

SOHO: A LEGACY OF CREATIVITY

ESSAY BY YUKIE OHTA



Painter Vered Lieb's SoHo studio, 1976 (©Thornton Willis)

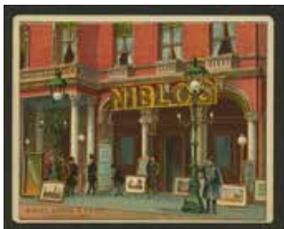


Detail of the E.V. Haughwout Building on Broadway at Broome Street
(Landmarks Preservation Commission)

Look up at the majestic cast iron facades that line SoHo's streets and you see optimism in their ornate cornices that reach toward the sky and beyond. SoHo's legacy of creativity, born in this built environment, is infused with that same far-reaching optimism. Without it, SoHo as we know it today would not exist. It is what draws people here, compels many to return, and has led others to stay and put down roots. As time passes, few can still trace this magic to its source, but a look back at SoHo's storied past provides clues.



Temporary sign for the Paula Cooper Gallery at
155 Wooster Street, 1973 (©Jaime Davidovich)



Nible's Garden, a dining and entertainment complex on Broadway at Prince Street, c. 1890

When the City began paving Broadway north of Canal Street in 1775, it jumpstarted development in the area that is now called SoHo and, by the 1820s, it became an opulent shopping and entertainment district for well-to-do New Yorkers. Stores such as Tiffany & Co. and Lord & Taylor shared the neighborhood with grand hotels such as the St. Nicholas, which, in its heyday, was New York's preeminent hotel. By mid-century, bordellos began popping up on side streets, and SoHo was at once a fashionable shopping district and a red light district. After the Civil War, New York's commercial and entertainment centers began moving further uptown, and by the late-1800s, the private homes, shops, hotels and brothels would be replaced by factories and showrooms housed in the cast iron buildings that have come to define SoHo's architectural landscape.

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SoHo is also known as the Cast-Iron Historic District, so designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. An American invention, cast iron facades were not only less expensive to produce than stone or brick, but also much faster, as they were made in molds rather than carved by hand, and affixed to the face of buildings. Because iron is pliable, ornate window frames could be designed, while the strength of the iron also allowed for enlarged windows that let floods of light into buildings as well as high ceilings in vast spaces with only columns necessary for support.

Natural light and open spaces were essential for the manufacturing that defined SoHo for the next fifty years, until advances in mass-production rendered the verticality of SoHo's buildings inefficient and outdated, and factories began leaving the cramped confines of New York City. It was also these same elements of SoHo's built environment that compelled artists looking for studio space, beginning in the 1950s, to inhabit these emptied industrial spaces that had fallen into disrepair, foregoing basic amenities such as heat, hot water, or even a lease. Artists slept on mattresses on the floor that were easy to stash and put blackout curtains over their windows so that, after dark, building inspectors would not suspect that anyone was living in these buildings without certificates of occupancy.

A fear of eviction at a moment's notice pervaded the existence of SoHo's resident artists until a confluence of events transformed this desolate area into a vibrant artist community whose mythical image still looms large in the public imagination. In the early 1960s, City Planning Commissioner Robert Moses was poised to build the Lower Manhattan Expressway (LOMEX) through SoHo to connect the Hudson and East Rivers. Property owners, unsure of the fate of their buildings, were hesitant to renovate their properties and instead rented spaces under-the-table at prices artists could afford. Once they had established their live-work spaces, artists fought for their right to remain, and in the end, due largely to citizen



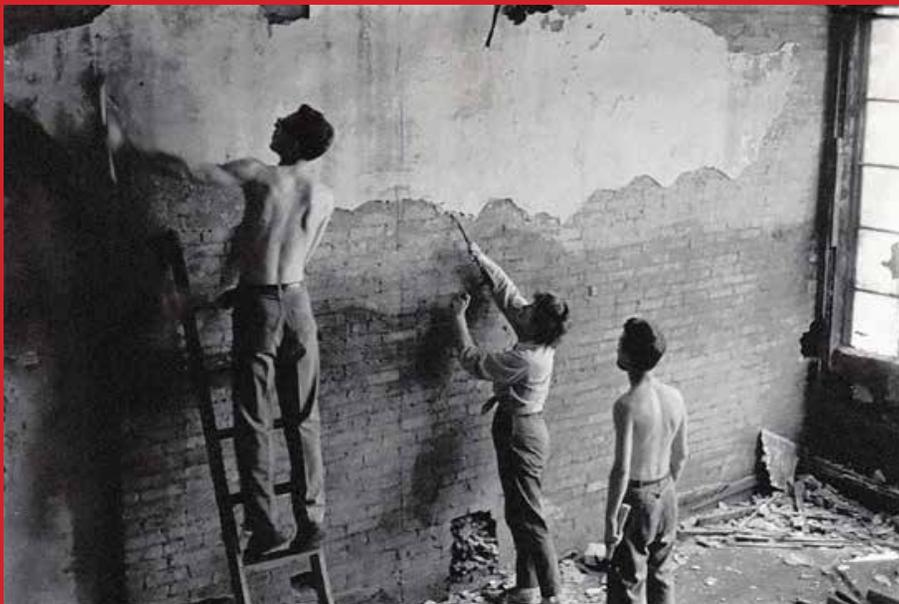
The St. Nicholas Hotel on Broadway and Spring Street was at one time New York City's most opulent hotel, c. 1860



