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A wave of renovation is removing Troy's Rust Belt decay to open the way for new urban economy and culture

By SUZANNE SPELLEN
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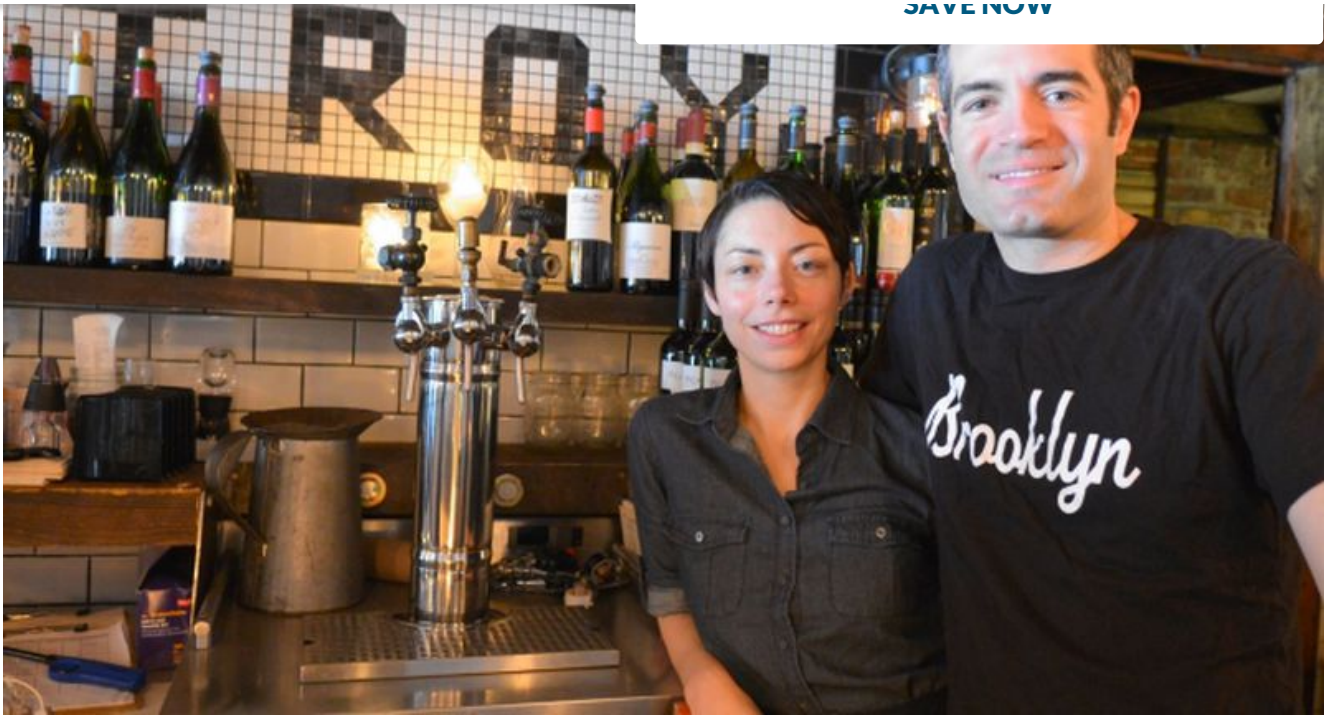


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Heather LaVine and Vic Christopher are owners of Lucas Confectionery on Second St. (John Dillon)

"Troy is the place where Henry Hudson turned around," goes the chorus of a rock anthem by The Parlor, a popular band from this upstate town.

But while the famous explorer didn't find the Northern Passage to the spice markets of Asia, a new generation of urban entrepreneurs is discovering opportunities here.

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With an abundance of affordable studios, shops and homes in grand turn-of-the-century buildings, artisans, restaurateurs, and other creative types are helping resurrect this venerable old town just north of Albany.

In a way, Troy has come full circle. Shipping, steel and textiles built Troy, even made it one of the wealthiest cities in the entire country.

At the end of the 19th century, the population peaked at 89,000. Today, it's barely half that size.

Like many Rust Belt cities, manufacturing roared, then died, after World War II. By the 1970s, Troy was another small city with big city problems.

Detractors called it "The Troylet."

It could have been flushed for good but the city had several things going for it: the waterfront, a rich architectural heritage, and a determined group of people — old timers and new — who could see Troy soaring again.

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growing crowd tapping into this heritage.

For 89 years, the Charles F. Lucas Confectionery, on Congress St. downtown, was one of a dozen shops turning out sweets in Troy. Like so much else, it closed in the 1950s.

