The dilapidated buildings stand empty and forlorn at the end of a rutted, overgrown dirt road, isolated from their nearest neighbors. Several bear signs of former use: Registration! Ladders! Extinguishers! Others scream with epithets and slogans—some angry, some sophomoric—of faded causes and bygone radical movements. A swastika affronts visitors. Obscenities abound. There is little evidence that these buildings were once known as a “garden city,” both an acclaimed model of industrial housing and a stratagem to promote industrial efficiency.

This place, this odd cluster of burned-out, bombed-out buildings, is all that remains of Concrete City. During its heyday, Concrete City provided the best of housing for workers. Located near Nanticoke in Luzerne County, on the southern tip of Pennsylvania’s northern anthracite field, it was built in 1911 by the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company’s Coal Division to house mine workers at its Truesdale Colliery. Until abandoned in 1924, Concrete City—constructed entirely of poured concrete, hence its name—represented a new and unusual approach to building construction.

Concrete City emerged during the opening years of the twentieth century, generally characterized as the Progressive Era. It was an exhilarating time during which many Americans attempted to reform the conditions of a maturing industrialized...
society. It was a period which witnessed Teddy Roosevelt tame the country’s robber barons; the publication of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and the enactment of meat inspection and pure food and drug laws; the outbreak of acrid conflicts between labor and management, ultimately resulting in presidential intervention to settle the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902; the unprecedented growth of labor unions; and the enactment of welfare legislation on the local, state, and federal levels.

The era has also been tagged the “Age of Efficiency,” reflecting the impact of Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915), the founder of efficiency engineering, and his “scientific management” principles on American society. Taylor’s concepts, originally expressed in 1910, were intended for application primarily in the workplace, but a veritable efficiency mania swept the country. Taylor’s ideas were popularized by the press, and a rash of “efficiency experts” emerged with a simplistic version of his system to be applied universally by anyone with common sense. Taylor did not imply, however, that his principles could be applied to the management of homes, farms, churches, universities, and government.

The pervading spirit of social reform and efficiency led many corporations to conceive, construct, and maintain employee housing. In a 1919 article, Horace B. Mann argued that successful management of industrial housing offered “increased labor efficiency; closer cooperation of employer and employee, and the fostering of proper pride on the part of both in good living and working conditions. This helps to reduce labor turnover and contributes its quota to increased plant efficiency.”

The period between 1875 and 1925 was one of great expansion and consolidation for the anthracite industry. During this remarkable half-century, mining and processing of hard coal steadily increased, with the exception of major strike years, from twenty-three million tons in 1875 to nearly ninety million tons in 1924. In 1917, the year America entered World War I, one hundred million tons were produced. The industry, begun by local entrepreneurs and independent companies, became increasingly dominated by mammoth corporations, the most powerful of which were large...
Since much early industrial development occurred in relatively remote areas, employers found it necessary to provide living accommodations for workers. The DL&W transported coal on vast interconnecting rail systems to major metropolitan markets and, through extensive acquisition of coal lands, also mined anthracite. Organized in the mid-nineteenth century, the railroad acquired coal operations throughout the northern anthracite region, and by the 1870s its holdings included twenty-five thousand acres of the richest and most accessible fields in the entire anthracite region. Its rail system extended throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York.

In just twenty-five years the DL&W quintupled its assets, from fifty million dollars in 1900 to two hundred and fifty-nine million in 1924. In 1904, the company produced nearly eight million tons of coal and employed fifteen thousand workers at its coal operations, second only to the giant Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, which operated primarily in the middle and southern anthracite regions.

The monopolistic nature of the company's interwoven production and transportation arrangement was prohibited by federal law, and the DL&W was forced to divest itself of its coal properties in 1908. It incorporated the DL&W Coal Company to operate the coal business, but, in 1915, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the companies were virtually identical. Following a series of corporate stock manipulations and sales, the Glen Alden Coal Company took over the DL&W coal properties in 1921. In 1924, the DL&W remained a major passenger and diversified freight carrier in the region, and continued to be a major force in the transportation of coal. It hauled seventeen million of the nearly ninety million tons of anthracite produced.

The Glen Alden Coal Company maintained the dominance its predecessor had established in the northern anthracite region. Of the more than thirty-five million tons of anthracite mined and prepared in Luzerne County in 1924, the company produced more than ten million tons; its Truesdale Colliery alone produced fourteen percent, or more than one and a half million tons. The colliery, opened by the DL&W in 1904, was consistently the highest producing operation in this region. In 1913, the year Concrete City welcomed its first residents, the Truesdale Colliery produced more than a million tons of anthracite and employed more than seventeen hundred workers. According to the 1914 Report of the Department of Mines of Pennsylvania, it was the only "operation in the anthracite coal fields that has shipped to market over one million tons of coal in two successive years."

