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Williamsburg on the Hudson

By Peter Applebome

FROM the venerable general store his grandparents opened in 1919, where you can get hunting knives, cigars, worms, khaki pants and copies of Vogue, Phil Terni has watched Dutchess County's passing parade for most of his 68 years.

The store has seen celebrated customers — Babe Ruth, Ava Gardner, Artie Shaw, Ruth Bader Ginsburg — amble in and out. And Mr. Terni has seen [Millerton](#) prosper as an agricultural crossroads with three hotels served by three railroads, and then decline toward irrelevance as the milk processing plant shut down and the farms died. Still, none of that has prepared him for what he sees outside his door every day.

“Not in my wildest dreams would I have expected this,” he said in the back of the store, with its black-and-white photos of old locomotives, a giant Revolutionary War oil painting, bric-a-brac from a century of small-town commerce. “This never would have entered my mind.”

And yet there it is, everywhere you look: the old diner, renamed the Oakhurst and now serving gourmet curried chicken rolls, organic burgers and venison chili cheese fries; [Eckert Fine Art](#), with its paintings by Eric Forstmann and Robert Rauschenberg; the fliers for the [Buddhist Path of Fulfillment retreat](#); the sustainable agriculture benefit; the artsy, SoHo-esque [Hunter Bee antiques](#); the three-screen [Moviehouse](#) on Main Street with its art gallery and cafe.

Somehow, Mr. Terni has no idea how, Millerton has become hip, cited by the magazine Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel as one of the “10 coolest small towns in America.”

“It's just my comfort zone,” said Rebekah Blu, who has specialized in rock 'n' roll, celebrity and what she calls Goddess photography and moved to town with her husband and two infants from the East Village two months ago. “You think of the East Village; you have local businesses, not chains, you don't need a car, there's lots of art and culture. You have a lot of that here, but you're living in the country.”

In the usual suspects of [Hudson Valley](#) exurban revival, like Beacon, Cold Spring and Hudson, in cities like Kingston and Poughkeepsie and smaller communities like Tivoli, Red Hook, Accord and High Falls, you can find something similar.

Call it the Brooklynization of the Hudson Valley, the steady hipness creep with its locavore cuisine, its Williamsburgian bars, its Gyrotonic exercise, [feng shui](#) consultants and deep clay art therapy and, most of all, its recent arrivals from New York City.

Jenifer Constantine and Trippy Thompson, bartenders in Williamsburg, found the adventurous loft life there a bit too precarious after the birth of their first child in 2007, and moved to New Paltz to open their own minimalist, Brooklynesque bar and restaurant in Rosendale, [Market Market](#), with a locavore menu and weekly spoken-word slams.

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Dave Lerner, a musician, found the Brooklyn life getting claustrophobic and moved to West Saugerties, a place that seemed different but part of a familiar universe, where there was [music](#) and culture but you could [bike](#), [hike](#) and breathe.

John Friedman, a lawyer who lived in Greenwich Village, fell in love with Hudson and went from making mostly telecom deals in Manhattan to making mostly agriculture deals in the Hudson Valley.

Kate Doris left her hometown of Kingston as it skidded downward after I.B.M. left in the '90s. Now she's back, plugged into the local art scene, amused at the number of her Brooklyn friends who have also moved up.

The greening of the Hudson Valley did not begin yesterday. It's as revealing for what it's not as for what it is. And given the comatose national economy, many grains of salt should be added to any rosy projections.

Still, in the best case, it adds up to more than refugees from the city, fair-trade coffeehouses in every far-flung town and unexpectedly cool places and culture — the [Phoenicia Festival of the Voice](#), the [Last Bite](#) in High Falls, the [Wassaic Project](#) arts organization in a refurbished mill and animal auction house.

Instead, you could argue, it's a new chapter in an old story — Henry Hudson's voyage of discovery, the Hudson River School's attempt to capture an American Eden, updated for the Twitter era and based around sustainable, human-scale agriculture; manageable towns that are neither giant cities nor cookie-cutter suburbs; a \$4.7 billion tourism industry; and the mountains, valleys and rivers of one of America's unspoiled places.

"We're in the early stages of a green economic revitalization of the Hudson Valley," said Ned Sullivan, president of [Scenic Hudson](#), which half a century ago was at the heart of a battle to save Storm King Mountain, spurring on modern environmentalism.

"The land is being preserved," he said. "Waterfront parks are being created. Water supplies are being protected. There's a green economy that's being born."

