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ABOUT REAL ESTATE

ABOUT REAL ESTATE; RIVERDALE ESTATE PROJECT: OBSTACLES ARE OVERCOME

By KIRK JOHNSON

At the old Delafield Estate, in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, the rock outcroppings that dot the surface of the land are made of nearly fissureless quartz called Manhattan gneiss. It is very difficult to build around, or blast through.

But hard rocks have been among the least of the problems for the string of would-be developers who have put forward proposals for the site over the last 20 years, since Edward C. Delafield donated his 10.4-acre, heavily wooded estate to Columbia University in 1965. Indeed, until now, no developer has got so far as to worry about the hardness of the rock.

Under protection of city "greenbelt" zoning since 1975, which requires stringent conservation measures (the only other greenbelt areas of the city are on Staten Island), and under the watchful eye of several local residents' groups since well before that, most development proposals have withered on the vine. The last developer to actually file a formal plan was turned down by the City Planning Commission in 1977.

Now the first project to have surmounted those obstacles has broken ground. The developer, the Miller Buckley Group, a British company primarily involved in construction contracting, is building what its promotional literature calls an "ultra-exclusive residential enclave" of 33 attached and free-standing homes that are to range in price from about \$660,000 to more than \$1 million. The mansion itself, which sits at the end of a winding road at about 246th Street, is to be converted into three connected homes.

"This is definitely the most expensive, most difficult project I've ever been involved in," said Colin D. Neil, the 45-year-old president of Miller Buckley's United States subsidiary, which acquired the property from Columbia for about \$1 million in 1981. Mr. Neil, a soft-spoken Englishman who moved with his family from the south of France to the Bronx in 1982 to oversee the Delafield project, said the first homes in the \$22 million development would be ready for occupancy next spring. Marketing began last week, with one model home completed.

Mr. Neil said that the construction timetable called for the project's completion in about two years,

but that, since the homes were to be custom-designed, construction would proceed with the rate of sales. The homes will all have at least three bedrooms and range in size from about 3,900 square feet to more than 5,000 square feet for the largest home in the mansion.

Local residents and city officials say Miller Buckley successfully walked the tightrope of community and city interests at the Delafield property by agreeing to preserve much of the topography of the estate - including many of the rock outcroppings and as many trees as possible - while keeping the density at the project low, and complementing the architectural style of the project with the style prevalent among the older homes in the area.

The Delafield homes, to be built on the model of English manor-style residences, will feature stucco exteriors with high ceilings and long vertical windows. The development's name has an English flavor as well: "Delafield, Riverdale-on-Hudson."

"Density was the basic problem," said James Stewart Polshek, the dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, who designed the Delafield project. Previous developers, he added, "never got beyond the density issue" because of local opposition, particularly from a group called the Friends of the Greenbelt, which has taken the lead in monitoring development at the property.

Although the zoning at the Delafield project allowed for more than 33 units - the previous plan called for 72, and Columbia had once proposed putting up 144 faculty residence units - city officials agreed that Miller Buckley's lower-density plan was a key selling point.

But the city had its own demands as well. The Planning Commission required, for example, that the so-called Belvedere lawn to the north of the mansion be preserved. To do that, Mr. Neil said, a parking garage has been blasted out underneath the lawn, with a tunnel entryway drive to the lower levels.

The homes adjacent to the lawn will have elevators that connect to the lower-level parking spaces. A roadbed, at a cost of about \$2.5 million, is also being blasted out around the mansion, for access to the home sites. Altogether, about 15,000 cubic meters of rock have been removed.

The Delafield project, which represents the last of 257 acres purchased in Riverdale by Maj. Joseph Delafield in 1829, is probably the largest development of single-family homes in Riverdale since the Delafield family sold a large tract east of the estate more than half a century ago.

That project, which is called Fieldston, is one of the few privately run communities within New York City, with all the streets and common areas owned by the community corporation.

The Delafield project is to operate on a similar principle. Its streets and grounds, which are to be commonly owned, will be cared for by a resident caretaker at a cost of about \$1,500 a month per home.

