

FACT SHEET ON ARTISTS HOUSING IN SOHO

The City Planning Commission has scheduled a public hearing on September 23, 1970 on a proposal to legalize artists occupancy of loft buildings for joint living-working purposes in the SoHo District of Lower Manhattan. It is essential for passage of this legislation that all segments of the cultural community in New York City understand the intent of the legislation, the problem it seeks to alleviate, and how this legislation can be adopted.

THE PROBLEM

The New York City Zoning Resolution divides the city into ten types of Residence Districts, eight types of Commercial Districts, and three types of Manufacturing Districts. In each of these districts only certain specified uses are permitted. The Manufacturing Districts designated as M1-5 are intended to serve as "Light Manufacturing Districts" in which establishments engaged in the manufacture of apparel and textiles, electronic equipment and wholesale service facilities are located. Such districts are mapped to protect clusters of older loft buildings containing low-skilled jobs that are important to New York City's economy. The buildings in M1-5 Districts are typically 25 x 100 feet, five, six or seven stories in height, and 80 to 100 years old.

New residential development is prohibited from locating in M1-5 Districts. This prohibition has created serious problems for New York City's artists community because most of the desirable buildings that can be used for joint living-work purposes by artists are located in M1-5 Districts.

The South Houston area, or SoHo, is a 40-block M1-5 District bounded by Houston Street on the north, Canal Street on the south, West Broadway on the west, and Lafayette Street on the East. In 1962 Dr. Chester Rapkin, currently a member of the City Planning Commission, was hired to investigate the area and submit recommendations to the City concerning its future development. He found SoHo to contain a large number of small "incubator" firms, or establishments that are "getting off the ground" and need small, inexpensive space. He also found the number of jobs to be relatively high. His recommendation was that nothing be done by the City to disturb this industrial complex, a policy which the City Planning Commission has followed in SoHo for the past eight years.

In 1965 a large number of artists began to seek loft space in the smaller buildings in SoHo for joint living-work purposes. These smaller buildings were slowly being vacated by industry as they were found to be dysfunctional for modern manufacturing purposes. By 1970 over five hundred lofts were occupied by artists and their families, producing a residential population of some 2000 persons. But all of them were occupying their lofts in violation of the Use Regulations of the Zoning Resolution. They thus found themselves under continual threat of harassment by the Buildings Department and eviction proceedings by the Corporation Counsel.

THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

In 1968 the SoHo Artists Association and the Artists Tenants Association petitioned the City Planning Commission to amend the Zoning Resolution in such a

way that artists could continue to occupy their lofts with full legal status along with the industrial users of SoHo lofts. After two years of consultation with these groups the Commission has developed a formula which it believes will solve the immediate problem of the artists illegal living status, and at the same time protect the existing marginal industries in SoHo.

The proposed legislation is a zoning change which would create a new Zoning District to be called an M1-5A District. All of the regulations pertaining to manufacturing uses would remain the same, but artists would be allowed to legally occupy their lofts if their buildings could meet several conditions. All buildings occupied by artists on May 1, 1970 would qualify for legal status provided that they contain lofts whose size does not exceed 3600 square feet. This restriction would protect the larger lofts for industrial uses. Ten percent of the approximately one thousand buildings in in the area would thus qualify for legal status, affecting about 460 existing artists lofts and opening up about 200 lofts, now in industrial use, for future occupancy by artists. Buildings owned cooperatively by artists would be legalized regardless of size. These provisions would leave some fourty artists occupying over-sized lofts without legal status. The SoHo Artists Association would work to relocate them into legal buildings.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO INSURE ADOPTION OF THIS LEGISLATION

To insure adoption of this legislation by the City Planning Commission and its final approval by the Board of Estimate it is essential that members of the cultural community make their support known to the public officials who sit on these bodies. The following steps must be taken:

- 1- Letters must be sent to the City Planning Commission in time for its public hearing on September 23, 1970. They should be addressed to: The City Planning Commission, 2 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y. 10007. Refer to the following reference numbers in your letter: CP-21256 (Zoning Text Change) and CP-21260 (Zoning Map Change). It would also be valuable to reach individual members of the Commission to make your feelings known to them; they are: Donald H. Elliot, Chairman, Gerald R. Coleman, Martin Gallent, Walter McQuade, Ivan A. Michael, Chester Rapkin, Beverly Moss Spatt, Commissioners. They can be reached at the same address.
- 2- Broad support for the proposal must be shown at the public hearing. Members of the cultural community must be present to fill the chamber and, if they so desire, to speak on behalf of themselves or any groups they represent. The hearing date is September 23, 1970. It begins at 10:00 AM and is held in the Board of Estimate Chamber at City Hall. If you wish to speak you must register at the desk in front of the chamber and take a seat in the Chamber. You will called by the Chairman to speak when your turn comes up.
- 3- After adoption by the City Planning Commission the legislation then goes to the Board of Estimate for final approval. The Board would probably consider it sometime in October. The same procedure outlined in (1) and (2) should be followed. Letters should be sent after approval by the City Planning Commission; address them to: The Board of Estimate, Municipal Building, New York, N.Y. 10007. The Board must also hold a public hearing before it can grant final approval. Its members are: The Mayor, The Council President, the Comptroller, and the five Borough Presidents.

Hudson

River

East

Soho

City Hall

River

Bellevue Hospital

United Nations

Tompkins Square Park

Washington Square Park

Brooklyn Navy Yard
(inactive)

Wallabout Channel

