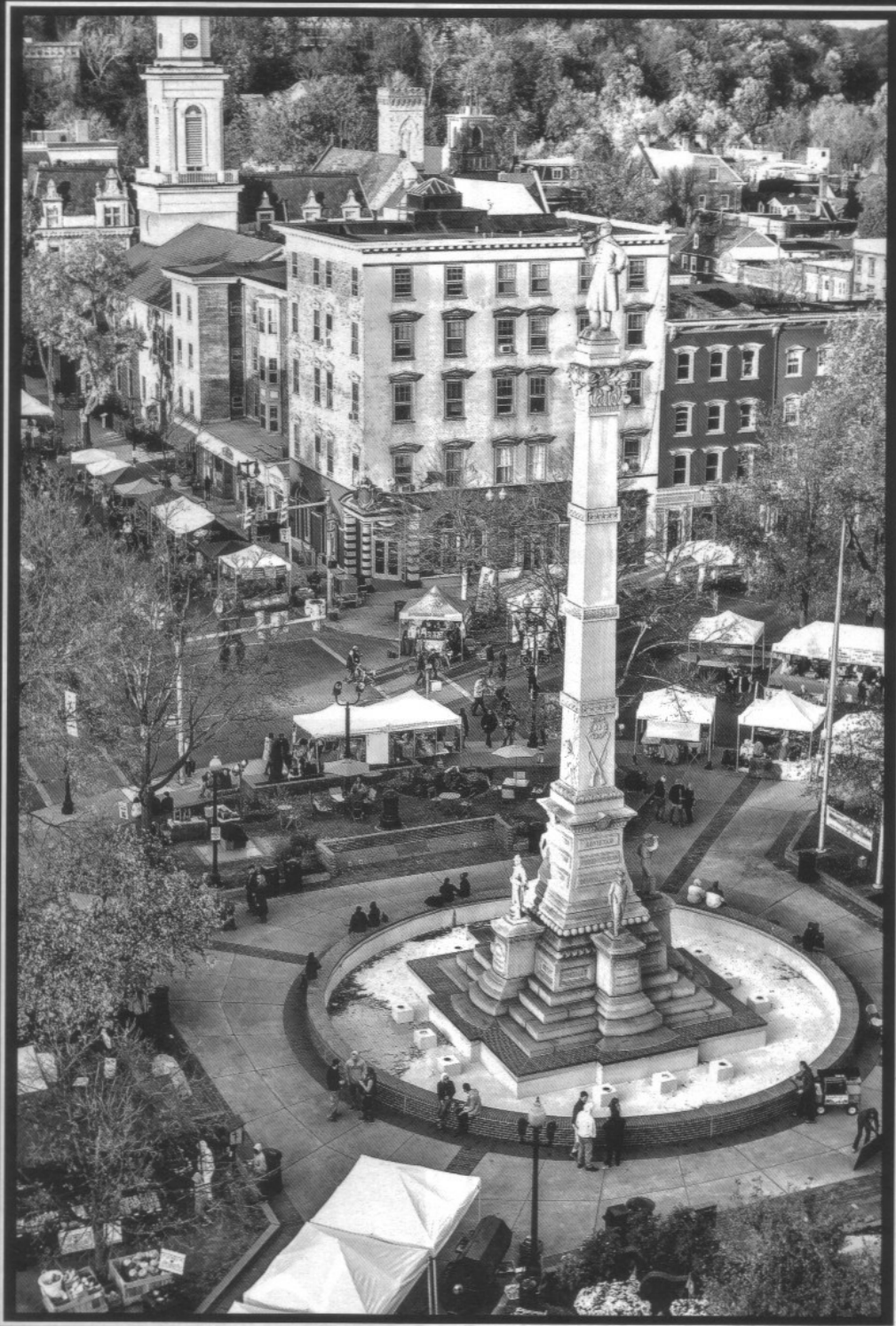


URBAN RENEWAL



THE RETURN OF THE URBAN CORE

Article by Andrew Sheldon

Photography by Mark McDonald

For the first time in more than 100 years, the urban population growth rate in the United States is outpacing the suburban growth rate. More and more young people are considering the walkability, cultural opportunities and architectural landscape of the urban core as preferable to the car oriented suburban lifestyle.

