

SOHO, NEW YORK CITY:
ARTISTS IN THE SHADOW OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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New York City's neighborhood of SoHo in Manhattan has been through many changes in the last two centuries. It is the ultimate portrait of gentrification and has been an important place for the creative class in New York ever since the 1960s. Gentrification presents many issues in urban environments, and SoHo's gentrification is no exception to the rule. As the neighborhood has transformed and progressed, the future of the neighborhood as a hub for the creative class is challenging and uncertain. Though artists are still present in the neighborhood, the real estate surge and commercialization of the neighborhood have contributed to the downfall of the art community it once was. The threat to the creative class within the neighborhood is a growing concern as this trajectory continues. Some, however, believe the arts are still thriving in SoHo and the neighborhood should be preserved as a community for artists, like SoHo resident and blogger Yukie Ohta, who was born in SoHo to an artist father at the time it was an artists' colony. In her blog post "SoHo Past, Present, ...Future?" on her website *The SoHo Memory Project*, she asserts that SoHo is at "a tipping point" and "critical juncture."¹ She writes, "On the one hand, there seems to be a lot of looking back, especially at the 1970's, going on... A nostalgia for a time that was, yes, dirty, dangerous, and dire, but also full of potential...when hardship bred true creativity and passion. A circumstance so bleak could have led to a contagion of apathy, but the opposite happened in SoHo, innovation, stemming from a place of pure hope, flourished."² The evolution of SoHo into something new is inevitable, as it has already begun. The question is whether or not it will remain an artists' community while satiating the real estate and retail markets' desires to capitalize on the neighborhood's popularity. If the arts disappear in SoHo, where it has been so prominent for the last fifty years, how will that affect the creative class in New York? SoHo has, indeed, reached a sort of juncture in which zoning laws, housing,

¹ Ohta, Yukie. "SoHo Past, Present, ...Future?" *The SoHo Memory Project*. Dec 05, 2015.

² *Ibid.*

and urban development must be reevaluated and configured to reflect what the neighborhood intends to be—a place for the creative class to live and work, a purely residential and retail district, or some amalgamation of both, what it has been and what it is morphing into.

To understand SoHo, its function, and its challenges today, understanding its history is essential. SoHo had many identities before its name was coined in 1969 by urban theorist Chester Rapkin, who is credited as “the father of SoHo” on a plaque on Prince Street.³ The Dutch settled the area in the early 1600s before the British moved in to cultivate the rural farmland.⁴ The area eventually became, ironically, a posh residential and shopping district in the mid-1800s with high-end stores such as Tiffany’s and Lord & Taylor, upscale hotels, and townhouses. By the late-1800s, the area was an entertainment and red-light district with theaters and a plethora of brothels, and then as the city developed northward, the area was largely abandoned. The cast-iron buildings constructed, now considered historical landmark, were inhabited for industrial and factory use, and the neighborhood was zoned for manufacturing. The cast-iron architecture SoHo would become known for, a factor that contributed to its ultimate preservation, had originally been a matter of feasibility.

The industrial area began to see a decline in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and it was branded a “blighted” area. Flammable materials such as paper, garments, and cardboard caused a lot of fires in the warehouses and buildings, which led to the nickname “Hell’s Hundred Acres,” and aroused the idea that buildings in the neighborhood should be demolished.⁵ At the same time, the proposal for a 10-lane highway known as the Lower Manhattan Expressway—an effort

³ Chester Rapkin: Father of SoHo. New York City. In Read the Plaque.

⁴ Pommer, Alfred and Eleanor Winters, *Exploring New York’s Soho*. (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 13-14.

⁵ Gratz, Roberta Brandes, “SoHo,” In *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs*. (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 97-98.

led by Robert Moses—contributed to the decline of the neighborhood as businesses moved out preemptively when faced with the threat of being forced out upon demolition and reconstruction. An area full of destitution was the result, and the future of the cast-iron manufacturing district was bleak. If the expressway through Broome Street and planned housing projects surrounding it had been successful, SoHo wouldn't exist as it is today.

However, there were still many active jobs in the neighborhood. Chester Rapkin did a study in 1963 that demonstrated 12,000 jobs—mostly manufacturing jobs for minority and women workers—existed in what was not yet SoHo, as well as a significant number of housing units and businesses.⁶ Thanks to Rapkin, grassroots activists (one of which included Jane Jacobs), and certain urban planners who demonstrated the neighborhood's viability in its provision of jobs, businesses, and housing for artists, the expressway and renewal projects were aborted. Though the neighborhood was preserved, the threat to it had caused a decline in its value and maintenance. The area was still zoned for manufacturing and void of the proper amenities for residential use, but its increasing desertion provided the opportunity for artists to move into the empty lofts in which they could work and create as well as live. As industry declined, the landscape of art culture was changing, and artists initiated yet another identity shift for SoHo.

