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NEWSLETTER

FALL/WINTER 2021

Welcome to the 35th edition of the newsletter of the New York Preservation Archive Project. The mission of the New York Preservation Archive Project is to protect and raise awareness of the narratives of historic preservation in New York. Through public programs, outreach, celebration, and the creation of public access to information, the Archive Project hopes to bring these stories to light.

Yukie Ohta of SoHo Memory Project to be Honored at Bard Breakfast

The Archive Project's beloved annual Bard Birthday Breakfast Benefit, known to many as simply "The Bard Breakfast," returns for the 19th time with an in-person format on the morning of December 16th. The event's namesake, Albert Sprague Bard, was a tireless and essential preservationist whose efforts across many decades led to the Bard Act, New York State legislation passed in 1956 that allowed New York City to pass its own Landmarks Law in 1965.

The event will take place at a new location in Manhattan, 8 East 69th Street, and it will include a panel discussion on the acquisition of the Robert Caro papers by The New-York Historical Society. Valerie Paley, the Sue Ann Weinberg Director of the Society's Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, will moderate the panel. Panelists include Paley's predecessor and Archive Project board member Michael Ryan, former Manhattan Borough Historian Michael Miscione, and Archive Project board member, John Reddick.

This year the Bard Breakfast will honor the work of **Yukie Ohta**, the founder and guiding spirit behind the SoHo Memory Project. **The Archive Project will present Ohta with the Preservation Award for her efforts to document and disseminate the history of the preservation movement in New York City's SoHo cast iron neighborhood, as well as her work to secure a long-term home for the Memory Project's archives and materials with the New-York Historical Society's new Diamonstein-Spielvogel Institute for New York City History, Politics, and Community Activism.** Taken together, Ohta's efforts under the aegis of the SoHo Memory Project are an inspiration: every historic neighborhood would benefit from having a similar small-scale project that serves as a community repository of images, materials, and stories, and that safeguards a local heritage of preservation activism.

Preservation Award Honoree

"I love SoHo in all its iterations," Ohta said. "It is a preservation story—both on purpose

and by accident." Both that love and that story have come together in the SoHo Memory Project that Ohta has cultivated for just over a decade.

As she wrote on January 1, 2021: "What began as a blog that I thought only my mom would read has turned into **a nonprofit organization with an archive that will soon be acquired by the New-York Historical Society Library.** Together we built our collective memory of SoHo, past and present, grit and glory, from scratch." Ohta was inspired to start the project by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation with encouragement from Henry Raine at the New-York Historical Society.

Today, the SoHo Memory Project has grown to include collections of oral

histories, archives, audio walking tours, and installations, all focused on the history of SoHo from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. Importantly, Ohta made clear at the outset that the effort would aim to capture "SoHo as a community, a neighborhood made up of a wide variety of people, families, businesses, community groups, and, only incidentally, all manner of creative activity." She has succeeded in her aims. Today, "everybody comes to me if they need to know about SoHo history," Ohta said.

Along the way, Ohta has learned a great deal about the cast iron district that preservationist Margot Gayle, who founded Friends of Cast Iron Architecture, and many other individuals, especially resident artists,

Continued on page 9



Yukie Ohta, founder of the SoHo Memory Project, will be honored with the Archive Project's 2021 Preservation Award at the Bard Birthday Breakfast Benefit. | Courtesy of the Archive Project

BARD BREAKFAST continued from page 3

worked to save from the plans of Robert Moses. “It was saved in spite of and thanks to Moses,” Ohta said, indicating how Moses managed to galvanize a community with the temperament to live in lofts before it was legal. “People underestimated the energy and power of artists.” The historic district was designated in 1973 after more than two years of battle. Gayle’s tours layered direct architectural value onto the functional value of SoHo’s loft spaces, which were occupied by artists full of idealism and a willingness to live behind blackout curtains (so that their unauthorized use of industrial spaces as residences would not be noticed). Artists ultimately prevailed upon the city to change the area’s industrial zoning to allow for artists’ residential use. Today, SoHo faces another prospective change in zoning, one that has been hotly contested.

When Ohta was first becoming acquainted with the archival profession, she thought: “There’s got to be some archive for SoHo.” But there was not. “So I did it,” she recalls, reflecting on the founding of the Project. “I had a vision and it actually came true.” In creating the Memory Project, she started out with a blog and some friends. The undertaking grew exponentially, creating



SoHo Memory Project founder Yukie Ohta teaches future archivists at Stuyvesant High School in 2018. | Courtesy of SoHo Memory Project



A SoHo Artists Association Newsletter announcing “SoHo Artists Legalized” from the SoHo Memory Project Archive in Museum of the City of New York’s Mastering the Metropolis: New York and Zoning, 1916-2016 exhibition in 2016-2017 | Courtesy of SoHo Memory Project

a collective memory one story at a time by accumulating images, ephemera, and records. The Memory Project filled a need in the SoHo scene, one that catalogued and preserved the vigorous activism in public meetings and on the streets. The Memory Project may at first have been less publicly visible than those other forms of civic engagement, but it was soon seen as a crucial means of validating the work of the community. As Ohta puts it: “archivism is activism.”

Today, the SoHo Memory Project’s emphasis extends beyond the cornices and the foundry stamps (small insignia denoting where cast iron components were made) that mark SoHo’s built environment, with an eye to the future. “There’s a whole new generation—who will be decision makers,” Ohta said, mentioning her role as an archivist and guest

lecturer at the Little Red Schoolhouse. There she instills a sense of why history is relevant to students, pushing for equity in history at every step. New technological approaches help as well. The Memory Project’s audio tour now brings even more history and life to the neighborhood and to new demographics.

Bringing archival materials and the history of preservation to new audiences is crucial. As Ohta notes, speaking of SoHo’s journey as a place of ongoing adaptive reuse: “You kill the ghost—the figures of the past who made this setting—you kill the desire to be here.” Place is given meaning by its story thus far.

The Archive Project looks forward to honoring Yukie Ohta’s work as the founder and caretaker of the SoHo Memory Project. She has certainly earned this year’s Preservation Award. ■