By 1924, twenty-one hundred worked at Truesdale, representing nearly thirteen percent of Glen Alden Coal Company's workforce.

It was in this charged milieu of frenetic industrial expansion, tumultuous social reform, and evolving management efficiency that Concrete City was conceived. It would, however, be company housing quite inconsistent in many ways with that traditional type of housing provided for workers by American industry up to the time. Company housing is as old as industry in the United States. Since much early industrial development occurred in relatively remote areas, employers found it necessary to provide living accommodations for workers whether it be in a textile mill in New England, a cotton mill in South Carolina, an iron mine in Michigan, or a coal operation in Pennsylvania. Remoteness was certainly characteristic of the anthracite region of northeastern Pennsylvania—which was frequently described as wild and forbidding—during the coal trade's embryonic years.

 Provision of workers' housing continued into the early twentieth century. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated a thousand industrial employers in the country were performing "housing work" in 1916. The bureau that year gathered data from more than two hundred companies which employed nearly four hundred and sixty-seven thousand workers, and found thirty-four percent of these employees lived in company-owned houses. For the anthracite region the numbers are somewhat more difficult to ascertain, but when taken as a whole, the percentages reported range from sixteen to just below twenty-three percent. Company housing in the middle and southern coalfields was more common than in the northern region because of small and scattered coal basins.

Most company housing available in the early decades of this
The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics noted “the chief characteristic noticeable in every company town is its uniformity.” Most of the houses were of a frame construction, and, if painted, were of a standard color. Little attention was given to surroundings, which were often unhealthy. Two-thirds of the houses analyzed in the bureau’s 1916 study contained four, five, or six rooms; sixty-nine percent rented for less than eight dollars a month. Approximately forty percent of these dwellings lacked “inside sanitary conveniences,” and only four percent had “gas or electric light and running water inside.”

Similar conditions were reflected in the company housing of the anthracite region. Nearly fifty-seven percent of the houses were built before 1890; ninety-eight percent were frame buildings. Many of the houses built in the nineteenth century had only two or three rooms and were often classified as “shanties” by county assessors. They were rarely painted or plastered, and afforded little privacy. Occupants bathed in kitchens and family members slept together in one bedroom. Gradually, many of these homes were enlarged; so, with the addition of newly constructed ones after 1890, by 1916 nearly eighty percent of the company homes in the coal region had four, five, or six rooms. Few modern conveniences were provided, however. Only six percent boasted modern conveniences; little less than half had “no modern conveniences at all.” Much like the national trend of the time, most rented for less than eight dollars a month. Maintenance, if provided by the company, varied greatly. Garbage, in some cases, was collected “every two months or less frequently,” and no uniform policy seems to have existed for the cleaning of outhouses. It’s little wonder contemporary clergyman and sociologist Peter Roberts described conditions in these mining towns as “oppressive.”

Although some positive changes in the character of company housing in the anthracite region occurred in the early twentieth century, few attempts were made to provide model housing using the most modern planning and construction techniques available. Concrete City was one of those rare attempts, yet it had relatively little effect on the broader circumstances, since it affected very few employees of a single company. Housing conditions improved more through a gradual increase in home ownership by workers than by direct, progressive intervention on the part of the companies.

Construction of Concrete City began in September 1911. Twenty double houses were built on a thirty-nine acre tract...
Architects in Europe and America experimented with the material as one which would satisfy the newly awakened, irresistible demand for vastly increased economy and efficiency within view of the Truesdale Colliery. (The company apparently planned to build forty hollow-tile houses near the concrete houses, but they were never built.) The concrete houses were sited around a rectangular area measuring three hundred and seventy-five by four hundred and thirty feet. Four dwellings were erected on each of the short sides and twelve on each long side. The houses faced inward to overlook a central park. The two-story, two-family houses measured fifty by twenty-five feet, and each unit had a forty by one hundred and fifty foot lot. Each had a flat concrete roof covered with slag roofing, rain gutters and downspouts, and a concrete slab suspended over the front and rear doorways. A twenty-five-foot-wide road "graveled and provided with gutters" separated the residences from the communal central park.

The use of concrete as construction material for housing had grown in popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Promoted by the cement industry, it was used in a wide range of housing types, from moderate middle-class homes to opulent mansions for the wealthy. For working-class housing, it was considered to be "durable, sanitary and fire-resisting" and would "better the living conditions of the laboring class." Architects in Europe and America experimented with the material as one which would satisfy the newly awakened, irresistible demand for vastly increased economy and efficiency in "industrial and social development."

