



The Westin La Cantera Hill Country Resort Course

Quarries Next Quest

The Westin La Cantera Hill Country Resort Course and Six Flags Fiesta Texas.

Finding the upside potential of that hole in the ground.

By Dan Martin and Helene Berlin

QUARRYING—a once healthy industry—has had its ups and downs for a century. It has also left a legacy in the form of the old quarries themselves. Some have taken on new lives as neighborhoods, shopping districts, or recreation centers. Many thousands remain, often in locations with great potential, if only their owners could envision a reuse.

Consider these: A successful mega-cinema and restaurant cluster sits in a former quarry on high-traffic I-88 in the Chicago suburb of Warrenville. The quarries on the edge of San Antonio's Brackenridge Park have been reused for park amenities, including sunken gardens and a zoo. Multifamily

housing has been successfully tucked in Boston-area quarries from Quincy to Malden.

Other quarries are only partly redeveloped, awaiting better times and public or private investment to complete their long-term plans. A luxury home development on a water-filled sand and gravel quarry that was once an entrepreneur's waterpark is in suspended animation in California's Central Valley, and planning is under way to revive a nearly dead mall near Rochester, New York, that sits in a hollow left by another quarry.

WHICH WAY IS UP?

Redevelopment of quarries for new uses is not entirely a new phenomenon. In many cases, the genesis of current reuses began in

the first half of the 20th century. In others, the quarry developments will not be fully built out for several decades.

The overwhelming reuse of quarries has been for public recreation, but in this article we emphasize commercial and residential reuses by putting the spotlight on five projects. One looks like a recreational reuse but cleverly turns out to be an economic development scheme. Another is an amazing array of reuses, from a theme park and shopping malls to a resort that together inhabit a long belt of former limestone quarries where two major roads meet.

The third is owned by a community but leased to a group that has filled it with profitable adventure sports experiences. The

fourth has become a beloved city park that draws 1.5 million visits annually in a city with a population only a fifth as large—all in just a few years. The fifth old quarry now has almost 1,000 families living in it.

The message is to look closely: fly over your communities with Google Earth and you may find some well-located quarries that have been concealed over the years as communities have quietly encapsulated them, often with other low-value uses. Also: start to plan today for these hidden gems.

THREE OAKS RECREATION AREA

Three Oaks, a 462-acre public recreation area in Crystal Lake, Illinois, is a recent quarry redevelopment that launched to instant success. In its first three months of operation, even with swimming facilities not yet open, some 18,000 people visited the park, many to fish in the quarry lake.

Crystal Lake (pop. 40,700) is about 50 miles northwest of downtown Chicago. The city, which owns and operates Three Oaks, was involved throughout the planning of the new recreation area, including early visioning, negotiating for the property, and directing the redevelopment plan to fruition.

Three Oaks sits on a reclaimed sand and gravel quarry that operated from 1954 to the early 1990s. Well before negotiations for purchase began, the city envisioned a major recreational amenity that would boost surrounding land values and make that land appealing for commercial development.

Preliminary planning began in 2003, five years before title was transferred to the city from Vulcan Materials, the quarry owner. With the title transfer for the acreage, the city began planning of amenities and land layout. The town council approved the plans in late 2008, and Three Oaks opened in 2010.

Construction was funded with a 30-year, \$15 million bond issue, backed by proceeds from the city's home rule sales tax (a tax on merchandise similar to the state sales tax). Vulcan Materials gave the land to the city in exchange for mining rights on a portion of Three Oaks Road. In 2008, Crystal Lake purchased an additional 13 acres from Vulcan to provide access to the site.

The operating budget for Three Oaks, \$565,000 for the first full year (2011 through 2012), is offset by admission and parking revenues plus revenue from the home rule sales tax. Nonresidents are charged for admission, Crystal Lake residents aren't.

Although only recently opened, Three Oaks is already responsible for business development in Crystal Lake. Route 14 businesses report increased traffic and, in the summer, families in beach gear can be seen at restaurants along Route 14. In addition, some 250,000 square feet of retail businesses have opened along Route 14, the entryway to Three Oaks. "Three Oaks has been an incredible catalyst for business development. This 250,000 square feet is new retail absorption for Crystal Lake," says James Richter, Crystal Lake's assistant director of economic development.

While the long-term vision includes residential uses with water views, Crystal Lake's city council has determined that the redevelopment's core purpose is to serve as a public facility. Reportedly there is strong interest from residential developers.

