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The Greening of Pittsburgh

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In a contemporary retelling of Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare, **Pittsburgh** is finding recession-era advantages in a slow-growth legacy.

The city, which has lost half its population since 1950, had a well-chronicled change of character over the second half of the 20th century: from a center of the steel industry to headquarters for many large corporations to a much more diverse economy that encompasses health care, education, finance and technology.

As it shrank, the city had relatively little new construction compared with many United States cities. But it was in the forefront of the movement to conserve existing structures and clean up the contaminated industrial sites called brownfields, becoming a leader in the field of sustainable building. That is now serving **Pittsburgh** well during the economic downturn.

Describing the area's rebuilt economy, the Allegheny County executive, Dan Onorato, said: "It's clean, it's shiny, it's green. Slow, steady growth is our strongest asset."

The city's commercial real estate market is relatively healthy. In the fourth quarter of 2008, **Pittsburgh** earned the top ranking in Moody's Investors Service's quarterly "Red-Yellow-Green" report on the state of commercial real estate in 60 major United States cities.

Though the southwestern Pennsylvania metropolitan area is only the 22nd largest in the United States in terms of population, the city employed energy-efficient construction well ahead of larger cities. In 2005, **Pittsburgh** claimed more LEED-certified square footage -- meaning it had met Leadership in Energy and Design standards for energy-saving designs and building techniques -- than anywhere else in the United States. As other cities have caught up, **Pittsburgh** now ranks seventh nationally in the number of buildings with such certification, according to the local Green Building Alliance.

Founded in 1993, the alliance says it is the first nonprofit organization in the nation to encourage green commercial building. "There was no government-driven agenda here," said Rebecca Flora, former director of the Green Building Alliance and now senior vice president of education and research at the national Green Building Council, a nonprofit organization that oversees the LEED program. "**Pittsburgh's** doing green in a weak market city with existing building stock, and it's done it without government programs."

A number of century-old landmarks have been revived as energy-efficient buildings in the last decade, and several major projects, both new and retrofits, will open this spring.

Years before national environmental building standards were set in 2000, **Pittsburgh** began experimenting in sustainability as local architects, engineers and academics debated how to reuse old industrial sites.

"We were working on the Model T of green building," said the architect Bob Kobet of the discussions among early proponents of solar energy, weatherization and nontoxic design.

With innovations that would later become widely accepted, like a rooftop garden and photovoltaic roof panels, the local Green Building Alliance's first project, in 1998, retrofitted a 100-year-old former soap factory and art gallery as office space for Conservation Consultants Inc. "Nonprofits became the test market," said Ms. Flora, with local foundations underwriting new designs.

Working with advisers from Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh, the alliance also provided technical advice for more complex renovations for other nonprofit groups.

In 1999, for example, Phipps Conservatory, a Victorian landmark at the entrance to a city park, began planning an energy-efficient expansion to blend with the century-old structure. A local architecture firm, IKM, preserved its signature fritted-glass dome with a \$5.2 million below-grade welcome center. A 12,000-square-foot tropical forest exhibit deploys a radical roof venting system and geothermal tubes for passive cooling in a \$7.5 million glasshouse. A solid-oxide fuel cell produces electricity from natural gas.

Two other public venues -- the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and the David L. Lawrence Convention Center -- incorporated energy efficiency in ambitious redesigns. The 1.5-million-square-foot convention center, designed by Rafael Vinoly in 1999, was completed in 2003. Its swooping riverfront design uses natural ventilation and illuminates a exhibition hall entirely through its windows and skylights.

The Children's Museum sought to blend a historic 1897 post office with a 1939 planetarium that had stood vacant since 1991. The solution -- a glass lantern shape that appears to float between the grand older structures -- reused original materials, like terrazzo, marble and copper. In 2006, the design won awards from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the American Institute of Architects.

Gary Saulson, director of corporate real estate for the PNC Financial Services Group, the nation's fifth-largest bank, was a green building skeptic until 1998. Steel girders were already rising along the Monongahela River for Firstside Center, the bank's 650,000-square-foot operations center, when Ms. Flora met with Mr. Saulson to suggest making the structure a sustainable building.

"At the end of the meeting, I had committed to make Firstside into a green building," Mr. Saulson said. "It seemed like the right thing to do. As a company, we embrace new ideas and innovation."

Mr. Saulson says that PNC now has more buildings certified as environmentally friendly than any other company in the world. Fifty-five have achieved LEED certification, and 15 more are in the pipeline, including the new 780,000-square-foot headquarters at Three PNC Plaza in downtown Pittsburgh.

Mr. Saulson said the green investment was cost-effective. He said that suppliers had quickly responded to the demand for sustainable supplies like low volatile-organic-compound paints, energy-efficient window walls and sustainably harvested plywood at a competitive price. "We're building our branches as LEED-certified buildings for \$100,000 less than one of our major competitors is building the same size branch that's not green," he said.

As sustainable building gathers national momentum, 41 more LEED projects are expected to open in southwestern Pennsylvania in 2009. Among the largest is the new 1.5-million-square-foot Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, opening May 2 in the Lawrenceville neighborhood. The \$625 million campus, which overlooks the Allegheny River, will have two green-certified buildings among a half dozen.

Consol Energy Center, the planned home of the Pittsburgh Penguins beginning in the fall of 2010, intends to be the National Hockey League's first green arena, with seating for 18,000. The design includes a glass-walled atrium and ventilation that admits natural air.

Twenty miles north of the city in Butler County, the Westinghouse Electric Company hopes to attain LEED status for its 825,000-square-foot Cranberry Woods center. Owned and built by Wells Real Estate Funds, the headquarters and technology center will open the first of three buildings in June.

Federal historic tax credits have aided green renovations at two other city sites. The Union Trust Building, a 1915 downtown structure with a Flemish Gothic exterior and rotunda capped by a stained-glass dome, expects to gain LEED certification for \$10 million in energy-saving renovations by its owner, the Mika Realty Group of Los Angeles.

In the city's densely populated East End, Bakery Square, the former home of a Nabisco plant, is to reopen in 2010 with about 380,000 square feet of mixed-use retail and office space. The \$113 million project will be crowned with a 75-kilowatt solar panel array. Though Pittsburgh's cloudy winters limit sun-generated power, it will provide 1.5 percent of the projected energy use for the site and save \$6,000 a year.

"Pittsburgh has a legacy of really beautiful public venues that have become green and accessible," said Ms. Flora of the Green Building Council.

PHOTO: The 1915 Union Trust Building in Pittsburgh, with its rotunda capped by a stained-glass dome,

has been given an energy-conserving renovation.(PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF SWENSEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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