Locally, the downtowns of Easton, Bethlehem and Allentown are each in the midst of their own renaissance. With popular farmers' markets, frequent festivals, chef driven restaurants, and loft style residences, the urban cores are calling many to set up home.

Alex Paola is one such individual. He suggested we conduct our interview for this piece over a glass of scotch.

My reaction was both surprise and a total lack thereof. The ability to elicit that response is what makes Paola so likeable: You could always rely on him to offer some level of creative twist on a situation. What the twist entailed, however, was always novel.

He'd always had this energy about him, at least since the first time I met him back in fifth grade during Mr. Miller's period one Social Studies class. Even though we were never exceptionally close, I remember liking Alex immediately. Obviously, he made an impression.

We graduated together from West Morris High School in Chester, New Jersey in 2006. I hadn't really seen him all that much, save for one or two nights of college-level carousing, even though we both attended Rutgers University during the same time. That's why it was a total shock when I entered Terra Cafe one morning to hook a caffeine IV directly to my blood stream and saw him paying for his breakfast at the counter.

There were the obligatories: "How have you been?"; "What have you been up to?"; "So good to see you." He told me he was living downtown on the Square, just above one of the watering holes, and working at Easton CoWorks. He said I should come by sometime.

Just because they were the social obligatories doesn't mean they weren't sincere. It was good to see him, and that energy I first encountered back in September of 1999 was still there.

Still, something about seeing a former classmate from high school at a coffee shop in downtown Easton seemed particularly odd, however irrational that might sound. Terrified by personal senselessness in all its forms, it was an idea I turned over in my head until I arrived at what I thought was the most sensible explanation:

New York City seemed to have a magnetic pull on just about everybody we had graduated with. Early adulthood seemed like a game of bocci ball with New York as the

target and everyone else attempting to settle themselves as close as possible.

And we were meeting on our paths in the opposite direction.

I posed my hypothesis to him early in our conversation.

"Yeah, absolutely. I totally agree with that. I think it's a natural progression of people," he said. "If you grew up in Northern New Jersey, you're going to go to Hoboken or Weehawken. Even if you don't have a job, that's what you do. You go where the herd is."

When I asked Paola what drove him west instead, he mentioned the nightlife of Easton.

"Of course, there are the bars and what goes in in the Square," he said. "But that's sort of obvious and superficial."