In addition to two lakes and a beach, Three Oaks includes a grass picnic grove with a gazebo and several overlooks of the lakes and lake islands. Three Oaks also offers hiking trails, a playground and spray park, a concessions area and patio, an outdoor fireplace, two marinas equipped with rentals, and the 4,400-square-foot lake house with showers, locker rooms, food concessions, and staff offices.

Several eco-friendly and sustainability features, including rain gardens and bioswales, clean stormwater before it enters the lake or the groundwater. Many quarry stones were reused in construction, including gravel for the hiking trails and beach sand. In addition, more than 28 acres are being restored with native prairie flowers; in all, some 23,000 trees, shrubs, and native plants are being installed.

LA CANTERA

La Cantera, the Spanish word for rock quarry, is the name of the sprawling mixed use development about 15 miles from central San Antonio, just off of two major highways. The 1,700-acre La Cantera property was once a limestone quarry. Today, golfers at La Cantera Golf Club enjoy views of the limestone cliffs and take shots atop quarry walls. At Six Flags Fiesta Texas, also in the quarry, visitors ride roller coasters right onto the quarry walls.

La Cantera is composed of large retail, hotel, residential, and office developments, with thousands of additional square feet of development planned for the future, including 8,000 housing units. Located west of

Interstate 10 along La Cantera Parkway, the development currently includes The Shops at La Cantera (an upscale shopping center), the amusement park, and the 500-room Westin La Cantera Resort.

East of the highway, also on an abandoned limestone quarry, the three-million-square-foot Rim shopping center opened in 2006. Although the Rim is not technically part of La Cantera, it is thought of as an element of the mixed use development, as is the nearby multiplex theater.

Visioning and planning had taken place since the mid-1980s, but La Cantera essentially opened when Six Flags opened its theme park in 1992. While retail leasing was initially affected when the real estate bubble burst in 2008 and prospective tenants could not obtain leasing, since then the second phase of The Shops at La Cantera has steadily attracted tenants, reflecting the health of Texas's real estate markets compared to those in the rest of the country.

Two new developments are in process at La Cantera. The 178-acre Town Center at La Cantera will include nearly 500 residential units, about one million square feet of office space, and a high-end boutique hotel with a spa and retail space. Eilan, a 120-acre project, recently opened a hotel, completed over 500 apartments, and will include restaurants, offices, and retail. It is designed to resemble a small European hill town, with limestone office and retail buildings.

BROWNSTONE PARK

The Portland Brownstone Quarries, while owned by a municipality, is partly comprised of a popular recreational attraction operated by a private company under a lease agreement. The quarries are in Portland, Connecticut (pop. 9,567), a small suburb of Hartford. The surrounding county has a population of about 165,000.

Brownstone Exploration and Discovery Park opened in 2008, after two years of discussions between the town and the leaseholder (the Hayes family) and cleanup in the quarry. It offers scuba diving, cliff jumping, rock climbing, swimming, kayaking, climbing and rappelling, rope swings, wakeboarding, and zip lining from a 60-foot tower and 100-foot high walls.

The Hayes family has a 25-year lease on a portion of the north quarry to develop and operate an "adult adventure sports park." In return, Portland not only realizes a portion of gate receipts, but also is relieved of much

of the maintenance and policing of the quarries. Residents use the park for half price.

The active park concept was met with largely positive response from Portland residents, particularly because it would not disturb natural features. Although some residents believe the quarries should be for public use only, there has been no organized opposition to the leasing agreement, especially as the city gains revenue and is starting to see the economic development effects of Discovery Park.

The park attracted 50,000 visitors in 2010, a season that was cut short by a hurricane, and 52,000 in 2011 (unofficial count). Preliminary revenue figures for 2011 show gross gate revenues of \$1.29 million and gross food and beverage sales of \$205,125.

Downtown Portland's economic development prospects have improved since Discovery Park opened. The business district has few vacancies and two new businesses are coming in. At least one downtown business sold recently, within a few months of being put on the market.

The Brownstone Quorum is currently working with Portland on a public park on town-owned riverfront property across the road from Discovery Park. Riverfront Park, which has been open for two years, was created from slag (broken brownstone) material that had been dumped from the quarries during their operations. The town of Portland is using grant funds to build a pavilion in Riverfront Park. The Brownstone Quorum oversees this park and its volunteers maintain it.

