

# SoHo, New York

## MIXED USE, DENSITY AND THE POWER OF THE MYTH

BY ALISTAIR BARR

### INTRODUCTION

In 1960 SoHo was a derelict brownfield site, but now it is a vibrant New York district. This paper examines how the renewal occurred so rapidly and completely. The dramatic revival has resulted in a high density environment which provides the mix of uses usually associated with urban villages. High density and mixed uses have been bound together and sustained by the catalyst of myth making.

These three terms, mixed use, density, and myth are first defined and their interaction over the last 200 years is plotted to demonstrate how these qualities provide a successful urban environment. This historical overview also shows how SoHo became a primary example of local residents overcoming city planners and how it is the first time that artists acted as urban pioneers.

Finally the theories of Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch are used to understand the components of this fast and vigorous urban renewal which can offer many lessons to current brownfield sites.

### LOCATION AND NAME

SoHo is one and a half miles north from the southern tip of Manhattan (fig. 1). It is generally defined as running from south of Houston Street to north of Canal Street but the east and west boundaries are less precise as discussed later. (fig 2). The name is an acronym of South of Houston coined in 1968 and it was the first district in New York to be named as such. This act of naming will be discussed later as it is fundamental to the phenomenon of myth making within the city.

### MIXED USE

Mixed use districts are areas where people can live, work and play in close proximity. These have often been eradicated from modern cities because urban planners believed that segregation was the only way for cities to survive. This was a reaction to the problems created by the Victorian mixing of heavy industry and housing which led to segregation of housing, industry, shopping and cultural uses. Jane Jacobs realised that such lack of diversity was creating sterile places and her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961, marked the start of this. She stated the desire for mixed use in terms that became the rallying cry for urban designers. (1).

" This is the heart of my argument. This ubiquitous principle is the need of cities for a most intricate and close grained, diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both

economically and socially. The components of this diversity can differ enormously but they must supplement each other in certain concrete ways".

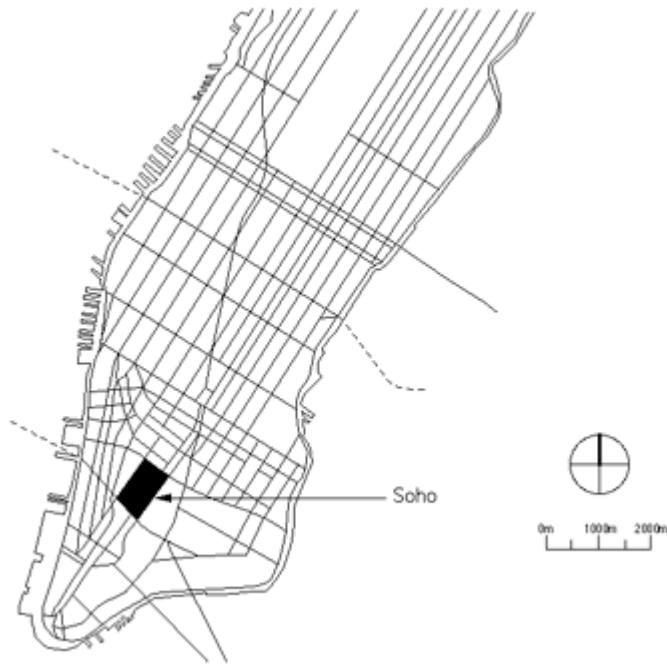


fig. 1 Manhattan Island, New York, showing the location of SoHo.

This principle is now generally accepted and encouraging good mixed use is still a cornerstone in creating successful urban districts. This paper analyses how SoHo has achieved its diverse uses and how they have evolved. SoHo is an excellent example of Jacob's ideas as it shows how a formerly dead part of an American City can return to life richer and more diverse than before.



fig. 2 The SoHo district.

SITUATION	DENSITY		COMMENT by J. Jacobs
	dwellings per acre	per hectare	
Suburbs	6-10	15-25	"can make out well in the suburbs"
Garden City	12	30	
Semi-suburb	10-20	25-50	"apt to be dull...will not generate city liveliness"
City in between densities	20-100	50-245	"fit for nothing but trouble"
Greenwich Village	125-200	310-495	"Popular high density areas have considerable variations among the buildings."
Soho, New York	144	360	

fig. 3 Table comparing the present density of SoHo with the density of different types of urban environments described by Jacobs before SoHo was named or had started to become a fashionable area (see Jacobs, 196, 20,222-30).

## DENSITY

There has been vigorous debate over the last 100 years about what constitutes "good" or "bad" densities. Howard and Abercrombie reacted against Victorian overcrowding by suggesting Garden Cities with extremely low densities. Jane Jacobs led the backlash against this and Figure 3 paraphrases her comments upon relative densities. Her opinion is that high density stimulates a rich city life, but this has often been seen as something to avoid especially in England. However opinions are changing, especially as sustainability supports close living, as Rogers sets out (2).

"This means we can reconsider the social advantages of proximity, rediscover the advantages of living in each others company. Beyond social opportunities the "dense city" model can bring major ecological benefits. Dense cities can through integrated planning be designed to increase

energy efficiency, consume fewer resources, produce less pollution and avoid sprawling over the countryside. It is for these reasons that I believe that we should be investing in the idea of a 'Compact City' - a dense and socially diverse city where communities are focused around neighbourhoods".

SoHo is a high density environment by any definition. It has approximately 360 dwellings per hectare (144 per acre) which generates the social and economic activity that has transformed this district.

## **MYTHOLOGY**

(3) "Because cities are artificial things they lend themselves to interpretation and this is nowhere more true than New York City".

The definition of myth can be examined in two ways. Firstly, *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* states (4)

"1, an ancient story that deals with gods and heroes, especially one used to explain some natural phenomenon, 2, such stories in general; mythology, 3, a commonly-held, false notion, 4 a non-existent, fictitious person or thing".

The modern world is constantly creating new myths and whilst some may be false notions others create a new lens to view the world through. This can be used in a positive way in relation to perceptions of city districts. The second definition in Roland Barthes' book *Mythologies*, accepts that myth making is a modern preoccupation. His exploration of how objects acquire significance beyond their immediate appearance is relevant to the way that cities are perceived by their inhabitants and visitors. Barthes searched for the hidden meaning implicit in language by disengaging the signifier and the signified and then by analysing the creation of signs. SoHo is now a well known neighbourhood in a world famous city because the selling of its image has elevated a small piece of the city to mythic proportions.

Barthes had misgivings about the myth, believing it to represent right wing confusion of nature and history (5).

"There it is essential; well-fed sleek, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly. The oppressed makes the world, he has only an active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor senses it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical; it is Myth".

I believe that re-invention of cities is an important part of their growth. The myth can sustain the city's energy and complexity in a positive way and its actions should be studied. By examining SoHo's history I will demonstrate how the myth about the area has developed and influenced urban patterns of use. Stephen Games notes that positive myth making is a New York activity in a phrase that describes SoHo's renaissance. (6) " Then recovery might almost be achieved by an act of will. To accomplish it we need a myth that is even more compelling".

## **AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

New York's history is relatively short with the first settlement on Manhattan being in 1626 and SoHo's story is shorter still as it was only named in 1968. Successive layers of history have left their traces in the district both physically and in literary records. Everybody, whether resident or

visitor wants to express an opinion about the urban life in New York and some of these are examined later.