David Hubbard (l.), owner of GSD Contracting, and Jeff Buell, owner of Sequence Development, at the Rice Building, which they are renovating. (John Dillon)

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"I'm just a guy from Marine Park, Brooklyn," Christopher says, downplaying his role at the heart of the Troy turnaround.

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He first arrived here in 2004. Christopher was working for the Brooklyn Cyclones, who had come to town to play the Tri-City ValleyCats, the local minor league team.

"The Cyclones were playing Tri-City in Troy that year in the playoffs and I just stuck around," he says. "It was the craziest thing."

Christopher became assistant general manager of the VCats, where he met Heather LaVine, another team executive.

In 2010, Christopher and LaVine married, and they decided to leave professional sports to become local entrepreneurs in the city that brought them together.

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"We had this dream, but we didn't have much money," says Christopher. "The great thing is that the city is willing to let you be unconventional. People want you to succeed."

The couple could feel it at their opening party, where more than 75 locals turned out — almost all of whom had contributed their time, resources, even artifacts.

"Troy embraces outsiders," LaVine says. "It's really humbling for us, and it gave them a sense of ownership."

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The Clark House on Broadway, once in danger of collapse, is being renovated for retail and apartments. (John Dillon)

Their business is growing fast.

Last year they spent \$80,000 to purchase the Clark House building next door. Among Troy's most endangered landmarks, the four-story, 10,900-square-foot brick building was in a state of collapse.

The city wanted to tear it down for another parking lot.

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work expanding their 1,500-square-foot wine bar with an outdoor patio, grocery store and another restaurant, with apartments above.

Around the corner is 9 First St., a four-story brownstone built in 1864 as a print shop and book-binding business. By 1996, it was an abandoned SRO.

Today, it's being gut-rehabbed by Sequence Development, a new company headed by Jeff Buell, 34, Chris Colwell, 31, and David Hubbard, 37. All are local guys. They acquired the long-vacant building for \$10,000 from a community improvement nonprofit.

The 8,100-square-foot building, called "The Bindery," will house a street-level restaurant and three 1,400-square-foot loft apartments. They've all been rented out even before being finished, Buell says.

"Troy is growing organically," says Buell. "That's what gives the place its unique heart that we all love — personal blood, sweat and tears."

Colwell, a decorated army veteran with two tours in Iraq, recently graduated with an MBA from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy's preeminent engineering and technical college. He personifies the Sequence Development mission.

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Kathleen Tesnakis, president of E ko logic, is adding a retail shop in Frear's Troy Cash Bazaar market. (John Dillon)

He laments the "brain drain" that drives many fellow graduates out of town. "I think they should stay here and be the ones creating the jobs themselves. That's what we're doing with the Bindery."

Next on their slate is a mixed-use, three-building site on the same block, at the corner of First and State Sts. Plans include ground floor office space and apartments above. All are leased up before they're even finished

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something I couldn't be happier about," says MAYOR LOU ROSAMBA.

Monica Kurzejeski, his economic development coordinator, points to the 35 new businesses that opened last year, "with as many opening this year."

It's not just the little guys, either.

Regional developer First Columbia, one of many major firms working in Troy, recently completed the nine-story, 250,000-square-foot Hedley Park Place. Once part of the largest shirt factory in the city, it is now home to City Hall.

The company's plans to redevelop the surrounding 25 city blocks into "the Hedley District" include new buildings, a seven-story hotel and a riverside promenade.

"Downtown Troy is one of the best-kept secrets of the Capital District," says First Columbia president Kevin Bette.

But it won't be a secret much longer, with several other large developers already investing in multimillion-dollar projects.

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The Hedley Building on River St. is now home to City Hall. (John Dillon)

Just a block from the Hedley building is 444 River St., another of Troy's historic factory buildings. The Troy Waste Manufacturing Co. once took scraps from the city's many mills and reprocessed them into new material.

It's the perfect site for E ko logic, the company owned by designer Kathleen Tesnakis and her husband, Charlie. Kathleen takes cashmere clothing apart and uses every inch to create new garments, accessories and home furnishings. Founded in 1996, she now

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centered on New York, a friend told them
this very building.

"Troy's industrial heritage inspired me." Kathleen Tesnakis says.

The Vecino Group recently bought 444 River St. and plans to convert the 80,000-square-foot, five-story brick building into 75 apartments.

E ko logic is relocating and will open a retail shop in the city's most famous market: Frear's Troy Cash Bazaar. The large Victorian-era enclosed market, reminiscent of Manhattan's Ladies Mile, once brought people from far and wide to shop.

It was converted to office space in the late 20th century. Now it is being reborn again as shops, and E ko logic will have a large ground-floor atelier and store.

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"I travel for business a lot, and I work really hard," Tesnakis says. "It's such a pleasure to come back to lovely Troy."

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