Right
Cella's Chocolate Covered
Cherries factory in SoHo,
1974 (©Allan Tannenbaum)

Left
A craftsman restores a
piano in a SoHo workshop,
1974 (©Allan Tannenbaum)





Artists renovating a Broome Street loft, 1963 (©Louis Dienes)

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—YUKIE OHTA**

activism that included many SoHo artists, the LOMEX plan was defeated and the expressway was never built. Around the same time, a group of developers recommended a large part of what is now SoHo be cleared for development, but a report sponsored by the New York City Planning Commission titled “The South Houston Industrial Area,” found that SoHo was still an important industrial incubator and provided essential jobs to low-income workers and workers of color. Due to this report, the buildings of South Houston (later shortened to SoHo) remained intact.

For a short while, no one seemed to notice that artists had taken over this once-derelict area. But when non-artists looking for investment opportunities began noticing the profit potential of lofts, artists, who until then had chosen to remain anonymous and hidden, came together to form the SoHo Artists Association (SAA), an advocacy group that, in 1971, secured the legalization of loft dwellings for artists by demonstrating that art and artists are an invaluable asset to the city’s cultural and economic life. Then, in 1973, at the end of a years-long battle, the SAA, along with allies in the City government, secured historic district designation for the area, ensuring the architecture of SoHo would never be jeopardized again.

After a decade of uncertainty and artist activism that began with illegal living and ended with legalized live-work lofts for artists and historic district status, there was a brief moment in time in the early 1970s when SoHo became a tight-knit community where everyone knew one another and was united behind a common purpose: to make art. Many of SoHo’s pioneering artists look back at this time as a magical moment when artists no longer had to hide behind blackout curtains, but were not yet faced with rising rents and housing insecurity.

Once artists began moving to SoHo in numbers, art galleries followed. In 1968, Paula Cooper opened the first SoHo art gallery on Prince Street. At first, this was viewed as a misguided move, but soon after, SoHo, and especially West Broadway, became the art hub of New York as galleries began popping up all over the neighborhood. Gallerists came down from 57th Street, long the stronghold of elite New York art galleries, to be close to their artists and to rent the expansive and inexpensive industrial spaces they pioneered. For the first time ever, a large portion of the New York artist and gallery communities occupied the same neighborhood.

The building at 420 West Broadway, called the Gallery Building, or simply “420,” was considered the epicenter of the flourishing downtown art scene. Some of the now-world-famous artists who showed their work in this building include Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, and Robert Rauschenberg. By 1985, when the Tony Shafrazi Gallery mounted its legendary Warhol-Basquiat show, SoHo entered a new phase in its history, where superstar artists and gallerists hobnobbed with their wealthy clientele.



Top
Frank Owen's SoHo studio,
1975 (©Thornton Willis)

Bottom
Douglas Dunn's dance studio
on Broadway, 1982
(©Peter Moore)



Thornton Willis in the SoHo studio of
John Seer, 1975 (©Thornton Willis)



SOHO IS STILL HOME TO MANY ARTISTS TODAY AND THERE IS STILL PLENTY OF ART TO BE FOUND THROUGHOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

As the 1980s morphed into the 1990s, New York City emerged as the fashion capital of the world, and SoHo transformed once again. Many artists began leaving SoHo for Brooklyn and Queens as early as the mid-1970s due to rising rents, but it wasn't until the 1990s that galleries moved northward to West Chelsea and were replaced by fashion brands. Avant-garde designers whose work blurred the line between art and clothing, were the pioneers of the new SoHo fashion scene. Younger, edgier designers who felt shut out of Seventh Avenue, long the stronghold of New York's elite fashion brands, also came to SoHo to establish more artisanal, less corporate spaces for themselves to create and sell their designs. By the 2000s, SoHo had become a retail destination where the most coveted fashion brands inhabited the airy ground floors of the cast iron buildings that once housed art galleries and, before that, manufacturing showrooms.

SoHo is still home to many artists today and there is still plenty of art to be found throughout the neighborhood. While most of SoHo's famed art galleries relocated decades ago, some remain, such as Jeffrey Deitch and Louis K. Meisel, as well as several arts venues such as the Judd Foundation, The Drawing Center, and the Dia Foundation. More visible are the fashion brands from around the world that have planted their flags within the 26 blocks that comprise this neighborhood.

What was a shopping district in the mid-1800s is a shopping district once again, but in the interim, the community of artists who lived and worked in SoHo left a permanent impression. It is their optimism, activism, and creativity that, against all odds, gave birth to a magical place whose legacy drapes itself over all who come here today to visit, to work, and to live. It is this magic, present in its people as well as its built environment, that sets SoHo apart. ■

The Drawing Center at 35 Wooster Street was founded in SoHo, 1977 (©Ajay Suresh)