In the 1960s, amidst the drama of SoHo's impending doom or salvation, young artists being priced out of Greenwich Village, looking for more space, began taking advantage of the vacated loft spaces in the cast-iron district then known as "The Valley"—a reference to its position in between the skyscrapers and high rises of Midtown to the north and the Financial

⁶ Gratz, "Soho," *Battle for Gotham*, 109.

District to the south.⁷ In contrast to what may be assumed, it was not only “starving artists” moving into these spaces, although the living conditions were a far cry from glamorous or even comfortable. Because the lofts were meant for industrial use and manufacturing, they were not equipped with proper heating and other amenities. Yukie Ohta says she remembers sleeping in her winter coat and learning how to ride her bike inside her family’s loft.⁸ Furthermore, the neighborhood itself was not equipped for residence; there were no schools, social services, grocers, Laundromats, street lamps, garbage disposal, or green spaces. The only restaurants were luncheonettes that operated during the day for factory workers. The area shut down in the evening when businesses closed for the day, making it generally unsafe. Nonetheless, space was abundant and available, rent was cheap, and the lofts provided light and room for working artists.

Though artists moved into SoHo illegally at first, the negation of the Lower Manhattan Expressway opened the door for them to establish themselves as permanent residents. By 1971, certified artists could legally live in converted “living lofts” as joint living and working spaces.⁹ Artists had to prove they lived and worked in their lofts and that they needed the space to produce their work. However, in 1987, all SoHo residents, whether or not they were certified artists, received amnesty.¹⁰ Though the same zoning laws are still in place today, many people move in and out of SoHo, and the number of actual artists living there is undetermined. The artists who were once living in SoHo illegally are now the legal residents who are up against others moving into the neighborhood that are not necessarily supposed to be there.¹¹

⁷ Gratz, “Soho,” *Battle for Gotham*, 99.

⁸ Ohta, Yukie (resident and blogger). Personal interview. November 3, 2016.

⁹ Zukin, Sharon, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 54.

¹⁰ Ohta, Yukie. "Are There Still Artists Living in SoHo?" The SoHo Memory Project. June 04, 2016.

¹¹ Ibid.

Art in the 1960s experienced a cultural shift, becoming less elitist and more accessible to the middle class who became consumers.¹² Artists were not quite able to support themselves with their art alone, but it was becoming more of a possibility. An increasing number of artists were college-educated and optimistic about having an actual career as an artist.¹³ Having access to cheap rent where they could both live and work was instrumental to that period. In today's urban climate, rising artists, and even middle class artists, are losing access to that sort of accommodation with skyrocketing rents, in general, and especially in trendy, developing neighborhoods such as SoHo.

Though there are still artists living in SoHo today despite its gentrification, it is becoming increasingly challenging for them. The capital and wealth that has flowed into the neighborhood has made it difficult for artists who can't afford the rising costs of maintenance and developments within the neighborhood and its buildings, despite the stabilized rent they may pay. Economically, this is one of the factors driving out the creative class that established the neighborhood and catalyzed its metamorphosis.¹⁴ Matt Ambrose, who works in fashion and public relations, has lived on Sullivan Street—a street commonly described as being in SoHo but technically not within the limits of the manufacturing-zoned area—for five years. Ambrose feels that art in SoHo is a memory. “The old SoHo, the real SoHo, has been gone for a long time,” he says. Ambrose explains that the art that was once being created in SoHo lofts is now hanging on the walls of the wealthier residents who now inhabit it, adding, “I’ve been to a lot of apartments with Warhols.”¹⁵ Because rents and cost of living in SoHo has risen drastically, the newer

¹² Zukin, *Loft Living*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid*, 97.

¹⁴ Ohta, personal interview.