Reinforced concrete was used in the revolutionary design of an "Industrial City" exhibited in Europe by architect Tony Garner in 1904. At the same time, "workingman's cottages" of precast concrete slabs were successfully erected by New York architect Grosvenor Atterbury for the Sage Foundation in New Jersey. In Pennsylvania, "poured-in-place" concrete houses were built in Donora's "Cement City," laid out by the American Steel and Wire Company for middle management workers in 1916. Precast concrete houses were also constructed in Lansford, Carbon County, by the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company in 1918.

The construction process at Concrete City was particularly innovative in the use of a system of portable steel molds. The system was designed and patented by the Brooklyn, New York, architectural firm of Read and Morrill, Inc., one of the firms experimenting with concrete construction techniques. Two foot square plates were secured together to form a tightly sealed box which was filled with concrete. These molds were adaptable to the construction of walls of various widths, and could be used for concrete posts as well. Using these plates, an entire house could "be constructed wholly in one day." Or, as was the case at Concrete City, only two belts of plates were used, a lower one "to protect the concrete which has already been placed," and the upper to mold newly poured concrete. The molds were hinged together and could be lifted to the next stage without being entirely disconnected.

Another innovation used at Concrete City was a "concreting train." As the site was cleared and graded, a railroad track was laid around the rectangular area and building materials were hauled in by train. A writer for Coal Age observed that "a mixing plant was mounted upon a flat car with an elevator for hoisting concrete attached. Cars of sand, cement and cinders were attached to the mixing car, and the concrete was hoisted from the mixer to an elevated hopper, from which spouts conducted the mixture into steel forms at various parts of the building." When the concrete of each level hardened sufficiently, workmen hoisted the pre-constructed forms to the next level and the train progressed to the next structure and poured another belt of concrete. The procedure was repeated until the house was completed.

Each residence had seven rooms: a living room, dining room, and kitchen on the first floor, and four bedrooms on the second. In addition, each had a pantry and cellar. Although the original design included an open back porch off the kitchen, the porches were eventually enclosed, providing another small room. The kitchen was equipped with a combination laundry tub-sink and a coal cooking range with a hot water tank. No toilet facilities were located inside, but concrete outhouses, containing both the toilet and a coal bin, were built behind each house. A coal stove located between the living room and dining room augmented the heat generated by the kitchen range. To eliminate the potential problem of dampness, a mixture of cement, coal cinders, and hydraulic lime was concocted to make the concrete nonabsorbent; and "to prevent water from rising from the foundations upward into the building, the lowest course is mixed with crude oil."

One precaution included the plastering of interior walls. These methods were not entirely successful. In 1920, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported peeling plaster and paint. (Blistering of exterior paint is visible in one of the company's official photographs made in the teens.) A woman who lived in Concrete City as a child recently recalled her father's shirts freezing in an upstairs closet, requiring her mother to iron them before he could go to work.

Upon the complex's opening, the company gave careful attention to its maintenance. The houses were painted white and trimmed in dark green. Trees and shrubbery were planted, and

To facilitate the erection of such an innovative compound, a "concreting train" (facing page) was employed to haul building materials and equipment to the site. The train caught the attention of Coal Age, which described how sand, cement, and cinders were delivered to the area.

The mothers of Concrete City, photographed in August 1914 with traditional company housing in the distance.
flower boxes were attached beneath the front windows of each house. Four-foot-wide sidewalks separated the houses from the street and extended to the outhouses in the rear. Electric lamps illuminated the street. A baseball field and tennis courts were eventually added. A sliding board, swings, and small pavilion were available for young children in the central park area. During summer 1914, a concrete swimming pool for the children was opened, only to be filled in shortly after the drowning of a young boy.

Because Concrete City “was intended to be a choice residential section,” coal company officials “insisted on absolute cleanliness and extreme care of the properties.” The company sponsored annual garden contests and awarded cash prizes to promote the village’s beautification. Most tenants planted extensive vegetable gardens in the summer. Houses were painted every two years by company employees, and each year at housecleaning time, reports another woman who grew up in the village, “all the furniture was carried outside and then the inside was washed down with a hose.”

The houses cost about twenty-five hundred dollars per family unit to build, and rented for eight dollars a month. Construction costs proved to be high when compared to the twenty-one hundred dollars for brick houses—which included steam heat and interior toilets—built several years later by the company.

What actually motivated the DL&W to build Concrete City remains perplexing. A writer for Coal Age reported in 1913 that the houses were constructed, at the behest of E. E. Loomis, company president, to provide “model buildings” and “model surroundings” for company workers. Because there was a record of considerable death in the coal industry due to non-fire resistant construction, the dwellings of Concrete City represented a continuation of the company’s “promoting safety in the mines” by assuring “the health and comfort of its employees above ground.”