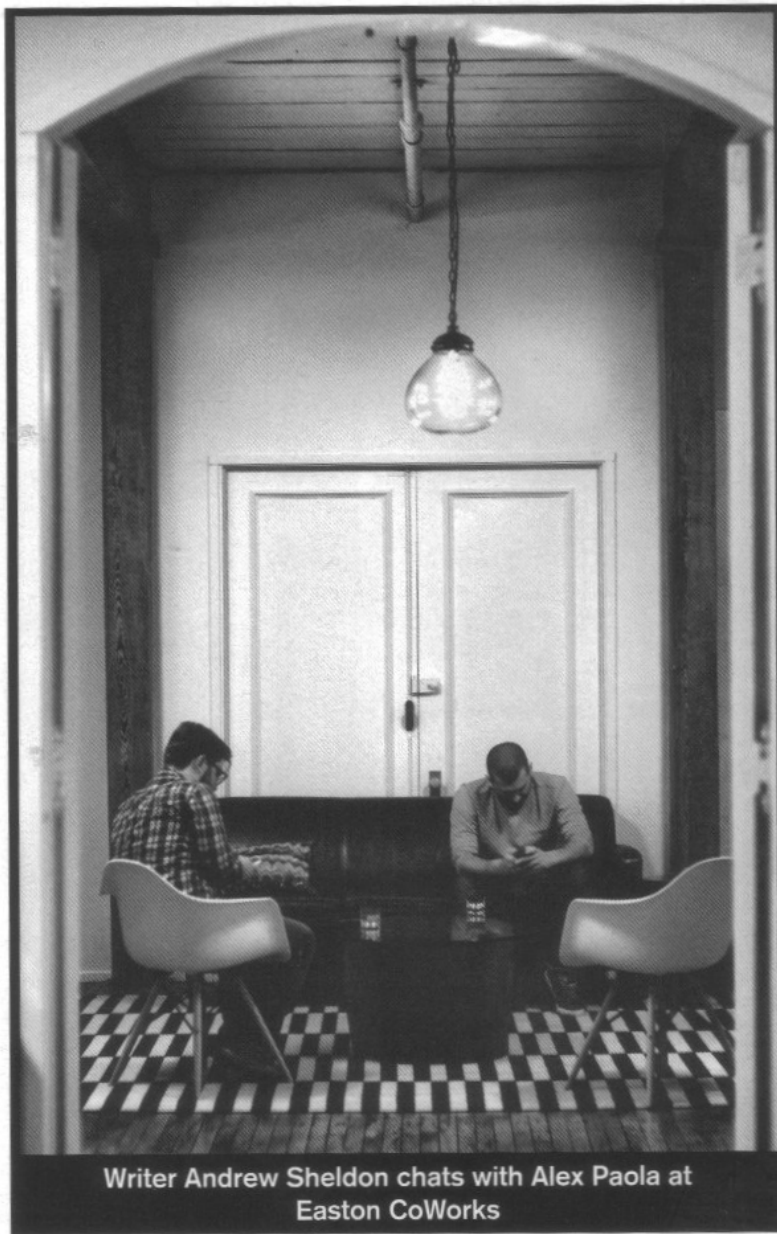
Aristotle once wrote, "Man is by nature a social animal" and Paola's reflections on this idea made a lot of sense, considering we were talking in a coworking space, which is a shared working environment for

different companies. The whole thing is built on community.

Let's say, for arguments sake, I run a freelance writing business out of a coworking space but am having trouble generating clients, so I decide to build a website. Well, what do I know about web design? I just put my ideas to words.

But a couple desks down, there is a coder who offers to build me a website if I'm willing to write him some copy for a project of his. He starts putting it together, but admits he can make it functional, but it won't be pretty. Then we enlist the help of the graphic artist who also shares the coworking space.

The environment is entirely collaborative and



Writer Andrew Sheldon chats with Alex Paola at Easton CoWorks

democratizes the office setting. By sharing office space and resources with other startup companies, the cost of starting your own business is lowered.

It became pretty obvious that the job is what truly drew Alex to the city, not the nightlife. It was the chance to create something new and be a part of the city's redevelopment.

"It's a social experiment. We wanted to create a community," Paola said.

When I first arrived at Allentown's new Wave Nightclub, located on the top floor of the Cosmopolitan, Daniel Shelley was a little bit all over the place. And that was perfectly fine. It was actually a little endearing, if seemingly erratic.

It was also understandable. Dan organized the event, which was dubbed as the return of stand-up comedy to Allentown. A bartender at the club on the weekends, he convinced his boss to let him host a comedy night during the week when the club, opened just this last February, isn't being utilized.

Just as things seemed to settle down for Dan that night, host and comedian Jesse Keim called Dan on stage to do five minutes of comedy and that energy carried through his set. It was immediately after this performance that he finally had a few moments to speak with me.

It was still there, the energy. Suddenly it became apparent that this was Dan: bombastic and full of enthusiasm. As we'd talk, isolated on the balcony overlooking the stage, he'd pause the conversation to hear the punch lines of his favorite jokes by the other local comedians.