IN the beginning was the river, which the Indians called Muhheakantuck — "river that flows two ways" — because for about half its 315 miles it is also a tidal estuary, where salty water meets fresh.

Life on the shore has flowed two ways, too, through culture and commerce. For almost a century, beginning around 1825, the Hudson Valley was the nation's first industrial heartland, an incessant bustle of shipbuilding, ironworks, railroad lines, shipping docks, cement, stone, iron, lumber, weaponry and even whaling industries.

The valley was also a seminal creator of American culture, from Washington Irving, who became America's first international literary celebrity, to the Hudson River School and later to artist colonies and the [Woodstock Festival](#). The factories are almost all gone. The cultural buzz remains.

You can pick your favorite current image of industrial past and creative present. The stunning [Dia: Beacon](#) collection of massive modernism in an old factory on the Hudson? The exhilarating [Walkway Over the Hudson](#) that turned an abandoned railroad bridge into the world's longest pedestrian bridge? The industrial spaces turned into artists' studios in uptown Kingston?

But the [Basilica Hudson](#) seems as good a snapshot as any. Built in 1884 as a foundry and forge for manufacturing steel railway wheels, it finally shut down as a glue factory using rabbit hide in the '90s. Almost a decade ago, its

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18,000 square feet were reimagined as a local gathering and performance space for ska concerts, avant-garde movies, art exhibits, filming and recording.

Like almost everything in the Hudson Valley, it's still a work in progress. But its owners, [Melissa Auf der Maur](#), a seriously glamorous Montreal native who has played bass for bands like Smashing Pumpkins and Hole, and [Tony Stone](#), a filmmaker, come from central casting as exemplars of the new, hip Hudson Valley.

The Basilica is the kind of space and scene that the artist and musician Patti Smith (no stranger to Hudson) had in mind a few months ago when she advised young artists that "New York has closed itself off to the young and the struggling" and that they should find their futures someplace else, like Poughkeepsie.

"A bunch of my friends from Montreal came to visit and they said, 'You told us you moved to a small town, but you didn't tell us you moved to a magic David Lynch town. What is this place?' " Ms. Auf der Maur said.

Hudson, she added, has the feel of SoHo decades ago. "There's the sense that it's manageable, it's beautiful, it has infrastructure that can inspire you and facilitate your needs and get you to feel like you're part of a moment of discovery."

Not long ago, Hudson was notorious for drugs, prostitution and post-industrial torpor. Now, Warren Street, with its antique stores, galleries and hip restaurants, is a vision of the Hudson Valley reborn. And it was the scene of perhaps the last great battle between the old industrial Hudson Valley and the new one, when a coalition of interest groups came together to defeat a proposed coal-fired cement plant with a 40-story smokestack capable of producing two million tons of cement a year. Opponents said it would be an environmental disaster that would cut off access to the river and go against everything Hudson was becoming. They made an overwhelming case. But in the housing projects and poor neighborhoods just off Warren Street, strangers in the new landscape, it doesn't seem so clear.

Sitting in a downtown park, Calvin Wilson Sr., 63, said it was nice to see the revival on Warren Street, but it didn't offer much for him or for young people growing up in a town whose population is almost a third black and Latino, and in which one in five residents is living below the poverty level. "All those old factory jobs, they've all dried up," Mr. Wilson said. "So, where those people going to work? Me, I wished they'd built that cement plant."

THERE is a parlor game people sometimes play, comparing Hudson Valley towns with New York neighborhoods, said Sari Botton, a freelance writer in Rosendale.

For instance, Rhinebeck might be the Upper East Side, Woodstock the West Village, New Paltz the Upper West Side, Beacon the East Village, Rosendale and High Falls different parts of Williamsburg. Tivoli could be compared to Greenpoint, Hudson to Chelsea, Catskill to Bushwick, Kingston to a mix of Fort Greene and Carroll Gardens.

The migration north began with the weekender incursions in the '80s and '90s, gained a more urgent and permanent tone after 9/11, stumbled during the real estate bust and is now finding its way again. But, for all the images of upstate decay, the population of the Hudson Valley is growing more than twice as fast as that of the rest of the state — 5.8 percent over the past decade, compared with 2.1 percent for New York State and New York City. (While there are no universally accepted boundaries to the Hudson Valley, this reference includes the counties north of suburban Rockland and Westchester and south of the capital region: Putnam, Orange, Dutchess, Ulster, Columbia and Greene.)