¹⁵ Ambrose, Matthew (current resident). Personal interview. December 2, 2016.

creative class of people living in the neighborhood is becoming modified to include mostly millennials with money and extremely wealthy artists. Ambrose says that, in his opinion, the trendy neighborhood attracting a demographic of young people with money leaves it with less creativity flowing through. He says of the neighborhood now, “It really isn’t that cool. It’s just become so sterile.”¹⁶

The lofts that were once anything but luxurious—spaces for working and creating—are becoming luxury apartments for those who can afford the escalating costs. This means fewer artists working and creating and more residents contributing to the commercialization and growing opulence that represents the neighborhood today. Yukie Ohta, however, doesn’t believe the arts have disappeared completely and recognizes the efforts being made to uphold the artist community in the neighborhood. In her blog post, “Is there art in SoHo?” she says, “Many people lament the fact that SoHo is no longer a cultural destination, that it has lost its creative soul. I beg to differ. SoHo may no longer be the center of New York’s art and gallery scene, but there is still a vibrant creative community here, though it is sometimes obscured by the more visible retail establishments.”¹⁷ The three organizations Ohta references support the art scene still present in SoHo today. She also believes that those who are nostalgic of “the old SoHo” and fight against the changes happening today should instead embrace the new SoHo. “My SoHo is over; it’s done,” she says in an interview, “but it’s not, like, a sad thing.”¹⁸

It may be that “the old SoHo” is gone, but what “the new SoHo” will become is still to be determined. As wealth infiltrates the city and gentrifies areas such as SoHo—and now areas such as Long Island City and Williamsburg in the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn, respectively—

¹⁶ Ambrose, personal interview

¹⁷ Ohta, Yukie. "Is there art in SoHo?" The SoHo Memory Project. Oct 03, 2015.

¹⁸ Ohta, personal interview

the creative class is being forced to even further outskirts. Bushwick is an example of what SoHo was in the 1960s, as many young members of the creative class have flocked to the neighborhood for cost efficiency while taking advantage of the space that is slightly more abundant in Brooklyn. However, rent in Bushwick is still becoming increasingly unaffordable to this demographic, unlike SoHo's affordability when artists took it over. As demand and costs increase, the creative class will inevitably be pushed out from there as well.

The question that remains is, what shall be done to preserve SoHo as a community for artists? Or should the gentrification already happening redefine the neighborhood once again, leaving its art era behind? Artists "coexisted comfortably" with those who worked manufacturing jobs in the neighborhood when they moved in in the 1960s,¹⁹ and today it seems they are being forced to coexist with the retailers and new, wealthier residents driving them out of the community they established. It might not be long, though, before the art community is forced out completely. In 1964, a building code article allowed visual artists to live in SoHo lofts with an "Artist-in-Residence" permit, and, in 1968, an amendment extended the privilege to creative and performance artists as well.²⁰ If we consider today's technology and the expanding scope of what artists create, those struggling to build community in increasingly popular urban environments have needs that are also shifting. Filmmakers, photographers, performers, musicians, designers, and graphic artists are lacking in the resources needed to create and produce, not only in terms of space but also in terms of time and finances. Many artists today don't have the opportunity to work and live with their art the way artists of the 1960s and 1970s did. In order to survive in New York, many artists have to work in jobs that may be unrelated to their creative fields, having less time and fewer resources to produce art.. This affects art communities (or the ability

¹⁹ Gratz, "SoHo," *Battle for Gotham*, 107

²⁰ Schwartz, Madeleine. "The Art of Gentrification." *Dissent*, Winter, 5-8, 2014, 6.

for them to even develop) and the culture of the creative class in the city. In this sense, the artists of the 1960s and 1970s who inhabited SoHo seem to have had an advantage that artists today do not.

As art's role in society shifted in the 1960s, the type of art being created and the demographic of its consumers changed. This is one of the factors that allowed the artists of SoHo to live and work the way they did; the public accepted and consumed art differently. It would, perhaps, be interesting to consider what another cultural shift in art might look like were SoHo to be preserved, or reclaimed, as an artists' community. With industrial work fading more and more into history, SoHo's gentrification will continue rapidly. The joint living and working quarters (JLWQ) zoning law that was put into effect in 1971 to allow certified artists to live and work in lofts is still in place today, though its conservation is vulnerable as the city looks to reexamine and, possibly, amend it or remove it all together to officially rezone the neighborhood for residential and commercial use. This leaves the artists who currently lived in SoHo, and have since the beginning of its creative development, worried about their fates as residents and the neighborhood's fate as a creative hub.²¹ The changes in zoning laws and laws in place to protect artist residents could go either way. On one hand, they could be preserved and altered to continue hosting and protecting artists, or even to foster an accessible environment for new artists. On the other hand, laws could be changed to further the redevelopment of the neighborhood into the luxury real estate and retail center it is trying to become. In an article for Baruch College's student newspaper *The Ticker*, entitled "The future of real estate zoning in SoHo," Aleksandr Smechov writes, "Most of the residents Baisley [New York real estate attorney] represents want a change. Some want to eliminate the words 'for artist' on the certification requirements, keeping

²¹ Ellefson, Alex. "Artists fear brush-off, loss of protections in Soho zoning study." *The Villager*. September 22, 2016.

the manufacturing zoning. Others want to get rid of manufacturing zoning. They believe retail should take the first level while the residents rent the higher levels.”²² There is a very real struggle involved in the determination of how SoHo should further change.

