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Housing Development Turns a Brownfield Green



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Daniel Gans, left, and George Vallone of Hoboken Drownstone plan to turn a seven-acre brownfield into a sustainable development. Cleanup is under way on the site, which was contaminated with arsenic.

By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

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JERSEY CITY

STANDING in an empty seven-acre field here just across the border from Hoboken, with a big poster propped in the open trunk of his car showing how carbon emissions have soared over the last 50 years, Daniel Gans spoke animatedly about what was going to happen next:

“More than 400 residences, in two large buildings,” he said, gesturing across the dirt piles, and a yellow bulldozer. “And we will build these structures so that they operate using 50 to 90 percent less energy than conventional buildings do.”

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“This project,” he added, “is going to demonstrate a whole new way of construction.”

By employing an aerated type of concrete that makes for superinsulated walls, along with a ventilation system with energy-recovery ability, and solar hot water and [geothermal](#) technologies, the company plans to build a model of energy efficiency on what is now a contaminated brownfield.

It is already evident that government and public-utility authorities believe Mr. Gans and his partner George Vallone are doing more than just blowing smoke about this. (The two founded the [Hoboken Brownstone Company](#) together more than three decades ago, and assembled the plans for what became the [Maxwell Place](#) development in Hoboken.)

Bills are pending in both houses of the Legislature to designate the development one of the first “Urban Energy Technology Demonstration” projects under the state’s energy master plan. Also, the state [Board of Public Utilities](#) recently awarded it a \$3.6 million grant to help develop alternative energy sources.

The city has obtained federal financing for creation of a park adjacent to the site of the residential buildings. And next week, members of the state’s Congressional delegation will gather in the same dusty field where Mr. Gans was recently talking about the future to announce a federal highway fund grant for a secure pedestrian route from the development to a nearby light-rail transit station.

Cleanup work has begun on the soil at the site — long ago contaminated by the dumping of white-cake arsenic — and capping with fresh soil is to follow. Construction should begin by the end of the year, Mr. Gans said.

Running along both sides of Hoboken Avenue, west of the Second Avenue light-rail station in Hoboken, the site was once the home of the Van Leer Chocolate Factory. The factory was demolished after the general area was declared a redevelopment zone, but the Hoboken Brownstone developers are nodding to history with the name for their project: Van Leer Place.

Construction is planned in two phases, starting with a rental building on the north side of Hoboken Avenue. It is to be tall enough to offer a direct view of Midtown and the Empire State Building; it will have about 220 units, according to the city-approved plan.

The project will eventually include parking for more than 400 cars, and 8,700 square feet of retail space, according to the plans.

Mr. Gans and Jersey City planning officials said the most exciting part of the project was its use of new techniques that reduce energy consumption levels, and carbon dioxide emissions from use of fossil fuels, well below current norms.

Consulting his poster graph based on federal environmental statistics, Mr. Gans declared the construction industry’s record “terrible” when it comes to energy efficiency.



“Fifty years ago,” he said, “the factories were the big polluters. But now factory emissions are much less than those from construction and building operations. Pollution from cars is still high, but not as high as buildings.”

Using research by the [Manhattan](#) architect [Michael McDonough](#), Hoboken Brownstone decided to adopt what is termed a “mass wall building” approach in Jersey City. It combines traditional passive-solar design — installation of solar panels that absorb the sun’s heat during the day and release it at night — with use of insulating concrete.

Mr. Gans expressed enthusiasm about a product that has barely been used in this country: autoclaved aerated concrete.

“It’s amazing,” he said, pulling out a sample he carries in the trunk of his car along with the poster graph. “Look how light it is” — about half as heavy as regular concrete — “and it’s airtight. It floats, it seals out moisture and mold and humidity. The heating/ventilation/cooling systems for the building don’t have to do nearly as much work, and the building winds up using way less energy to operate.”

In a separate interview, Mr. McDonough also pointed out that recycled coal ash could be used to produce the concrete, helping to save on landfill space. Invented in Sweden in the 1920s, the material is widely used in most countries except the United States, he said. Mr. Gans ascribes that to simple reluctance of American builders to try new technologies.

Currently, he added, there are only two American production plants, both in the South. For the Van Leer project, the material will most likely have to be trucked in from [Florida](#), thereby depleting some of the energy-saving benefits gained with its use. But, Mr. Gans said, he and Mr. Vallone are pursuing the notion of building a production plant in the New York metropolitan area.

“The new way of doing things,” he said, as he tossed the hunk of autoclaved concrete back in his car. “It starts right here.”