

YUKIE OHTA:

THE SPIRIT OF PRESERVATION

PHOTOGRAPHED BY RYAN MCGINLEY AT THE SOHO MEMORY PROJECT



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The spirit of SoHo is hard to define. For some, it can be summed up in the summers that sparked new movements in art and culture, the freewheeling creative energy that rippled through the streets, spurred on by wildly low rents, and the first gallery shows of legends-to-be, like Basquiat, Warhol and Haring. But it's also much bigger than that. It's the spirit of a tight-knit community of artists, families, and small businesses that began calling SoHo home in the 1950s, that helped make it what it is today.

SoHo's rich past is massively influential. It's a blueprint for the future—and it doesn't stay alive on its own. No one knows this better than Yukie Ohta, a SoHo native and archivist who has dedicated her life to preserving the neighborhood's history through her nonprofit organization, the SoHo Memory Project.

She sat down with Carlo McCormick to talk about what makes SoHo so extraordinary, and why preserving its legacy is vital for securing its future.



SoHo Memory Project showcase



Carlo McCormick: When you're dealing with a memory project, you're trying to get people to know something about SoHo. What are you trying to get people to understand about what this neighborhood was and what it means?

Yukie Ohta: The SoHo Memory Project preserves the ethos as well as history of artists' SoHo. Its aura is part of what makes it unique and what makes people want to be here today. Moving forward, if we lose that ghost of SoHo past, SoHo will lose what makes it special. I don't want people to forget.

Yeah. I always liked Jane Jacobs, who fought for SoHo. This was one of her big things, to get Robert Moses to not destroy SoHo with a superhighway and stuff. But she always talked about how you need the old ladies who sat on the stoop and told that story, because that's the identity of a neighborhood. Basically, we're a narrative. That's what it means to be a New Yorker, to know the stories.

SoHo was once a small community. It was like a small town. We did have those old ladies watching. When I was a child in the 1970s I always felt safe because I knew that people had eyes on the street. I knew that if anything happened to me, people would catch me. Even though it was considered a bad neighborhood where cab drivers didn't want to take you, and your friends didn't want to come over to your house because it was such a seedy area.

I mean, the same thing with raising my kid in New York was, your neighbors were looking out. And then this neighborhood got whiter. Those people don't pay attention in some ways. Like, when the rich people move in, they're all scared. But when it was a Puerto Rican and Dominican neighborhood, it was actually much better that way.

With old SoHo, we also think of painters, work pants and paint splatters. We had all these great young designers like Betsey Johnson coming out of here. Now it's a lot of really high-end shopping. But what's the nature of SoHo fashion? What do you think is consistent, and what's changed?

SoHo definitely had its own style. It wasn't just about what you wore, but how you moved through the world, your gestures and how you spoke. There were definitely paint splatters. But there were also dancers and musicians, even though, when you think of SoHo, you usually think of painting. There was movement everywhere in the streets.

When the first fashion brands started opening up here, they were cutting-edge brands like Comme des Garçons, where the clothing was art, and art was clothing. I think those brands came here because there was so much creativity in SoHo. They, in turn, started attracting the larger brands. And then around 2000, luxury brands arrived. And suddenly, there were all these stores that I couldn't afford to shop in. I thought things must have plateaued. And yet the bar continued to be set higher and higher, until the pandemic. Now, I think we might be at a point of reset.

It is really interesting. I think about how the great opportunity of SoHo now is basically coming from abandonment. The light industry—this warehouse district—had basically ceased to function in a commercially viable way, and then development was supposed to happen, which didn't, thankfully. So there's this incredible opportunity. The rents are different now, of course, but do you feel there's potential now because of the abandonment, of the neglect of the fact that the stores got looted and all that stuff?

I definitely think that SoHo is at a turning point where it's going to have to reinvent itself yet again. Artists came and made it something post-industrial, then the fashion brands came and made it something else. I see all this talk of upzoning, the empty storefronts and the demographic changing.

Who knows what's going to happen? I feel like whoever makes those decisions, if they remember where SoHo comes from, it can be a very special place. It'll be something different. And that's fine. New York is always changing.. But if they forget and just make it any old place, that'll be to the detriment of our neighborhood.

Yeah. I think there's something in the DNA, which you think would survive, but it needs to be preserved.

It does. There're these majestic buildings, but there are also the spirits that live in them. If you get rid of those ghosts, then it'll become very sterile. I don't want that to happen. I think cities need to change all the time, otherwise, they stagnate and die. But I think change should be planned responsibly and with respect to what was here before and to what makes our neighborhood special. I'm excited to see what's going to happen, I just hope it's not a wholesale erasure of what came before, but rather a building upon.

You just reminded me about all the dancers who were here. Who was that woman who would do great dances on the roof in SoHo?

Trisha Brown.

Yeah. That stuff is so radical. It was about the space. Now they buy, like, a little corner of a building and it's called a loft. But these were floor-through places. That sense of space was ginormous.

Space was everything. People came here from all over to be urban pioneers. Back then, it was like camping. There was no heat, there were no amenities—but there was lots of space, and that's all they needed to express themselves.

There was a magical moment here when people, if they had an idea, they gave it mass. They gave it weight. They gave it movement. They gave it sound. And they didn't care if you liked it, or if you wanted to buy it or even thought it was good. They just made it for the sake of making it.

Back then, no one made any money off art. But there was a sense of, Oh, I'm going to get rich, exactly like Basquiat.

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—YUKIE OHTA

The SoHo Memory Project,
Mercer Street

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When galleries arrived I suppose, things did change. But there was still that magical spirit. It's what draws people here. If we lose that spirit, I think SoHo will become unrecognizable.

One of the great gifts you're catching, because things are disappearing, is that you're able to talk to a lot of old residents here—people who've been here for more than fifty years. What are a few things you think people need to know about SoHo, beyond the creativity?

Well, being a child of SoHo was different from being an adult who came here from somewhere else. Growing up here, SoHo was all I knew. From birth, I was taught that anything is possible, and that if you wanted to create beauty or community, you were welcome here.

My peers and I have an optimism that allows us do whatever comes into our minds. We don't see restrictions that perhaps other people do. What I want people to see is that it's a wonderful way to bring someone up in the world.

Are you able to convey this with the same ease and honesty to your kids as you think was a reality for you growing up, or is it more complex now?

It's a little more complex. My daughter asked me if we're living in a dystopia. I was as honest as I could be. But I also told her that it's people who change the world. That if she puts her mind to it, she can make it something other than what she sees today. That it doesn't have to stay the same. I was able to tell her that and she believed me because it came from experience and from the heart. ■

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