

COLUMNS



Everything Old is New Again

Finding new uses for old industrial facilities

From Trash to Panache:

Westinghouse Electric's East Pittsburgh manufacturing plant is reborn as Keystone Commons, an incubator serving small start-up heavy and light industrial firms. Design 3 Architecture of Monroeville won the Associated Builder's and Contractor's 1990 Industrial Project of the Year Award for the renovation.

It makes a big change, doesn't it?" laughs William Snyder, AIA, delightedly showing before and after photographs of the site of the 1895 Westinghouse Electric Plant in East Pittsburgh now reborn as Keystone Commons. Better than any blueprints could, the photos eloquently tell the tale of a once-obsolete eyesore of a manufacturing facility into which new life has been breathed by clever architecture and an eye towards creating a new economic base for the valley by building on the parched bones of the community's industrial past.

The site, transformed by Design 3 Architecture, now sports a fresh decorative facade featuring exposed steel columns in shades of teal, and horizontal stucco bands highlighted by diamond-shaped louver-work set in warm red brick. The steel pipe columns with pointed structural "t's" supporting the outside porticos again reflect the diamond pattern. The effect is a tidy attractiveness rivaling that of most modern-day strip malls. It's a look which has

captured the Associated Builder's and Contractor's 1990 Industrial Project of the Year Award for the Monroeville architecture firm.

To Project Architect Snyder, Keystone Com-

mons represents a healthy trend towards revitalizing urban areas by salvaging old manufacturing sites for new uses. It's a concept ac-

tively promoted by Design 3's client, the Regional Industrial Development Corporation (RIDC), and the project's prospective tenant, NexTech, which will equip the site for its ultra-modern steel galvanizing process.

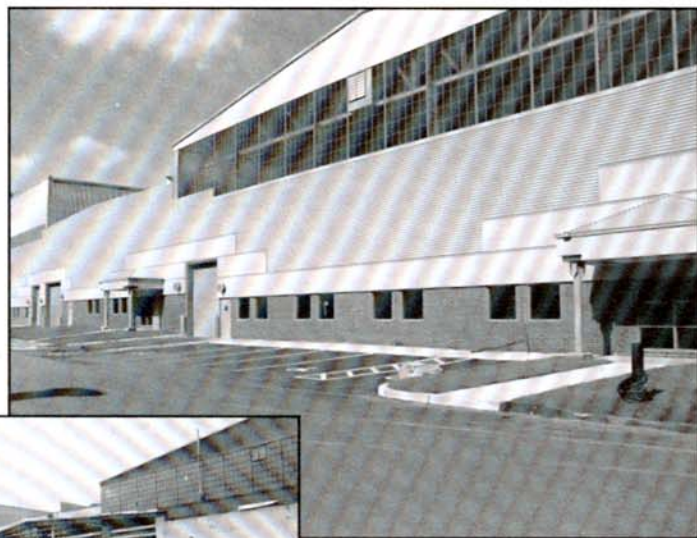
For the cost of building a new structure, Snyder explains, several old facilities like the Westinghouse site can be renovated, thereby creating less expensive urban workspaces and attracting many smaller light industrial firms which can provide a less monolithic employment source for the valley's residents.

"What I see are smaller manufacturers coming in and specializing in some segment of the industrial marketplace. Renovations like this really challenge our perception of 'what does a factory have to look like?' You see that it doesn't have to look like the factories of old. Now you can have a light manufacturing facility right next to this galvanizing works—and offices right across the way with a warehouse."

To be sure, there were particular challenges in renovating an old site to fit the requirements of modern-day industrial usage.

"[NexTech] needed so many square feet of louver area," recalls Snyder, "so we decided to break it up into a pattern [a diamond design, reflected on the lighting sconces, affixed to the front of the North Building]. And they needed to raise up the base in order to accommodate the equipment they were putting in, so we raised the roof and created towers."

"Overall, we were trying to lend it a more urban look," says Snyder of the project, the end result of which is attractive enough to serve as NexTech's new corporate headquarters.



One intriguing discovery was finding that a building connected to the NexTech building, known as the "K" Building, turned out to be the site of the world's first radio station—KDKA.

The second building under renovation, across the street from the NexTech Building, was developed for RIDC to serve as "flex space"—incubator offices for prospective tenant-entrepreneurs. Design 3 is now in the process of talking with prospective tenants about the building which includes enough office and warehouse space to accommodate three or four start-up companies.

A third building, now under partial demolition, is scheduled to become part of a garden fence with masonry at the windowsills. By retaining the building's piers and putting chain link fence with an attractive pattern in-between, Snyder hopes to provide the site with some security but still not make it seem so industrial.

"It really doesn't cost that much more to play a little bit with metal panels or to put in a couple of stripes in colors. You pay a bit of a premium, but not that much."

One example of the creative usage of everyday industrial commodities triumphing over costs are the North Building's uniquely diamond-shaped light sconces affixed to the new facade.

"They're just standard, surface-mounted light fixtures bound to a piece of steel. We took woven wire and put a frame around it and put that in front of the light fixture to carry through the diamond-shaped theme, the logo of the Keystone Commons, and the diamond-shaped louvers we'd used on the other side of the build-

ing. During the day, you see the teal green color of the sconces. But they're even nicer at night. You get a nice glow rather than harshness because the woven wire helps to diffuse the light."

For Snyder, the project has been as much a foray into urban planning and history as a design job. "It's hard to come away from such a project without having derived a sense of the admirable 'survivor' temperament of that small industrial town in the valley."

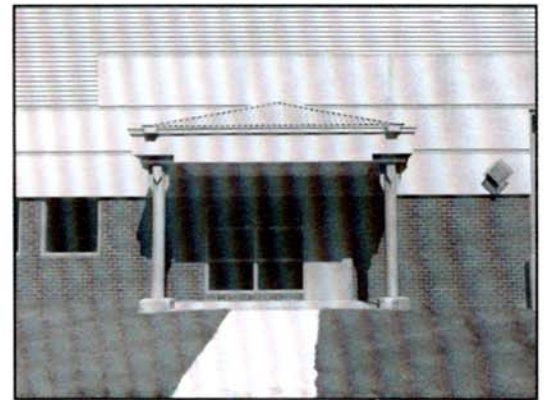
"Have you been to Turtle Creek?" he asks. "If you drive over the Westinghouse Bridge which most people do, you can practically miss it. But there's a real sense of community there and these buildings are a part of that."

"True, the employment base may never get back to what it was in Westinghouse days, but in this renovation there's room for new small companies and room for growth. The local economy should level off and the community will hopefully get a better tax base."

Get Out of Town

Not all old manufacturing facilities are hiding in the shadows of declining industrial towns -- many await rejuvenation in the suburbs and rural areas. For years, the Perry Forge sat empty on Rochester Road in Butler County, until it was dramatically transformed into the new Cranberry Municipal Center by Ross Schonder Sterzinger Cupcheck.

The region's fastest growing area and the first township over the Butler County line, Cranberry is accessible by Rtes 279, 19 and the Turnpike. The boom in new residents has created a



Above: Smoky blue corrugated steel and warm red brick are broken by long horizontal bands of stucco on the facade of Keystone Commons. Diamond-shaped louvers reflect the facility's logo. Below: Interior windows add light and visual interest to the Cranberry Municipal Building.