Four high points can be identified in the area's history: firstly it was a freed slaves settlement, next it became a middle class residential area, then New York's prime shopping and pleasure area and finally, after 60 years of obscurity it is now a desirable and successful mixed use neighbourhood.



fig. 3a Street life and diverse building types and uses in SoHo, Wooster Street North (photo: Steve Kahn).

### **MARSHLANDS DRAINED AND BUILT UPON**

In 1644 SoHo was the first settlement of the freed negro slaves of the Dutch West Indian Company. This rural area continued to be farmed until 1800 when the stream at Canal Street became sluggish and the ground too marshy to allow good farming.

The second high point started when one of the first houses north of Canal Street was built by Benjamin Lord in 1822. Today it is a decaying three storey house, completely overwhelmed by the vociferous commerce on Canal Street (shown on Figure 6A). Sixty metres to the north at what

is now Grand Street, The Broadway House, a roadside inn, was built. The only path through the marshland was Broadway, the old Indian trail, which was the road to Boston (7).

"The upper end of Broadway, from about the Park onward, was a dragged bit of lane which came to a sudden ending against a set of bars. Up this lane in the early mornings, and down it again in the late afternoons, went daily sleek and comfortable cows".

The land was drained and then the middle class flocked here as a clean and open place to live.

(8) "It was the place to live, a gracious residential area of three to four story brick houses with trim columned doorways, leaded fanlights and peaked roofs with dormers".

However the semi rural residences were quickly overtaken by the city's remorseless growth north. This was guided by a grid planning which was at first haphazard and then regular.

### **THE GRID IMPOSED**

In the 1790's the city Surveyor, Casimir Goerck, had laid out grids parallel to the riverside. In 1811 the Commissioners ( Simeon deWitt, Gouverneur Morris and John Rutherford) expanded the scheme and proposed 12 avenues running north/south and 155 streets running east/west. Rem Koolhaas praises the bravery of the plan and notes that it sets the framework for a mythical New York of delirious dreams.(9).

"It is the most courageous act of prediction within Western civilisation; the land it divides, unoccupied; the population it describes, conjectural; the buildings it locates, phantoms; the activities it frames, non-existent....In spite of its apparent neutrality, it implies an intellectual programme for the island in its indifference to topography, to what exists, it claims the superiority of mental construction over reality".

In planning for this massive expansion New York proclaimed its position as commercial capital of the New World. The grid creates a strict set of rules in plan that the burgeoning commercial power of the city exploited to its fullest extent (10).

"The Grid's two-dimensional discipline also creates undreamed of freedom for three dimensional anarchy. The grid defines a new balance between control and de-control in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos ..... It follows that one form of human occupancy can only be established at the expense of another. The city becomes a mosaic of episodes, each with it's own particular life span, that contest with each other through the medium of the Grid".

SoHo's built form demonstrates this three dimensional anarchy in the contrast of building width and heights. Mixed use development has been encouraged by the grid being ordered and fluid.

Games takes the argument further and believes that the grid sustains the myth of New York (11). "The same definition of the city's mythology is enshrined in its street pattern ..... when you stand on a sidewalk and look into the distance what you see is Nothing, just open sky; the prospect is, as it were, open ended. For an immigrant that is enough. It was from the start an invention of the human mind".

The SoHo grid is radically different to the rest of New York in that the short edges run east/west whereas above Houston they run north/south and the significance of this in generating urban activity is explained later. The other anomaly is that the edges of the district are defined by the

1790 grid generated from the irregular river edges and SoHo's grid is parallel to Broadway. SoHo shows the solidified moment when the 1790 grid clashes with the one of 1811 and a contemporary report describes it as follows (12) "In this new region the streets were straight in their several groups, but the groups were so defiantly at variance with each other that wherever their edges came together there was a tangle fit to make a loadstone lose its way. Which picturesque confusion was due to the fact that each group had started from a separate base and thence had extended until, quite at hazard, they had come together, but had not joined".

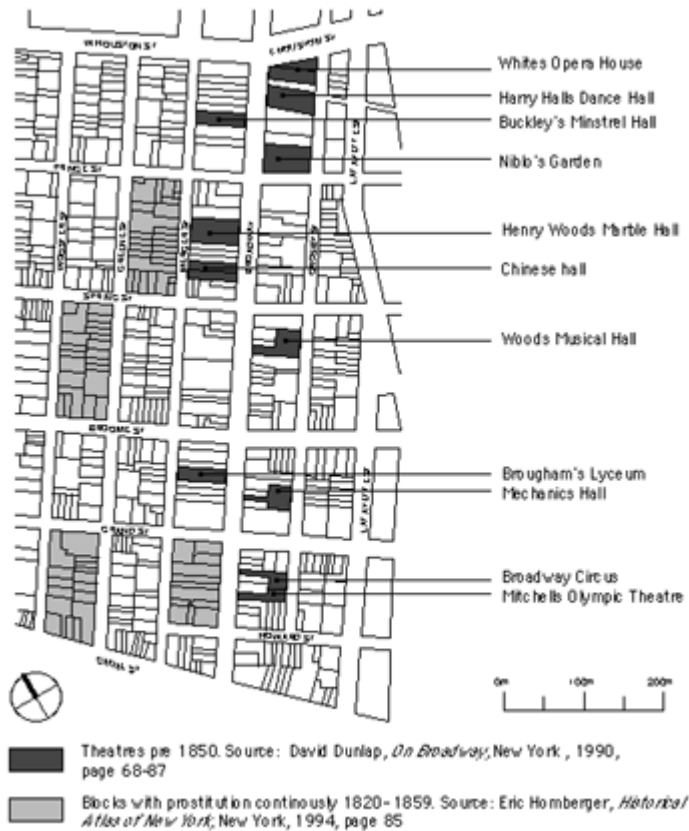


fig. 4 Broadway south of Houston – theatres and brothels in the first half of the 19th century.

## A VIBRANT MIXED USE AREA

By the 1840s the area was desirable and sought after by wealthy merchants who followed John Astor when he set up home in 585 Broadway between Prince and Houston. Astor was the wealthiest man in the country and the interior of his house was described as (13) "one of the most pretentious New York homes" at the time that this was a compliment.

A thirty year explosion of building then took place and the following edited list shows the diversity inherent in this new building activity. Olympic Theatre, 1837, Singer (sewing machines), 1850, Lyceum, 1852, Metropolitan Hotel 1852, St. Nicholas Hotel, 1852, Chinese Hall 1856, Haughwout (department store) 1857, Brooks Borthers (tailors), 1858, Crouch and Fitzgerald (travel goods), 1860, Boss and Brother (furs), 1860, W & J Sloane (carpets) 1860, Ball, Black and Company (jewellers), 1861, Tiffany and Company (jewellers), 1864. A vibrant area of mixed use had been created from the marshlands in as little as 30 years. Such a tidal wave of building and its diversity produced much comment. Frances Trollope for example, noted the generation of activity created by the mixed use and the density (14).

"From hence commences the splendid Broadway, as the fine avenue is called, which runs through the whole city. This noble street may vie with any I ever saw, for its length and breadth, its handsome shops, neat awnings, excellent *trottoir*, and well-dressed pedestrians".

