset project.

Despite its industrial nature, the slag heap was part of Squirrel Hill, one of the city's more desirable neighborhoods, and was bordered by such areas as Swisshelm Park and Duck Hollow. The idea was to make Summerset as attractive as the old surrounding neighborhoods, with houses in the same price range, but with modern plumbing, wiring, heating and fixtures, not to mention level floors and tight roofs.

But first the developers had to deal with 20 million tons of slag, and the surrounding communities, which were filled with the kind of people who keep track of broken stoplights. The more vigilant local residents began printing the Slag Bulletins, with headlines like "Other Communities Have Already Paid the Price." The neighbors' initial concern was about the potentially dangerous dust that would be stirred up by the contouring of the slag. (While chipping away at the slopes, workers did uncover abandoned cars, part of a freeway and some drums of petroleum, which they piled at a corner of the site.)

"We had over 400 meetings over six years," said Sally Pfaff, the project's manager, who faced questions about things like pollution, noise and traffic from Citizens for the Responsible Development of Nine Mile Run. At one meeting Mayor Murphy

was booed off the stage.

The developers added roads and made community presentations featuring watercolors of the finished site and descriptions of amenities that were being included, like Kohler bathroom fixtures and Andersen windows, and the houses' energy-efficient design. They also sponsored a lottery for people to bid on the first sites, to develop an air of exclusivity.

"At the time of the lottery, these people really had a slag heap and some plans," said J. Roger Glunt, the president of the Jayar Construction Company and another builder of the project.

Vince Sacca, 31, a metals trader, bought a 3,200-square-foot Village model for himself, his wife and their two children. They had been looking in neighboring communities for two years, but by the time of the lottery had become dispirited at what they were seeing. "We had been finding older homes that needed a lot of work

and homes with not enough space," Mr. Sacca said. David Shirey, 37, who works in video sales, bought a Cottage model for

$254,000. He said he could throw a baseball from his yard and hit the house in Squirrel Hill where he grew up. Other transplants say they are pleased that they can keep the same ZIP code.

"It's risky," said Vanathi Gopalakrishnan, 36, an assistant professor of medicine and intelligent systems at the University of Pittsburgh, who bought a $700,000 Estate, the largest model, with her husband, Ganesh Mani, 39.

"We are the only people who have a third floor," she said. She bragged about her view of Nine Mile Run, the local waterway known as Stink Creek, which collects runoff from three storm sewer systems. The developers once considered running the stream through a culvert; after protests by the locals, Mayor

Murphy promised that the Army Corps of Engineers would clean it up so much that it could serve as a trout stream.

As a partner in creating Summerset, Mayor Murphy brought in the Rubinoff Company of Pittsburgh, which had handled Washington's Landing. Mark Schneider, its president, and LaQuatra Bonci Associates of Pittsburgh, a landscape and urban planning concern, wanted Summerset to be a "new urbanist" neighborhood, with mixed styles of housing as well as parks, promenades and public trails. Washington's Landing was built on the site of a former rendering plant on Herr's Island in the Allegheny River, which had been cleaned up starting in 1989. Among the challenges there were fatty gunk, PCB's from old electrical transformers and an elephant carcass and giraffe bones from a nearby zoo.

The PCB's were moved to a far end of Herr's Island and "capped" with a tennis court. According to Robert Colangelo, executive director of the National Brownfield Association, a nonprofit educational organization in Chicago, PCB's are oily and clump together, staying in one place, rather than spreading into surrounding areas; even so, the site is checked annually.

Rows of cheerfully painted town houses with tiny cupolas (reminiscent of those in Celebration, Fla.) were built on the site of the former cesspool on Herr's Island. Town house units bought originally for $140,000 in 1996 have since more than doubled in value.

Developers promised that Summerset would be even more accessible to the public than Washington's Landing, on its island. (Whenever public money is used for housing, the area cannot be closed off to the public, said Deborah Lange,

executive director of the Brownfields Center at Carnegie Mellon University.) There is no gate at Summerset, but a slope defines

the borders of the former

industrial dump. Giant machines bit into the steep slag heap, chipping the material into something like gravel and grading it to a gentler rise leading up to a plateau and a future public park. The slag itself was covered with 30 inches of soil, grass seed was put down two years ago and maples, dogwoods, laurels and spruce were planted along the roadways.

Henry Prellwitz, who studied the slag heap in 1988 as part of his doctoral dissertation in geology at the University of Pittsburgh, said that as long as it is covered by soil, it poses no danger to residents -- unless they plan to eat it.

Some naysayers assert that sinkholes might develop at Summerset, but new residents seem unconcerned. As Donna Trust, Mr. Gitig's wife, said with a shrug, "Well, we'll know if we sink, won't we?" And local builders point out that large sections of Pittsburgh -- anything near the Monongahela or Allegheny Rivers -- is probably built on fill, and that slag is much more stable than the clay that was often used there.

Leaders of Citizens for the Responsible Development of Nine Mile Run say they no longer have significant concerns. Paul Peffer, perhaps the most vocal member, recently displayed a list of the group's 1999 demands and said, "A whole lot of these have been done or are in the process of being done." He was satisfied that enough testing for chemicals had been done and noted that, without Summerset, Stink Creek would not have been cleaned up so soon.

About the only remaining concern is keeping plants growing. That may take time, said Jack LaQuatra, a partner in LaQuatra Bonci. Ground-up slag is like gravel, and water flows right through it.

Still, drivers on Parkway East these days can see houses marching

up the sides of the slag. Edward De LaTourre, who runs a Pittsburgh manufacturing company, said he is now thinking of buying a house there. "I think they've taken some of the flavor of the neighborhoods from a hundred years ago," he said.

In a few generations, Summerset, named by Mr. Schneider for the first area settled in Squirrel Hill, may be just another neighborhood, and its status as a reminder of the city's steel business long forgotten.