As work on the Almono development in Pittsburgh’s Hazelwood neighborhood picks up speed, it’s a reminder of how far the transformation of the former steel mill site has come. By Jeffery Fraser
Almost all remnants of LTV Steel’s Hazelwood Works are gone, with the Mill 19 building, foreground, among the exceptions. But plans call for filling the vast, open space with a sustainable mixed-use community that will be another revitalization asset in the region.
t was named for the hazelnut trees that graced the banks of the Monongahela River. It was once crowned by a city newspaper as “the choicest suburban section” in 19th-century Pittsburgh for its fine homes, splendid lawns and unobstructed view of the river and forested valley below. It has been a pillar of the region’s Industrial Age, a steel producer for more than 100 years whose sprawling mill brought unprecedented growth, prosperity and the sulfurous odor of heavy pollution. It has loomed as a specter of post-industrial decline and stood as an example of the resiliency of a neighborhood to endure decades of disinvestment and increasing isolation.

Another chapter of Hazelwood’s history is being written and it is no less dramatic. On the 178 acres of riverfront brownfield where LTV Steel’s Hazelwood plant closed in 1998, a high-profile experiment in sustainable community development is taking shape.

It is a future first imagined when The Heinz Endowments and the Richard King Mellon, Benedum and McCune foundations bought the abandoned site for $10 million in 2002. They named it Almono after the city’s three rivers, which include the Allegheny and Ohio, as well as the Monongahela.

The partnership’s master plan is that of a harmonious blend of housing, offices, research and development, light manufacturing, retail, parks, trails and transportation efficiency. It’s to be a sustainable mixed-use development, a miserly energy consumer that also employs green infrastructure to help solve local stormwater management problems rather than exacerbate them and is mindful of avoiding the environmental insults the previous tenant imposed. A model 21st-century community integrated with the old through the use of strategies for shoring up its autonomous vehicles on its test track at one end of the site.

Where the LTV Steel Hazelwood plant stood, the cold-finishing mills, furnaces, coke ovens, quenching stations, and paint, welding, pipe and carpentry shops have been razed. The site has been remediated and graded tabletop flat. Financing to pay for infrastructure and other necessary preparations has been raised, including the largest tax-increment financing offer in city history.

More recently, pavement is being laid for the development’s main artery, Signature Boulevard, the city’s first complete street designed for motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists to safely share. Uber is testing its autonomous vehicles on its test track at one end of the site. And a former bar mill, the largest remnant of steel’s might, is being transformed through sustainable design as a place for research and advanced manufacturing. “Almono,” said Endowments President Grant Oliphant, “is in position to launch.”

After more than a century, Hazelwood is being reunited with its riverfront. h
From coal-fired furnaces to plans for energy-efficient homes and offices, the Almono development is part of a historic evolution of the Monongahela River’s north shore in Pittsburgh. By the late 1800s, the site was embedded within the city’s role as the nation’s iron and steel making capital, which was fueled by the abundance of coal in the region. But the decline of the steel industry a century later led to a downward turn in the fortunes of the Hazelwood neighborhood and its steel mill. Today, the community is on the upswing, and Almono is revitalizing its formerly industrialized riverbank.

1876

The Soho Furnace was one of the early industrial plants to occupy part of what is now the Almono site. Located on Second Avenue — today Hazelwood’s main thoroughfare — and Brady Street, the Soho Furnace produced pig iron and steel, and was owned by Laughlin & Company, which later became Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.

1902

The Jones & Laughlin Pittsburgh Works stretched along the northern bank of the Monongahela River on the site today known as Almono. By 1901, the complex included beehive coke ovens and four modern blast furnaces called Eliza furnaces, in keeping with the practice at that time of naming furnaces after wives, daughters and mothers. “Eliza” was a common name in both the Jones and the Laughlin families. In 1904, a fifth blast furnace was built and the annual capacity of the complex reached more than 1 million tons of metal.
It was important for a bustling steel-producing community like Hazelwood to maintain its infrastructure. This meant that even more than a 100 years ago, street and pipeline work on the main thoroughfare of Second Avenue attracted attention.

The beehive coke ovens at Jones & Laughlin produced the coke that was necessary for the production of steel. When coal is baked inside the ovens, moisture and volatile chemicals are eliminated, leaving a porous material that is almost pure carbon.

Hazelwood had the look and feel of a “mill district” when steelmaking was at its height in Pittsburgh. Gray, smoke-filled skies were part of everyday life for people like those photographed here from the top of wooden steps connecting Sylvan Avenue and Chance Way in the neighborhood.
As Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp. grew, so did Pittsburgh, evidenced by the construction in 1953 of the Penn-Lincoln Parkway, which stretched past Jones & Laughlin’s Eliza Works into the city’s eastern suburbs. Penn-Lincoln would eventually become part of I-376 and would be known locally as Parkway East and Parkway West.

Jones & Laughlin merged with Republic Steel in 1984 to form LTV Steel Corp. Although the steel industry was already in decline by then, LTV held on until 1998 when it officially ceased operations. Left is LTV Steel’s Hazelwood Works during its last week of operations in June 1998. Later, in 2002, as part of the sales deal with four Pittsburgh foundations, including The Heinz Endowments, LTV officials agreed to completely demolish the few remaining structures connected to the old mill.

The Thrival Music Festival culminates an innovation conference, a combination dreamed up by a group of young entrepreneurs interested in nurturing startups in Pittsburgh. The venue for the two-day rock concert has varied as attendance has grown. In 2015, more than 11,000 people attended the event on the Almono site, where a laser show lit up Mill 19 with brilliant colors.