Residential, commercial and entertainment mingled in a promiscuous way with commerce but the uses were not always uniform and interesting contrasts were created. The main street facades often hid rural and residential uses behind. Charles Dickens comments on how the farmland was still in operation as Broadway was built through it in 1842 (15).

"We are going to cross here. Take care of the pigs. Two portly sows are trotting up behind this carriage, and a select party of half-a-dozen gentlemen-hogs have just now turned the corner".

By the 1870's the area had been dubbed the French Quarter. The big stores fronted Broadway with their warehouses and suppliers behind and most of the buildings were built of cast iron, which gave fire protection and an opportunity for economical and highly detailed facades. These buildings prefigure the curtain wall in the way they maximise glass to give good daylight.

Janvier, writing in 1894 also notes the contrast in density and the mix of residential and retail (16) "North of Canal Street, over what once was Lispenard's land and on northward into Greenwich Village, there is a succession of quiet little streets filled with quiet little houses, in each of which, for the most part, a single family dwells. About this region there never has been the slightest pretence to style. Land values here always have been low, and much of the property can be acquired only on leasehold from Trinity. From the beginning, therefore, it has been a region of modest homes; and if there is an American quarter anywhere in New York it is here".

As a direct contrast to the quiet residential streets the music halls and pleasure palaces also generated a demand for brothels as Figure 4 shows. Thus SoHo became the post colonial New York's most celebrated red light district (17).

"What the Mayor seeks to abolish or abate is not the terrible evil of prostitution (for the great, notorious "ladies' boarding houses" of Leonard and Mercer Streets are left in peace), but simply the scandal and offence of the *peripatetic* whorearchy".

Eventually, the commerce and the night life began to drive the middle classes out because too much leisure in the urban mix is worse than not enough. Houston Street was named Murders Row and between 1860 and 1865 the area lost a fourth of its inhabitants. After the Civil War the gap left by the lack of residential was filled by a burst of commercial growth giving the area its third period of fame, this time for pure commerce. Property values leapt 50% as large mercantile and dry goods firms took over as forerunners of the department store. This activity eradicated all residential life for a hundred years and the entropy of the area dates from when this mono-culture strangled the previous mixed use.





fig. 4a Industrial and commercial buildings on Mercer street, with an electric mix of brick, stone and cast iron construction demonstrating the latest building technology of their time (photo: Steve Kahn).

### **1900 - 1960 INDUSTRY AND A NON DISTRICT**

Soho's rapid growth came to an abrupt halt in 1900 when Broadway's retail and leisure uses moved north to chase the rapid urban development there. The retail uses had followed the population shift northward, and manufacturing took over the cast iron buildings. The guide book "*New York, A guide to the Metropolis*" allocates Broadway's theatres an even shorter burst of fame (18).

"But the glitter and gaiety lasted only ten years. Keeping pace with the northward growth of the city, the entertainment district moved up to 14th Street and what was left of the former residential section gradually disappeared. By the early 20th century the industrial pattern changed again as the district became New York's millenary manufacturing centre. And with the felt hat makers came the fur and feather processors to add to the essential details".

The built density has remained the same since 1900 but the mixed use disappeared completely. Urban vitality cannot survive by density alone and the most dangerous parts of cities are often dense but with only one use. The history of SoHo demonstrates this problem clearly. Figure 5 uses a technique developed by students studying for a Diploma at the University of Greenwich to show graphically how elements of the areas urban life have changed, often in a fast and brutal way not found in European cities. The lines are subjective but based on the evidence of this research. What is clear is that when the density has mixed use to sustain it, the area is interesting, desirable and well known but when one use dominates, the district loses its attraction.

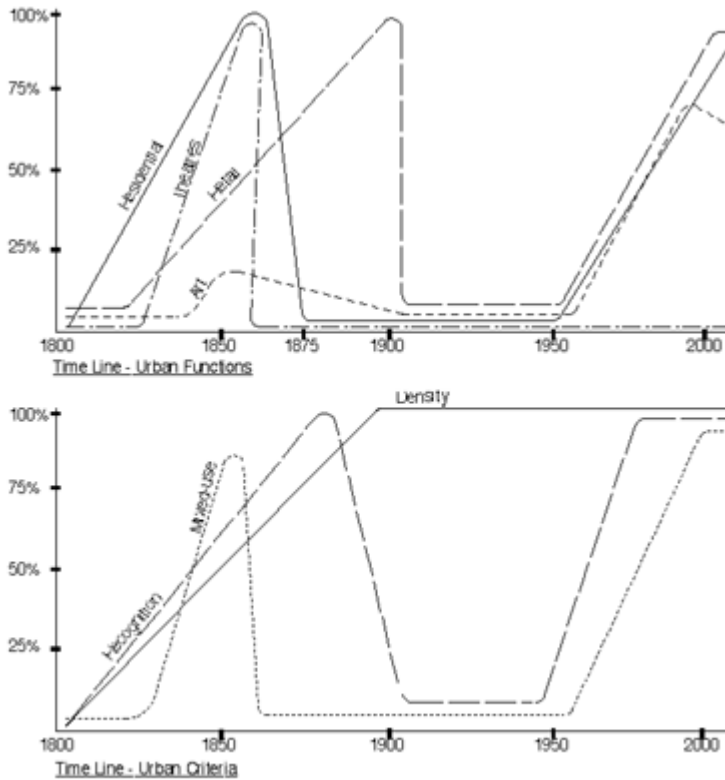


fig. 5 Time line tables showing changes in urban functions over the last 200 years, set against urban criteria of use, density and recognition over the same period. While the density remained high throughout the 20th century, the re-emergence of mixed uses correlates strongly with the SoHo area having a recognisable identity.

The area was neglected and forgotten for a sixty year period (19). "SoHo was (previously) known to officials as 'the Valley' - a grey blur of low industrial buildings that no-one wanted to visit or look at, a flat region rather like a gap in a comb where the teeth have broken, between the skyscrapers of Wall Street and the skyscrapers of Midtown".

*The WPA Guide to New York City* was published in 1939 and includes the study area in its map of Greenwich Village. However it is significant that no areas of interest are shown in the study area and it is not discussed in the text at all.

Ada Louise Huxtable notes that in 1962 the City Club published "*The Wastelands of New York City*" stating (20) "Spring, Broome, Mercer and Greene Commercial Slum Area No. 1, recommended for clearance and rebuilding. É. there are no buildings worth saving".

In fact, most texts on New York before the 1970's show present day SoHo as a void between Little Italy, Chinatown and Greenwich Village. In 'The Image of the City' Kevin Lynch refers to the phenomenon of the 'lost areas' and it is clear that south of Houston and north of Canal had become exactly that. Firefighters named the area "Hells Hundred acres" because of the fires in the semi abandoned warehouses which were probably insurance related arson. However, apart from that notoriety the area had 60 years of vacuum as an urban place.

With the mixed uses disappearing, the outside perception of the district fell. No one wrote about the area, no one visited it and no other uses existed there. This proves that lack of diversity can kill the urban life of an area even when a successful mix existed before.