That's where his enthusiasm came from: he was, above all, a fan.

He talked about the transformation he'd seen Allentown go through as he grew up in the Lehigh Valley.

"There was definitely a decline and for a long time, there was nothing to do," he said. "I'd always go to Bethlehem because there was nothing here."

But with the club launching in February and arena opening this past autumn, he's noticed a lot of momentum building in Allentown's Arts District.

"Business here has just about tripled since February," he said. "It's certainly a lot better, I can tell you that."

He noted that revitalization seemed to start with the arts. They provide people with a reason to visit and towns the opportunity to serve them at their restaurants and retail outlets.

Comedian Liz Russo was on the bill that night, scheduled to perform twenty-minutes of material. She's been doing stand-up comedy since May 2000 and has made a full-time run of it in the last few years performing all over. This past November, she opened for Gilbert Gottfried at Bethlehem's Steel Stacks.

Liz is a resident of Easton's West Ward after having been born and raised in the area by Lafayette's winningest football coach in the school's history. Like Dan, she's noticed the role the arts, and other events play in bringing people to a downtown.

"I think someone should give me money to open up a comedy club in town," she laughed. It was clear she was joking about the handout, but not about the dream of opening a comedy venue.

Eventually, the conversation turned to the nature of comedy.

"It's weird, isn't it?" she mentioned. "You get up on stage and just talk at people. It's not like music where you have an



Comedian Liz Russo waits to perform at Wave Nightclub in Allentown

instrument, you're just trying to make a room full of people laugh."

It's true. And we both concede that many comics are loners and there's a clear separation, almost war-like in a way, between the performer and audience. With a bad crowd, the comedian is dying up there. When things are going well, they're killing the audience.

But watching her on stage, I realized there's another side to that coin.

Her material was extremely personal and operated as a confessional at some points. But the audience was with her every step of the way, even as she twisted and turned. When she said she was celebrating four years of sobriety, a few in the crowd actually booed.

It's dangerous to admit to being sober in a room almost entirely dedicated to getting people lit.

Then she confessed: she had gone sober after earning herself two DUIs in one year, complete with an extended stay at the Northampton County Prison. By divulging that personal information about herself, she had undercut the

audience's initial reaction to her sobriety and forced them to reconsider their perceptions of the relationship between alcohol and a good time.

It's not an assumption, you could feel it in the room the same way you can when you're showing someone a film you promised them they would like, but they're clearly not enjoying it. There's something to a collective energy in a room full of people undergoing the same experience.

Maybe that's how art builds a community.

Ryan Hill was sitting cross-legged in a corner booth at Wave Nightclub in Allentown. It was a relatively secluded area of the new nightclub, the kind that could be roped off with velvet and quickly turned into a VIP section. The crowd that night would have seemed relatively small and low-key for the club, except that it was a Wednesday.

"There are just so many options," Ryan told me. "It's getting harder and harder for people in their twenties to say there's nothing to do [in the Lehigh Valley]."

He's played his own part in that: He's the original founder of comedy nights in Allentown and their hiatus correlates

with Ryan's hiring as the Program Manager of Cinema and Comedy at ArtsQuest in Bethlehem. Essentially, he tries to bring the type of film and entertainment to the Lehigh Valley people previously would have had to visit New York City for.

"What we've been excited to do is to try and fill gaps, to try and find things that aren't happening in the Lehigh Valley and try to make them happen," he said. "For us, it was a big deal when we could put a band in front of a movie, like we had The Great White Caps play in front of Point Break."

It was the same night the venue hosted a performance by comedian John Oliver.

"That was an amazing night," he said. "Not many

people in the Lehigh Valley would've taken a chance on John Oliver at that time. Now, obviously, it'd be much different and he'd play in a much bigger place.

"But that was the night I realized, 'Oh, okay. This is what I'm doing.'"