It is possible that the DL&W was interested in the morale and safety of its employees—but which employees? The company employed approximately sixteen thousand workers throughout the region in 1913, making it the second largest employer in the anthracite industry. Concrete City housed only forty employees of the seventeen hundred working at just one of the DL&W’s many coal operations. The promotion of safety and comfort for employees by building a housing project with such limited
However, the realization of company goals for industrial efficiency also yielded an exclusiveness based on job classification, status in the workplace, and ethnicity.

Concrete City's workplace, exclusiveness, and efficiency indicate the company’s investment. Without denigrating the DL&W’s impulse for humanitarian social reform completely, a more likely reason for the construction of Concrete City seems to have been the promotion of industrial efficiency by the creation of a superior living environment, close to the workplace, for employees perceived as vital to the company. And the Truesdale Colliery, where residents of Concrete City worked, was a record-producing operation.

By providing housing of Concrete City’s quality for certain essential employees, the company invested in the continuation of high production. The DL&W sought a stable and loyal skilled work force to guarantee maximum profit. These results of company housing were consistent with those expected by many employers in the United States, and compatible with those proselytized in contemporary housing construction literature. However, the realization of company goals for industrial efficiency also yielded an exclusiveness based on job classification, status in the workplace, and ethnicity.

The specialized nature of the workers’ employment status and Concrete City’s insularity are confirmed explicitly by an examination of community residents. Although complete tenant lists are unavailable, the published record indicates the men were select employees who held key positions at the colliery. “These were the foremen of the high producing veins, the technicians and shopmen,” considered essential to the Truesdale Colliery’s record production, a local newspaper reporter noted in 1939.

James McGuire, chief of the power plant, and Anthony Early, chief clerk at the colliery, lived in Concrete City. So did firebosses William Dixon, James Murray, Charles Speary, and John Williams, individuals responsible for detecting dangerous accumulations of deadly gases in the mine. Otto Pomerinkle, a driverboss who supervised the underground transportation crews and the movement of coal to the surface, called Concrete City home. Joseph Reynolds, outside foreman “in charge of all colliery operations on the surface” at Truesdale Colliery, resided in the complex, as did Thomas Lewis, head electrician, and John Allen, a carpenter and machine shop boss. Concrete City residents also included engineers who operated the company’s locomotives, and blacksmiths, electricians, and carpenters who labored in the DL&W’s extensive repair shops.

The company stipulated that Concrete City’s houses were to be rented “only to English-speaking workers,” a policy which excluded a large segment of the coal region’s burgeoning southern and eastern European population. With few exceptions, such as August Turnell, an Italian, and Slavic workers Wasi Fedock and Stephan Franchuck, most residents were of British, Welsh, or Irish background. These workers and others privileged to live in Concrete City were considered especially desirable employees. “If all the people working at Truesdale were like the people living in those houses,” said a foreman in 1914, “it would be much easier for me. Labor which has to come by early morning work train is much harder to handle. The houses attract the better class of miners who live in them happily and contentedly.”

The houses of Concrete City were rented to workers and their families for eleven years until 1924, by which time the complex was owned by the Glen Alden Coal Company. Rather than install a sewer system required by the township, the company announced its intention to destroy the buildings. The company considered the cost to install sewers—two hundred thousand dollars—prohibitive, and demolition of Concrete City began in December 1924. According to a Glen Alden Coal Company official, one hundred sticks of dynamite had little impact on one of the buildings, and so the company simply abandoned the complex.

All the houses in the complex remain standing today. For years the property was used by the Luzerne County Volunteer Fireman’s Association as a fire and rescue training center, and many of the buildings suffered fire and structural damage. Recently, the property was purchased by the Eleventh Congressional District Heavy Equipment Center, which announced plans to demolish the buildings. The timely intervention of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC), however, saved the buildings. In 1992, the PHMC approved a state historical marker commemorating Concrete City, but a co-sponsor is needed for its erection and dedication. Vandalism and land subsidence continue to take a heavy toll on the structures. Once tidy flower beds and orderly vegetable gardens have been overrun by weeds and brambles. The old swimming pool overflows with debris. The grounds are littered with junk. Local target shooters have riddled many of the buildings with bullet holes. The anthracite region’s once beautiful garden village is slowly—chunk by chunk, piece by piece, bit by bit—fading into oblivion and may, before the very eyes of today’s generation, disappear forever without a trace.

While men enjoyed their favored status at the colliery, and women took great pride in their new houses and gardens, the children of Concrete City relished their playground (facing page), located in the central park. Today, the abandoned playground is littered with debris and junk.