## **CITY PLANNERS VERSUS URBAN PIONEERS**

By the 1950's manufacturing had outgrown the lofts and Manhattan. Space and infrastructure were necessary to support growth and the city had blighted the area with its traffic plans. Jason Epstein gives an emotional version of events when he supported those of Jane Jacobs in her fight against the City. (21) "This tree, planted some 35 years ago, commemorates the deliverance of the area that now comprises SoHo, from the lunatic designs of politicians and planners who, in the 1950's attempted to enhance their power and enrich their patrons by constructing an eight lane expressway from river to river along the length of the street you are now standing (Broome)".

Robert Stern defines this battle as 'Two Power Brokers' with Jacobs representing the world's biggest village. (22).

"Two figures personify the struggle between New York as the grandest metropolis in the world on one hand and the world's biggest village on the other, between the power of the public purse É. and the power of the public will. Robert Moses, the master builder and Jane Jacobs, the urban theorist and activist".

Moses planned the Broome Street Expressway also known as the Lower Manhattan Expressway. This was put on the city maps in 1963 and accelerated the decay of the area by its threat. As buildings were abandoned artists began to occupy the lofts leaving Greenwich Village because it was too expensive and the spaces too small. In fact the occupation was illegal as the area was zoned as industrial use but landlords were pleased to rent the spaces and by the end of the 1960's 500 artists lived in the area.

During this time, Jane Jacobs had recently successfully repelled City Hall plans to demolish parts of Greenwich Village where she lived and fresh from that victory she helped spearhead the fight against the expressway. On April 10 1968 she attended a public hearing where members of the audience invaded the stage and tore up the stenotype record. Jacobs announced that since there was no record the hearing did not exist. She was charged with rioting, inciting a riot, committing criminal mischief and obstructing public administration. This was later reduced to disorderly conduct to which she pleaded guilty. Her actions kick-started the public objections and the artists residing in the areas formed the South Houston Artist Tenants Association and Artists Against the Expressway.

The architect, Paul Rudolph, was then commissioned to design a megastructure to flank the roads. His vast structure proposed a linear city which, had it ever happened, would have preserved some cast iron facades but would still have destroyed the whole district.

## **A DISTRICT REDISCOVERED**

These protests generated enormous publicity and more artists and galleries colonised the area as the debates continued throughout the 1960's. The city planners gradually gave way to increased public protest and the resultant process should be celebrated as a successful example of urban renewal and public involvement in planning process. Blighted areas of previous industrial use are a common problem in all world cities and SoHo's 30 year transformation is an important success story. Three events defined this rapid change; the first being the new name, SoHo.

The painter and engineer, Aaron Roseman named the area in 1968 during discussions in one of the warehouses. The City Planners maps had previously referred to it as the South Houston Industrial District abbreviated on maps to SO.HO. Industrial but this was not been well known.

Roseman's idea and its consequences are quoted by Jim Stratton in '*Pioneering in the Urban Wilderness*'. (23).

"We all chuckled thinking of images of Holmes and Watson seeking clues in the fog of our local warehouse. From time to time over the next few months, when adversity nibbled at our shanks, we would utter the new name and laugh. So.Ho. - a joke but it seemed appropriate. The rising dust, after all, could be easily mistaken for fog and we were certainly doing our best to outwit Scotland Yard".

At first there had been objections, (24)

"The New York Times art critic Grach Gluech noted, "Many SoHo residents objected to the name suggestive as it is of the grubby bohemian district in London that the area does not resemble".

But this particular act of naming was the catalyst for the regeneration of the area to accelerate. Reggie Nadelson identifies it as (25) "New York's first acronym" which began the trend for New York acronyms such as NoHo, Tribeca, and Dumbo. For me this act of naming is a way a claiming a city district because what was once a non place in Lynch's definition becomes a district. In Barthes' terms at the act of naming the signifier and signified became a sign. This sign then acts as a focus for the myth that sustained SoHo's regeneration (26).

"They both reach the threshold of myth endowed with the same signifying function, that they constitute, one just as much as the other, a language - object".

At a stroke, the district exists and it works on many levels because the name comes from the street name and helps define the boundaries. All the guide books note the formation of the word but rarely emphasise how pivotal the naming was for the areas renaissance.

The acceptance of the name was very fast as the logic was so strong. The Plan for New York published in 1969 says (27) "Increasing numbers of artists are beginning to occupy the smaller loft spaces vacated by industries leaving the area, particularly in the South Houston Industrial Area (SOHO). This is now illegal but we are considering legalising the use by artists of the narrow lofts that otherwise would be left vacant".

The second formative event defining SoHo's rapid change was in 1971 when The City Planning Committee rezoned the area to permit residence by artists which legitimised some 600 families. Initially restrictions were put on residents to be artists by submitting proof to a committee, but over the years the requirements gradually disappeared or have not been enforced. Permits of occupation gave greater security to artists and lead directly to the establishment of many more art galleries to exist alongside them.

The third significant event was on 16th August 1973 when the City Planners declared the area a historic district. This was a massive reversal from the 1963 city plans that Jane Jacobs had fought so vigorously. It is, incredible to note that in just 10 years the planners could revise their plans from total obliteration to an example of regeneration.

The Preservation Committee were quoted as saying (28).

"With this revitalisation the ongoing and important commercial and industrial activities continue, thus providing a combination of uses. This district demonstrates one way which the core of an old city can be given new life without the destruction of its cultural heritage".

## **THE MYTH AS CATALYST**

The naming of SoHo created the myth and this is the first example of branding an urban situation. Charles Landry discusses this in his book published in 2000. (29)

"Cities increasingly use branding devices such as the 'Intelligent', 'Educated', 'Green' or 'Creative' City. These marketing slogans raise expectations and can be mechanisms to focus strategy on reducing the gap between hype and reality."

The gap between hype and reality is exactly what Bathes was concerned with in 1957. However if urban designers need to create a myth to provoke regeneration of brownfield sites I believe that it is a valid tool to use. Games notes that (30) "In New York hype is hope" but this is not a problem but a 21st century way of dealing with living in a complex and exasperating urban environment. The "Big Apple" became the city's promotional brand logo in 1971 three years after the naming of SoHo and this began a wave of named cities and districts. The use of naming to galvanise an area is a powerful urban design tool that has proven results. A recent article in the *Architects Journal* about Terry Farrell pinpoints his uses of this tool. (31) "Restoring or developing an urban memory is one of the essential ingredients in the first stages of feasibility work. Being able to key into a focal point in the collective consciousness is used as a means of celebrating organic development"

### **1973 to NOW: RAPID REGENERATION AND BEYOND**

The educated art buying public visited the galleries and shops of SoHo and ensured that the area became much talked about. Since SoHo's rebirth it has been well understood that artists can be the best urban pioneers and can stimulate renewal. However in most cases their success becomes self-destructive and SoHo has been no exception. Although at first the shops in the area were quirky and design led they were very quickly joined by the chain stores. Many people argue that the gentrification of SoHo has gone too far and it is a fact that the rising rents have forced artists out to the neighbouring Tribeca and beyond. Jason Epstein represents this concern. (32)

"It was these artists that made SoHo chic and stimulated the first trickle of money that has since become a flood. By the 90's the artists had left for quieter and less expensive neighbourhoods and by the end of the decade most of the galleries had followed. SoHo's bohemian period had barely begun before it dissolved in a flood of cash".