Commercial quarrying here dates to the 18th century, but in 1936, the Connecticut River rose a record 30 feet, filling the quarries with water in less than 15 minutes. An estimated \$80,000 worth of cranes, saws, track, and train cars was lost. After the 1936 flood, several ideas emerged for the quarries, including draining them, but a 1938 hurricane and flood put an end to such plans.

The quarries were effectively abandoned until the early 1990s, when a small quarrying business started up to serve the demand for brownstone in home renovations. That business will close in 2012.

There was talk of creating a marina by cutting a channel in the Connecticut River but that scheme was abandoned in the 1990s. In 1999, Portland bought the quarry property and the National Park Service authorized its Rivers and Trails Program to assist Portland in planning for the quarries.

Largely through the efforts of the Brownstone Quorum, a local citizens group committed to the preservation and community-oriented utilization of the quarries, the site was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2000. Later that year, the city authorized the quorum to modify the site, to use the properties for public events, and to participate in a formal design process funded by a \$50,000 state grant.

Discovery Park is located a half mile from downtown Portland, next to the Main Street Village District. A new connector road obliges visitors to drive through town. Although only anecdotal data is available, town businesses have noticed that some of their customers also visit the park.

GRAY'S LAKE PARK

Named by *Planning* magazine as one of the 10 Great Places in America for 2011, Des Moines's 167-acre Gray's Lake Park, once the site of a gravel and sand quarry, is the city's most popular recreation area, with some 1.5 million visitors a year. The city-owned park opened in 1970. A 1,400-foot pedestrian bridge spanning Gray's Lake opened in 2001. At night, a rainbow of colored lights reflects off the dichroic glass bridge railings, which display a transmitted color and a completely different reflected color.

The bridge connects to a lit, two-mile trail encircling the lake. Kruidenier Trail offers views of downtown, which is just two miles away, and connects to a 42-mile network of area trails and more than 500 miles of the Central Iowa Greenways System. Plans are under way to hook up Gray's Lake Park to the coast-to-coast non-motorized American Discovery Trail.

Originally a small U-shaped lake on the Raccoon River, Gray's Lake had expanded to 100 acres by the 1950s after some 40 years of sand and gravel quarrying. In 1993, a flood destroyed the park as well as a hotel that had been built on the lake. With the help of contributions from the private sector, the city repaired and expanded the park, reopening it in 2001.

The expansion included a new road, a sand beach (Des Moines's only public swimming beach), a playground, and a picnic area. Concrete silos remain as reminders of the lake's origins as a quarry. Currently, shoreline restoration work is addressing flooding and erosion by planting native vegetation and grading steep or eroded banks.

Des Moines officials estimate that the success of Gray's Lake Park has stimulated more than \$2 billion in downtown projects and developments. Although Gray's Lake Park is a 15-minute walk from downtown, it unquestionably relates to downtown. Des Moines officials credit Gray's Lake Park as a catalyst for both public and private development in and near downtown. Two others are Gateway Park and Principal River Walk. A fourth public amenity, a major upgrade of Water Works Park, is in the planning stage and the subject of a recent national design competition. Joining these public projects is a network of private developments, including corporate buildings for Wellmark, Nationwide Insurance, Wells Fargo, and Meredith.

OVERLOOK RIDGE

The former Rowe granite quarry, located about nine miles from Boston, is being developed into a residential community that will eventually include 2,800 units, plus mixed use and commercial space. Overlook Ridge, which was begun in 2003, straddles the cities of Revere and Malden.

To date, 973 units have been built within the quarry walls, in two separate developments, Alterra and Quarrystone. A view of the quarry cliffs is a major amenity for prospective tenants.

The 251-unit Quarrystone development was originally built as condominiums, but is now rental units of one to three-bedrooms—victims of the poor economy. Alterra includes 722 rental units in a mix of studios to two-bedrooms at a lower price range than Quarrystone. The next phase of the development is expected to begin soon and produce 500 new rental apartments.

LOOKING AHEAD

As you look over your community and region you, too, may find that surprisingly undiscovered hole in the ground that could be your next Gray's Lake, Exploration and Discovery Park, La Cantera, or Three Oaks. Or you might discover one of the 50 other successful quarry reuses that we have found from coast to coast. Start planning now and it could be a gem for the next generation and a boost to your tax base.

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