Conor Sheridan-McAndrew is manager at Seasons,

a premium olive oil taproom located on Main Street in Bethlehem. He also revels in his role of bringing a product to Bethlehem that its residents couldn't have gotten before: Cheese.

"There's a level of pride in working here: the fact that I get to sell these things that are from all over the world and make them available to people," he said. "We're a local, family run business that is allowing people to do something that is usually only available to them through corporate means."

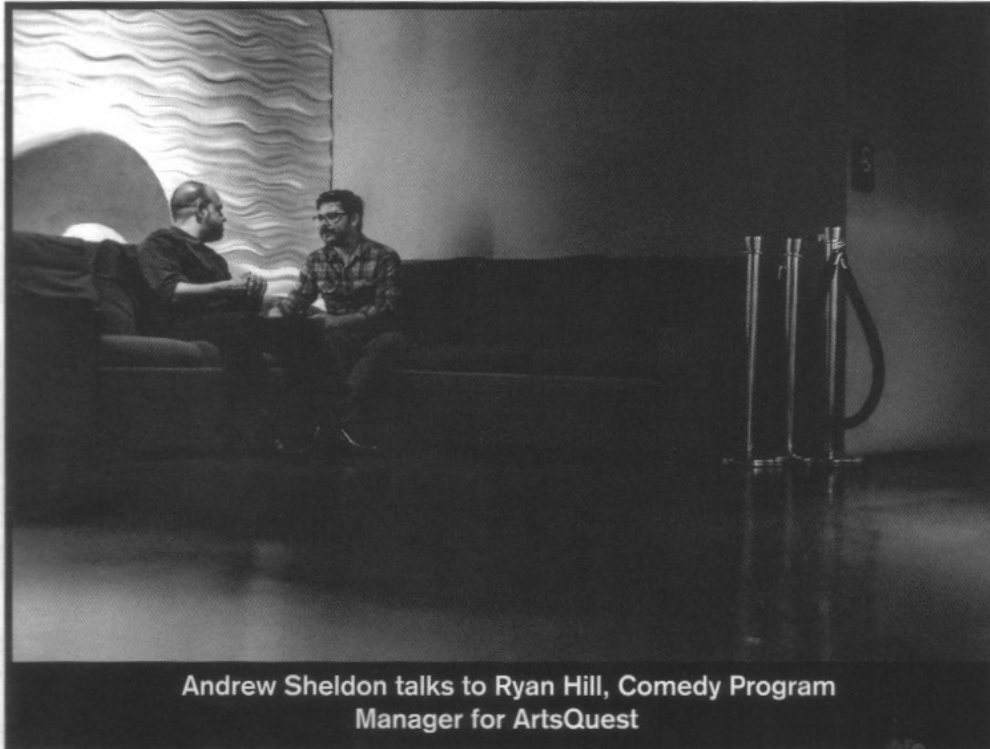
He used to take the bus from Bethlehem to Easton for his job at Cosmic Cup up on College Hill. Eventually, the commute was just too much and he began looking for work in downtown Bethlehem where he could walk to work.

"It was a long commute for a job where I was only working twenty hours a week," he laughed. "It was like seventy hours a week, and only twenty of them actually involved work."

He found himself working at Seasons. After only a few months, he was promoted to manager in August.

"It really is a group effort, though. We all bring a lot of stuff to the table," he said.

Speaking with Conor, it becomes clear it's that social



Andrew Sheldon talks to Ryan Hill, Comedy Program Manager for ArtsQuest

interaction with both his employees and his customers that he thrives on.

"I work in the middle of the community in which I live and I get to sort of play travel agent with people and myself," he said. "Every single week, I'm on the phone ordering something from somebody, something that I never thought I'd be able to taste."

Megan McBride has been manager of the Easton Farmers' Market since 2008 and quickly realized how the market could serve as a tool for economic development in

"The press was starting to take notice, and then the next year, more vendors were starting to take notice that we were getting in the press," she said.