In truth this is too bleak a picture because art still exists in SoHo, albeit in a modified way. In one sense SoHo has merely returned to its 1880's life as a thriving shopping district. The city moves on inevitably but leaves traces that create diversity and interest. SoHo as a mono-culture of artists would never have been sustainable and Nash and Kahn explain the positive aspects of the district. (33)

"In the late 1980s the bubble of SoHo's art world - epitomized by such artists as Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Jeff Koons - burst, and spaces where prominent galleries once showed their work have since been transformed into fashion boutiques. Art may no longer be the engine that drives SoHo, but it is still a vital presence, lending cachet to a glittering neighborhood of bistros and boutiques that set trends for the global village."

(34) "Art and commerce converge in SoHo. No longer a haven for artists seeking affordable living and working spaces, it remains an environment where artistry thrives. SoHo's retailers prize originality, and one-of-a-kind merchandise and creative window displays are prevalent. The area's blend of art and economic success recalls two of SoHo's previous incarnations - as a neighbourhood of artists and a shopping destination - that inform the SoHo of today".

SoHo is a lively area and urban life has been lubricated by the myth that embraces it. The density and mixed use will constantly reinvent the area it, will never be fully gentrified. There is a rich and vibrant diversity that runs through SoHo in a complex three dimensional way. There may be fewer artists, but art and commerce continue to be linked and the mix of uses is a strong driving force for urban pleasure. There are still many sleazy, rough edges to SoHo and I do not believe that money will ever rub all of them away.

## THE NATURE OF SOHO

(35) "Walking down a SoHo street is an experience in bricolage - a postmodern collage of odds and ends from all time periods, which combine to form new patterns and meanings."

This multi faceted environment is what attracts people to SoHo. In this section Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch's urban theories are used to examine whether visitors and inhabitants are truly experiencing the urban environment or if their perception is coloured by mythology. Many people are concerned that the branding has overtaken reality in SoHo but Charles Landry would argue that the hype and the reality collision are a positive attribute of a Creative City.



## JANE JACOBS

The following sections take chapters from *Life and Death of Great American Cities* and apply them to SoHo. Although the district did not exist in 1961 when the book was published, it is an excellent example of Jacobs' theories. For urban designers who thought her Greenwich Village example a little twee for the 21st century the SoHo example is of a gritty, high density place that prove the continuing relevance of the book. Many more people want to live in a village than is sustainable and Greenwich Village is a perfect example of an urban village to emulate. Jacobs' argument was that the qualities of Greenwich Village could be applied to other parts of New York and that it was possible to have a sense of place and belonging in a dense urban environment if the conditions were right. Diversity and density can create a vital urban village with its own richness if harnessed in the correct way.

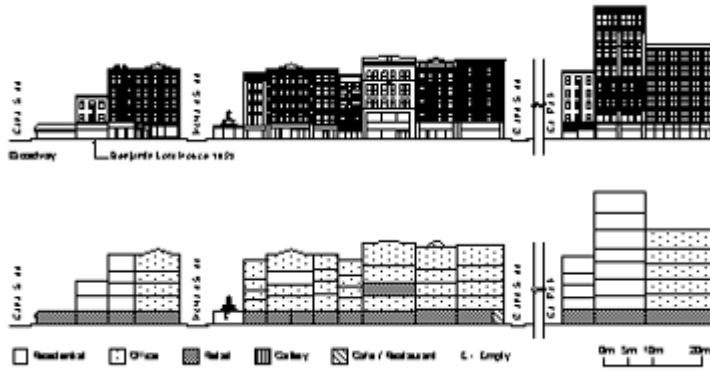


fig. 6a West elevation of Broadway, at Canal, Howard and Grand Streets, with the Benjamin Lord House, one of the first to be built on the former marshland. The extensive retail use at ground level gives permeability to the street facades while the mix of other uses such as residential and office mean there is constant movement and circulation in the street.

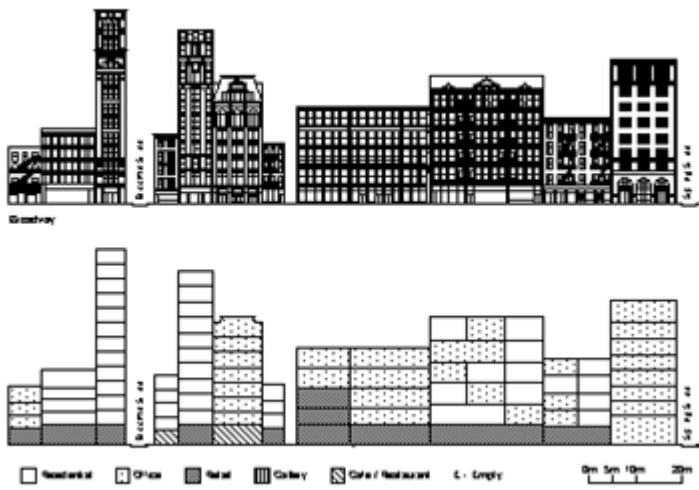


fig. 6b West elevation of Broadway, from Broom to Spring Streets, with cafes and restaurants adding Variety.



Fig. 6c West elevation of Broadway from Spring to Prince Streets, with art galleries creating semi-public space above street level.

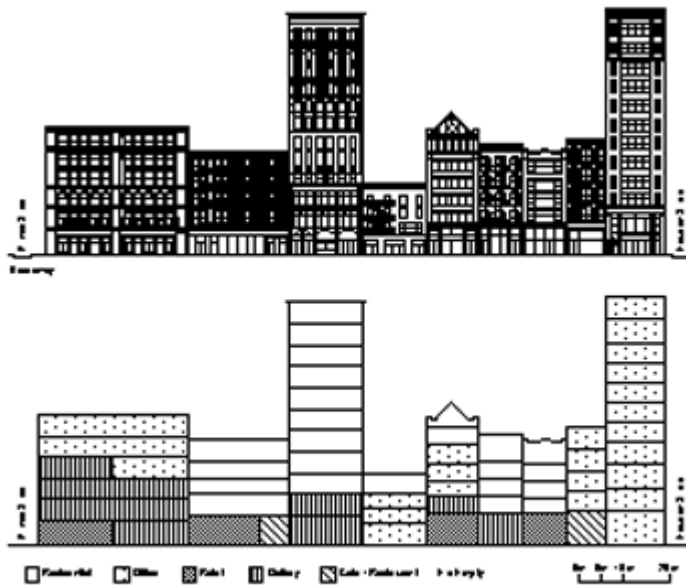


Fig. 6d West elevation of Broadway from Prince to Houston Streets, the core of the art gallery area.