A final problem to consider is whether or not it is actually possible for areas in urban cities that become trendy and popular to remain accessible to the pioneers who cultivate them in the first place. In her *Dissent* article entitled “The Art of Gentrification,” New York City resident and writer Madeleine Schwartz writes:

SoHo’s transformation has become a model for gentrification around the country. Real estate planners consciously seek artistic neighborhoods for development (according to *Businessweek*: “Bohemian Today, High Rent Tomorrow”). Cities set up arts agencies and alter zoning laws to encourage artist residency. Small towns use artists to enhance local color when the population is dwindling. The model has limited impact on revitalization: urban change does not “trickle down” as poorer areas become gentrified by artists and other creative workers. Yet it remains popular. A survey of American cities conducted in 2010 found 45 percent of respondents had built or were planning to build artist housing as a way to revitalize neighborhoods.²³

If artists move into undesirable neighborhoods and make them desirable, others begin moving in, increasing demand and driving up costs. This eventually forces out those who developed the neighborhood in the first place, as evidenced by SoHo’s own gentrification process. The only way to stop this from happening would be to use some type of force against an organic development with, perhaps, laws and regulations that would minimize the ability to profit off the capital gains and investments made from the neighborhood’s development. In a capitalist society, justifying the loss of such profit would hardly be possible. This seems to leave the eventual wealth of these areas inevitable. For these neighborhoods, this harms the possibility of preserving the creative class, critically determining the further diminishment of viable art

²² Smechov, Aleksandr. "The future of real estate zoning in SoHo." *The Ticker*, December 5, 2011.

²³ Schwartz, "The Art of Gentrification," 8.

communities.

Looking to the future, if artists continue to be forced out of the communities they build up and then the ones to which they flee afterward, they will not have any places left to go within the cities in which they currently live. This would force them to leave, inhabiting cities lower in cost, something that has already started happening as artists in expensive cities like New York and Los Angeles move to developing cities all across the country, such as Detroit.²⁴ This is a serious issue urban cities face and will continue to face as this trend progresses, leaving the future of the arts in these cities, and in the country as a whole, undetermined. The places that fortified the culture of art in society in the past are now the places in danger of losing their artistic contributions.

For SoHo, the future of its zoning, residential, and commercial regulations will be a large factor in determining its preservation and potential as an enduring creative center. Inevitably, though, its development into something other than an artists' community can likely be only slowed down rather than ended all together. An article in the *New York Times* from 1995 entitled, "NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: LOWER MANHATTAN; Can Trees Grow in SoHo: A Matter of History and Dirt," describes the controversy that occurred regarding planting trees in SoHo as it became increasingly residential and commercial. In the article, Monte Williams quotes then Parks Commissioner Henry J. Stern:

Some purists think trees are out of character with 19th-century SoHo when it was a factory district... So why not have slums and child labor, too? Besides, there may not have been trees in the 19th century, but there were trees in the 18th century and in the century before that. The barren streets of the 19th century were the aberration, not the norm.²⁵

²⁴ Smechov, "The future of real estate."

²⁵ Williams, Monte. "NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: LOWER MANHATTAN; can Trees Grow in SoHo: A Matter of History and Dirt." *New York Times*, June 18, 1995.

This demands the acknowledgment of SoHo's roots from farther back than its artist takeover while highlighting the inevitability of its continuing development as a place of retail, fashion, and luxury residence—something it, ironically, was in the 1800s before industry and the arts re-landscaped it. Its further conversion into this sort of neighborhood would actually be cycling it back around to its deeper origins. That, of course, would still be detrimental to the artists and creative class who have been flourishing there for years.

In conclusion, it's impossible to determine what SoHo will be in another fifty years, or what the creative class in New York and other urban environments will do when they become priced out of their communities. The problem faced today is how the destruction of this class can be avoided, both in SoHo and in other urban neighborhoods. As the creation of arts becomes more readily accessible through technology and other resources, while living as an artist becomes increasingly difficult in places the creative class typically prospers, neighborhoods like SoHo are important. It will take planners like Chester Rapkin, activists like Jane Jacobs, and creative communities as a whole to influence preservation and reinforcement in the midst of aggressive gentrification and urban renewal, along with the public's and government's support of the arts and creative class.

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