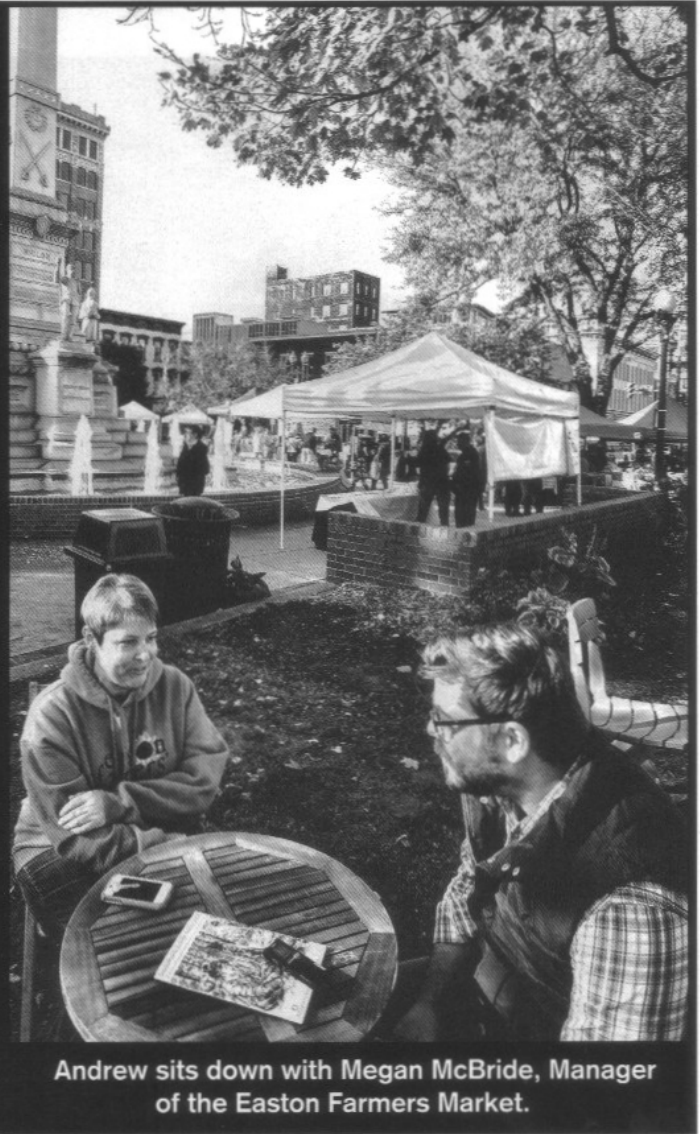
And her hypothesis proved to be correct. In 2010, McBride and her organization conducted a survey that showed 70 percent of the market's patrons were also visiting and supporting downtown businesses.

After the market grew, McBride saw another opportunity to spur redevelopment in the city's downtown.

"Easton is a really diverse city and our market is unique in that we service such a diverse population," she said. "One of the things that's very important to us is making fresh,



Conor Sheridan-McAndrew, Manager of Seasons in Bethlehem.



Andrew sits down with Megan McBride, Manager of the Easton Farmers Market.

the downtown even though the market was still relatively small and wasn't drawing too many visitors to the area.

But she had some ideas.

"One of the first things I did was started special events," she said. "There wasn't really a critical mass of vendors to attract people, so we needed something else and we did some really crazy things that year. There was the watermelon shot put, our first Zucchini 500 race, Tomato Fest, our hot pepper eating contest."

These special events not only brought people to the market, but gave the organization a reason to send out press releases to the local papers and receive coverage.

local food available to everyone at all income levels."

In 2010, the market established a program that allowed low-income residents to utilize food stamps in purchasing goods at the Farmers' Market.

"We've seen a good jump in folks coming in from the West Ward and some of the more dense areas of the city."

For anyone who follows the local news, the West Ward of Easton has become the center of much contention as a result of the numerous reports of violence in the area.