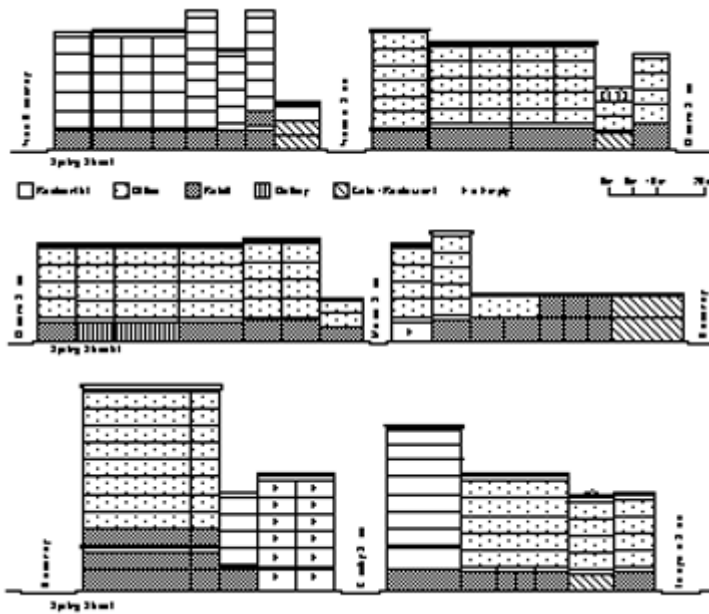


Fig. 7 North elevation of Spring Street from West Broadway to Lafayette Street, with more empty buildings than on Broadway. Although the perception is that SoHo has been fully overhauled, in reality many vacant building still exist; the process is not finished.



## MIXED PRIMARY FUNCTIONS

SoHo mixes three primary uses of residential, office and leisure (retail, restaurants, galleries) in the way Jane Jacobs advocated. The combination of the three becomes more than the sum of their parts. This is because they produce activity over different timespans with leisure generating a completely different use pattern at weekends. The mix of uses avoids the deadness that afflicts, for example the Financial District, at evenings and weekends. Figure 6 A-D shows the mix of uses across the western Broadway facade of SoHo and Figure 7 shows the Spring Street diversity of uses. The haphazard building rush from 1850 to 1900 has created a chaotic skyline and massing as Figure 8 shows but this is another expression of mixed use.

The mix is not quite as perfect however as the lack of good open space and school trends mean that there are few families with children. Grocery stores and 'take away' represent 12 stores out of 500 listed in the SoHo Red map, which is only 2%. This reinforces the fact that the residential population is young, transient and eats out a lot; not bad characteristics but a good district may have a better mix. There is little industrial use, only a few textile trade remnants, but probably a 21st century Manhattan cannot sustain industrial uses. Nevertheless the mix remains rich and interesting. (36)



Fig. 8 Perspective showing block density and lack of open space in area.

"Plenty of struggling artists co-op exhibition spaces, funky shops and cheap cafes fill the streets. Many artists continue to create in their converted apartments/studios behind historic cast iron facades. But the hype has changed SoHo forever (to) to yuppie-infested converted lofts. Still there is no neighborhood quite like it and to me at least, none that so fully invokes the vibrancy, diversity and creative energy that characterises New York."

Figure 9 is a Nolli map of the area that shows all public access areas (including leisure/retail) at ground floor during the day as white areas and non public access as black. Many parts of New York do not have accessible ground floor areas because they are mainly offices or residential. This public access encourages SoHo's many uses and diverse visitors which will hopefully mean that the current mixed use will remain longer than its 19th century version. The height of the blocks and their protected historic status means that there will always be large open loft floors above the ground and first floors for residential and office use. What is certain is that the mythology of SoHo will continue to encourage a mixture of uses especially now Broadway is

being described as "Silicon Alley"; a perfect place for Internet companies to start up. This is the true model for a 21st century city neighbourhood, not just a mix of primary uses but a container for the other, more abstract, functions of city life. (37)

"To remain at the cutting edge cities in the future need to be creative and innovative in all the dimensions noted above - intellectually, culturally, technologically and organisationally - and not merely focus on one type."

## **SHORT BLOCKS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO TURN CORNERS**

A précis of Chapter 9 of *Life and Death of Great American Cities* is that short blocks generate a choice of routes and that corners support and generate urban diversity. Jacobs advocates more streets because they attract a mixture of users along them and the book is critical of a place like the upper west side because the longer walk prevents a mix of shopping opportunities.

Figure 10 shows Jacobs' block analysis against the SoHo configuration. SoHo has rectangular blocks with the short edge north/south but above Houston east/west short edges are the norm. Jacobs says the 800 foot east west block kills vitality. She believes that 400 feet long is better and notes that in Philadelphia the most successful areas have 200 feet long blocks. SoHo blocks tend to be 180 feet at right angles to the north/south flow of Broadway. Jacobs argument about choice of routes and vitality are proven explicitly here. The commercial activity spreads fluidly away from Broadway and people find it easy to explore the side streets. Broadway is so strong in retail terms that if the blocks were deep the activity would never spread. As it is there is little of the abrupt drop off of activity found on the edges of other shopping streets in New York.

## **MINGLE BUILDINGS THAT VARY IN AGE AND CONDITION.**

(38) "Cities need old buildings so badly that it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them".

This argument was radical in 1961 but seem self-evident today. Old buildings can often only achieve low rents and these in turn allow innovators, artists and entrepreneurs a place to begin their activities. The way in which artists became urban pioneers who then invented SoHo is a perfect illustration of the process Jacobs' wrote about.

However, Jacobs' also noted the economic benefits of the process by which the new replaces the old. SoHo's landmark status means that new buildings are rare and un-restored loft buildings are running out. The maxim that old buildings equalled low rents has long since disappeared. There are still some unmodernised properties and heavily locked doorways with graffiti, proving the existence of urban pioneers but these are increasingly rare.

The historic district declared in 1973 can be seen as both the birth and the beginning of the death of modern SoHo. By preventing most new building the progress of the city is artificially halted and New York in particular prides itself on physical renewal as soon as a building becomes obsolete. The industrial legacy is of large floor plates, high floor loads, high ceilings and vast ground floor retail and loading areas and these encouraged the innovative and creative types of enterprise to set up there. However they cannot build new buildings or change the facades so the constraints of the landmark protection mean the creative energy and budget is spent on the inside. This has created an unrivalled selection of innovative interiors. The SoHo loft is a recognised shorthand for a type of design and the British developer, The Manhattan Loft Company taps into this myth, for example. The number of books and articles that extol this style prove that living within a SoHo loft is an aspiration for many people. One recent advert has

extended this beyond the physical into the myth (39) "SoHo is not a geographic area. It's a state of mind".

So perhaps the lack of new build plots will not, after all, strangle SoHo if its non-physical boundaries expand. If the interiors and the Silicon alley cyber spaces continue to grow the death can be avoided or postponed.

### **A SUFFICIENTLY DENSE CONCENTRATION OF PEOPLE**

New York is a dense city and observers have recognised this as one of its prime attractions. The following quotations show how the amount of people using a district of the city contributes directly to its perceived vitality. (40) "New York's streets are more sociable places than at first they appear to be. Stand in one spot long enough and you will be struck by the high incidence of chance meetings between friends. But they are not chance; with 1.2 million people in the one square mile of Midtown, the meetings are an actuarial probability."

The figure quoted, 1.2 million people in one square mile, points out the problem of defining SoHo density. Jacobs' figures shown in Figure 3 are of mainly residential areas. However SoHo mixes residents, workers and visitors in ever changing proportions and this is its pleasure and exuberance. But we do need to quantify some of this to learn and apply the criteria. I define Central SoHo as South of Houston, north of Canal, west of West Broadway and east of Broadway and this gives 20 nett hectares (49 acres). There are approximately 7,200 dwellings giving 360 dwellings per hectare (146 per acre). 13,500 residents are estimated giving 675 residents per hectare (275 per acre). I have used the use pattern research to estimate that every weekday 30,000 workers arrive giving 1500 per hectare (612 per acre).