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Add in disparate institutions with some shared sensibilities — [Bard](#), [Vassar](#) and [SUNY New Paltz](#); the [Culinary Institute of America](#) and the sustainable agriculture [Glynwood Institute](#); the New Age [Omega Institute](#), Dia:Beacon, the [Storm King Art Center](#), the green, hip and upscale [Chronogram Magazine](#) — you can posit a synergy that is gaining critical mass.

Some of the growth is an extension of suburban New York into Putnam and Orange Counties. The rest is an exurban phenomenon facilitated at least in part by new technology, the limitations of space and cost in the five boroughs and the natural search for something new.

For some it's generational. The Hudson Valley seems a cooler and more affordable alternative to the suburbs. David Clark moved to Beacon seeking space for his ceramic tile business, [ModCraft](#), in a place that felt familiar and creative. At 43, he also felt he had outgrown Williamsburg. "At some point you look around and find yourself surrounded by club kids and feel, well, maybe I've done this already," he said.

For others, the Hudson Valley just seemed a natural fit. [Amber Rubarth](#), 28, an up-and-coming singer-songwriter who used to carve wood sculptures with chainsaws, figured she could make music and live a creative life just as easily in Rosendale as in Brooklyn, and more sanely. "I go into the city once or twice a week," she said, "but there's nothing I can't do living here, and it's nice to fall asleep and wake up to [birds](#) singing rather than trash trucks rolling down the street."

Still, as with everywhere else in America, the question remains: All right, but where are the jobs? Mr. Sullivan of Scenic Hudson said one answer could be the abandoned I.B.M. complex now called [Tech City](#) in Kingston. Its 258 acres, 28 buildings and 2.5 million square feet of industrial and office space are envisioned as a state-of-the-art locale for solar, green energy and sustainable agricultural businesses, like bakeries and fish hatcheries. Across the street is the ambitious nonprofit [Solar Energy Consortium](#), formed in 2007 to assist and incubate solar and green companies. It's an alluring vision.

Whether it becomes reality is another matter. Todd Roberts, chief executive of one of the firms there already, [Solartech Renewables](#), is enthusiastic about the site and the industrial solar panels his company makes, but realistic about the obstacles ahead.

"We know it's going to take root somewhere, but if the market doesn't grow here, and the subsidies don't change in China, that's where it's going to be," he said.

IF you were an investor wagering on any Hudson Valley city, it might be Beacon, with a world-class attraction in Dia:Beacon, its walkable downtown, and an emerging art scene a 90-minute train ride from [Grand Central Terminal](#).

But you would still be hoping for the best, as you would with almost every place in the area. Maybe the [Roundhouse at Beacon Falls](#), a proposed 58-room hotel and [spa](#), with a fancy restaurant and living and work space for artists, will succeed, and revitalize an area of shuttered factories and warehouses. Maybe the historic downtown theater will reopen, and the old incline railroad will be rebuilt. But maybe not.

On a summer Tuesday afternoon, it's still a ghost town.

Tim Davis, 48, in Chicago Bulls cap and colors, has lived in Beacon almost all his life, but he is moving to Atlanta. "There's no work here," he said. "Basically they've turned this place into Antiqueworld. When we had the factories, this was a money-making town. Now it's not. Everyone I know is moving to the South."

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At the [Morphicism](#) gallery, the proprietor, Jay Palefsky, offered a cheerful greeting: “A customer! In Beacon!”

So many people have moved to Beacon from Brooklyn that people now call it NoBro, he said. He would like to buy into the hype, but he doesn’t see it. The economy is dead. The Internet has killed downtown commerce. He has seen well over a dozen businesses come and go in the five years he has been in business. “People want the access to the city without the craziness of the city,” Mr. Palefsky said. “But this just needs a lot of variables to make it work. One is the economy, and I don’t think that’s going to happen. Sorry to be so negative. I just don’t grasp the optimism.”

But optimism is one thing you find in the Hudson Valley, to an extent not seen elsewhere. It is true that, even here, it takes more than art, farm stands and caffeine to make an economy work — especially for those who don’t make a living with a laptop or a paintbrush. But in a culture sometimes whipsawed between a desire to be in the middle of the storm and to be a million miles away, the Hudson Valley offers the promise of both, the upstate hills and quirky towns just 90 minutes from Manhattan, said Bradley Thomason, who moved his small technology and organizational development consultancy, [Miraclelab](#), from Manhattan to the mighty metropolis of Accord last year.

“This isn’t like the tech revolution,” he said. “I’d be worried if there were some big kaboom Hudson Valley moment. But I think what you’re seeing is a slow progression toward something that can sustain itself.”