The next difficulty is when to measure visitor population as it varies with time of day and day of the week. Weekends see 45,000 people visit and 15,000 during the week. This potential total of half a million does not match the midtown figure but is still significant. Steve Khan's photograph captures some of this activity. (Figure 11).

Anyone who has experienced the vibrancy of this part of the city has a measure of what this means although no figure can be used in isolation but these establish a measure for a compact city of concentrated living. SoHo is a demonstration of how a high concentration of people can work alongside each other. E. B. White wrote in 1949, (41) "A poem compresses much in a small space and adds music, thus heightening its meaning. The city is like poetry: it compresses all life, all races and breeds, into a small island and adds music and the accompaniment of internal engines. The island of Manhattan is without any doubt the greatest human concentrate on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions of permanent residents but whose full meaning will always remain illusive".

The key words are "compresses" and "concentrate". Jane Jacob wrote "The need for concentration" chapter was written by Jane Jacobs in 1961. Eight years later the Plan for New York made concentration its cornerstone. (42)

"The 1969 Plan for New York City recorded a discernible dynamic from all this bustle, however. Concentration, it affirmed, was the genius of the place, the source of its vitality and excitement. New York's center had become the nation's center, and this concentration of activities its major attraction both domestically and internationally. If this meant crowding, so be it."

New York has created a celebration of this density and shows that British fears of Rogers' 'Compact City' are unfounded. (43)

"It's like a party - you need a certain number of people to make it work. And this is the mark of a great city.....Congestion was another name for the type of contact that makes cities effective".

Rem Koolhaas book *Delirious New York* was published in 1994, 45 years after E. B. White. He has probably the definitive statement of the Culture of Congestion. (44)

"Manhattan's architecture is a paradigm for the exploitation of congestion.

Manhattan is the area for the terminal stage in Western civilisation. Through the simultaneous explosion of human density and invasion of new technologies, Manhattan became, from 1850 on, a mythical laboratory for the invention and testing of a revolutionary lifestyle; the Culture of Congestion. Manhattan is the 20th Century Rosetta Stone".

The district was not mentioned in Jacobs book in 1961 because it was not officially recognised then. However it illustrates perfectly her contention that density creates urban vitality but only if allied with mixed use.

### **KEVIN LYNCH. IMAGE OF THE CITY**

In Kevin Lynch's book *The Image of the City*, published in 1960, he defines Path, Edge, Node, District and Landmark as parts of the urban topography. It has now become generally accepted that most successful urban areas have a complex mix of these components. They make the imaginability of the area strong and help its definition in urban terms. In *Urban Design Studies, Volume 5 - 6*, 1999 - 2000, I examined a London area, Primrose Hill in these terms. The conclusion was that this area had regenerated partly because it had strong urban components and landmarks that made it legible and understandable.

I have studied SoHo in the same way and have concluded that the area is not very legible in Lynchian terms and that the built form of SoHo does not have a very clear urban image. An examination of the Paths shows that although Broadway dominates, the grid makes a universal path. In terms of Edges Houston is defined strongly because it has become a six lane highway and is reflected in the name SoHo. To the south Canal is again slightly wider and marks the change to Chinatown because the urban memory of the canal and bridge remain as faint presence.

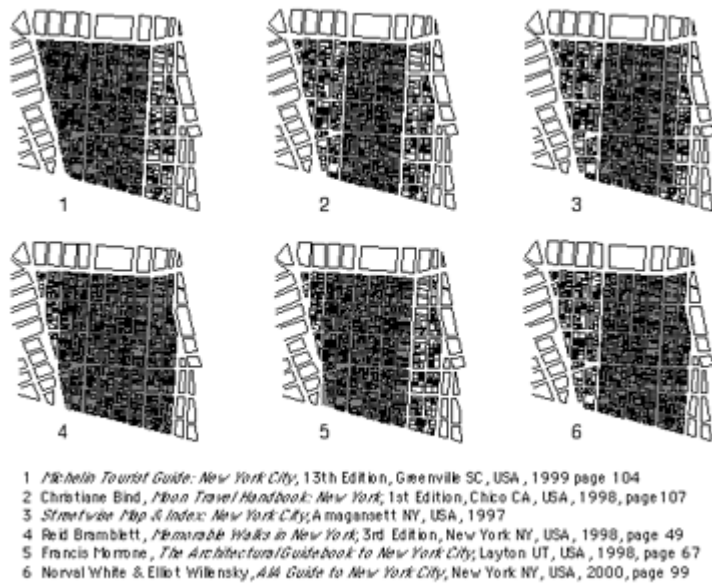


Fig. 9 Nolli plan showing all public access areas (including leisure/retail) at ground floor level during the day as white areas and non-public access areas as black.

To the west and east the situation is more vague and Figure 12 shows how various guide books define the area. The agreement for north and south boundaries is as striking as the disagreements east and west and that suggests an unclear urban image. My definition, used in the density calculations is to nominate the smallest area because aspirational areas always have their boundaries stretched over time. Broadway to the east and West Broadway to the west set out to me the east/west core of SoHo.

The definition of Node is as a centre of activity and Broadway is a linear node. But the shopping crowds on a weekend reinforce Koolhaus' opinion that the grid is abstract and that the flow of people is multiple and driven by the shopping experience not the urban topography.

Finally, Landmarks would normally help the residents, workers and visitors fix their mental image of the district. SoHo has no landmarks in topographical terms at all. The Cast Iron District has a pleasing uniformity of building type, mass, style and material. The building heights on Broadway vary in a startling way but do not create landmarks. This gives a wonderful character to the area but no clear cut landmarks. The only true landmarks have sprung from the artist pioneers and their imposition on the built form. When the SoHo Guggenheim opened it crystallised the idea of SoHo as an artistic centre.

Although Lynch's tools are useful they are not necessarily relevant to the 21st century compact city. SoHo re-invented itself in 1968 and continues to do so ceaselessly. Because of this it has no real need for strong paths, edge, node, district and landmarks. Instead it creates its own mythology which it feeds upon itself to create a different type of legibility to the area.

Another example of how SoHo has transcended physical realities is found on the world wide web. An American group is promoting Small Offices/Home Offices and their acronym is SoHo. Their web site attempts to lend a certain glamour and urban buzz to the activity of running a small office at home by connecting to the SoHo myth.(45)

"A Ring for the Bohemian Spirit of SoHo ..... This ring is open to all members of Geocities whose sites meet Geocities Guidelines and fit the theme of SoHo and Art, poetry, prose and the bohemian spirit".

As already mentioned Broadway in MidTown is called 'Silicon Alley' and the internet companies are thriving in SoHo via Broadway. It is easy to imagine these companies perpetuating and recasting the SoHo story as part of a Cyber City because the myth becomes stronger than the built form. (46)

"It (New York) is one of the oldest places in the United States, but doesn't live in retrospect like the professionally picturesque provinces. Any city may have one period of magnificence, like Boston or New Orleans or San Francisco, but it takes a real one to keep renewing itself until the past is perennially forgotten. "

The constant renewal transcends Lynch's ideas of an imaginable city and shows that the physical limits of a city can be overcome by self generated identities.

## **CONCLUSION**

High density has made a concentration of activity in SoHo and mixed uses have made that activity vital and exuberant over the last thirty two years. However without SoHo myth acting as an urban catalyst I do not believe that that area would have risen from its previous brownfield status so quickly and successfully. The history and the nature of SoHo have merged in the way that Barthes discussed. This has generated the SoHo Myth that is both bigger and more influential than the 20 hectare district.

This is not a criticism but a positive lesson for the future. Modern cities need to reclaim the elements of desirability and interaction. The blighting of cities by planners and politicians has created a reluctance to participate in city life to the full and places like SoHo teach us how true city districts can function. SoHo was one of the first urban districts to reinvent itself and made people want to be a part of the city. There is a perception of where people want to live that cannot be satisfied in a sustainable manner. (47)

"In 1997 a survey showed that 84 per cent of people in the UK wanted to live in a small village compared to 4 per cent who do. We cannot create enough villages to meet these aspirations. Instead we must make cities desirable places to live and be in, partly by recreating the values that people perceive to exist in a village - a sense of place and belonging, continuity, safety and predictability - and partly by nurturing distinctly urban possibilities - buzz, interaction, trade, unexpected delight and much more."

SoHo offers all these qualities and is an alternative to the low density, unmixed districts in suburbia or city fringes. The concentration of people in Soho creates a demand for activity that is more than fulfilled by the diversity of uses. The catalyst of its own mythology keeps the mixture vibrant and this has transformed this brownfield site to a desirable and successful area.

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

1. SOHO'S LOCATION IN NEW YORK
2. THE DISTRICT OF SOHO
3. COMPARATIVE DENSITIES FROM JANE JACOBS
4. BROTHEL AND THEATRE LOCATION 1850 - 1900
5. TIME LINE
- 6A. WEST ELEVATION OF BROADWAY, CANAL, HOWARD, GRAND
- 6B. WEST ELEVATION OF BROADWAY, BROOME TO SPRING
- 6C. WEST ELEVATION OF BROADWAY, SPRING TO PRINCE
- 6D. WEST ELEVATION OF BROADWAY, PRINCE TO HOUSTON
7. NORTH ELEVATION OF SPRING STREET
8. AERIAL VIEW
9. NOLLI PLAN
10. JANE JACOBS' BLOCK ANALYSIS COMPARISON
11. STEVE KAHN PHOTO
12. KEVIN LYNCH BOUNDARY COMPARISON

**Acknowledgements:** The author would like to thank Janis Patterson for preparing the typescript and Polly Barker and Jayne Barr for their comments on the text. Suzanne Brewer, Peta Drayton, Kate Mansfield, Shoshana Signer and Vicky Wenlock for the diagrams. Linda Johnson and Jennifer Clifford Danner for the SoHo residents point of view. Steve Kahns photographs are reproduced with the kind permission of the photographer.

1. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities, The Failure of Town Planning*, New York, 1961, page 23-24
2. Richard Rogers, *Cities for a small planet*, London, 1997, page 33.
3. Stephen Games, *Behind the Fa ade*, London, 1985, page 52.
4. *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*, Scotland, 1999, page 905
5. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, London, 1972, pages 148 - 149.
6. Stephen Games, *Behind the Fa ade*, London, 1985, page 53.
7. Thomas Janvier, *In Old New York*, New York 1894, page 201.
8. Dorothy Seiberling, *SoHo: The most exciting place to live in the city*, New York, May 20th 1974, page 52.
9. Rem Koolhaus, *Delirious New York*, Rotterdam, 1994, page 18-19
10. Rem Koolhaus, *Delirious New York*, Rotterdam, 1994, page 20-21
11. Stephen Games, *Behind the Fa ade*, London, 1985, page 55.
12. Thomas Janvier, *In Old New York*, New York, 1894, page 55-56
13. *Here Astor once lived*, Times (February 16 1896), page 22 quoted in David Dunlop, *On Broadway, A Journey Uptown Over Time*, New York 1990, page 69.



14. Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 1832 quoted in *Writing New York, A Literary Anthology*, Philip Lopate, Editor. New York, 1998, page 17.
15. Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* 1842, quoted in *Writing New York, A Literary Anthology*, Philip Lopate, Editor. New York, 1998, page 57.
16. George Templeton Strong, *The Diaries* Saturday 31 March 1855, quoted in *Writing New York, A Literary Anthology*, Philip Lopate, Editor. New York, 1998, page 199.
17. Gerard Wolfe, *New York. Guide to the Metropolis*, New York, 1994, page 174.
18. Thomas Janvier, *In Old New York*, New York 1894, page 220.
19. Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins, David Fishman. *New York 1960*, New York, 1995, page 264
20. Ada Louise Huxtable, *New York Times, Section 2, New York 24th May 1970*, New York 1970, page 27
21. Jason Epstein, *Lofty Ambitions. Time Out Book of New York Walks*, London, 2000, page 190.
22. Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins, David Fishman. *New York 1960*, New York, 1995, page 37
23. Jim Stratton, *Pioneering in the Urban Wilderness*, New York 1977, page 31-32.
24. Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins, David Fishman. *New York 1960*, New York, 1995, page 266
25. Reggie Nadelson, *All over the shop, Financial Times. How to spend it. 21/Oct 2000*, London 2000, page 53
26. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, London, 1972, page 115.

27. Donald Elliot, Chairman *Plan for new York City*, New York 1969 page 35.
28. Edward Ranzal, *New York Times*, New York, 17th August 1973, page 27
29. Charles Landry, *The Creative City*, London, 2000, page 153.
30. Stephen Games, *Behind the Fa ade*, London, 1985, page 68.
31. Austin Williams, *Architects Journal, Masterplanning a Gateway. Interview with Terry Farrell*, London, 11 January 2001, page 41,
32. Jason Epstein, *Lofty Ambitions, Time Out Book of Walks*, London 2000, page 191.
33. Eric Nash's introduction to *SoHo New York* by Steve Kahn, New York, 1999, page 17.
34. Steve Kahn, *SoHo New York*, New York 1999, page 84.
35. Eric Nash's introduction to *SoHo New York* by Steve Kahn, New York, 1999, page 21.
36. Reid Bramblett, *Memorable walks in New York*, New York, 1998, page 50.
37. Charles Landry, *The Creative City*, London, 2000, page 138.
38. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities, The Failure of Town Planning*, New York 1961, page 200.
39. Gant. U.S.A. 1949 Advert. *Sunday Times*. October 2000.
40. William H Whyte, Introduction to, *The WPA Guide to New York City, The Federal Writers Project Guild to 1930's New York*, New York 1939, page xxxi.
41. E. B. White, *Here is New York*, 1949, quoted in *Writing New York, A Literary Anthology*, Phillip Lopate, Editor. New York, 1998, page 698.

42. William H Whyte Introduction to *The WPA Guide to New York City. The Federal Writers Project Guide to 1930s New York*, New York, 1939, page xxii.
43. Stephen Games, *Behind the Fa ade*, London, 1985, page 67.
44. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, Rotterdam, 1994, page 10.
45. <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo> 2000. Home page
46. A. J. Liebling, *Apology for Breathing, Back Where I Came From*, 1938, quoted in *Writing New York, A Literary Anthology*, Philip Lopate, Editor. New York, 1998, page 630.
47. Charles Landry, *The Creative City*, London, 2000, page xiii.