

2 SUNDAY ROUTINE

A Staten Island Yankees boss: in the ballpark, at the salon.

3 NEIGHBORHOOD JOINT

In Brighton Beach, a post-Soviet haven for khachapuri.



4 CHARACTER STUDY

Got trombone troubles? See Chuck McAlexander.

7 ALBUM

Scenes from C-Squat, the tenement that punk built.

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The Memory-Keeper of SoHo



A lifelong resident wants to preserve the stories of artists, loft living and 'the dirty golden years.'

By KYLE SPENCER

In the four-story loft building where she grew up, Yulie Ohta, a 46-year-old architect, picked up a Mason jar filled with small leather rags and took a long nostalgic whiff. Then she handed the jar to a visitor and exclaimed, "This is a SoHo smell."

The jar was part of Ms. Ohta's "small jar collection," a series of glass containers with various items stuck in them to resemble the smells of SoHo past, specifically the period from 1969 to 1980 that she wistfully refers to as the "dirty golden years." That's when pungent scents from the neighborhood's leather warehouses and industrial bakeries washed through the stone-paved

The template for reinventing a faded industrial neighborhood.

streets, and she and her sister, Mimi, spent their days climbing a massive John Chamberlain foam sculpture that a former tenant had left behind in her family's loft.

It is this bygone era that still fascinates her, so much so that for the past four and a half years, she has been on a mission to help memorialize it — first with a website, the SoHo Memory Project, and then with a makeshift museum stored in a portable bookcase in her building's basement.

Armed with a little more than \$20,000, thanks to a recent Kickstarter campaign, Ms. Ohta has an ambitious new plan: to build a SoHo Historical Society.

The idea is to pay homage not only to the name-brand artists who sprang from the neighborhood — think Donald Judd hosting dinner parties in his loft on Spring Street, or Jean-Michel Basquiat spray-painting his "SAMO©" tag on the neighborhood's cast-iron buildings — but also to the families who created the loft aesthetic and popularized a now commonplace architectural trick: reinventing a faded industrial neighborhood for residents and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



Brownsville's Unlikely Dynasty

Far from the playing fields of Rugby, a sport thrives.

By ANDREW COTTO

On a patch of turf on the sidelines of crowded athletic fields on Randall's Island, under the rattle of the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, a dozen middle school students gathered around a burly man with a ponytail and a goatee. This was Ovidio Grozav, coach of two flag rugby teams — one boys, one girls — from Intermediate School 392 in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and he was giving his boys a few words of encouragement before their first match.

They were one of 70 teams in and around New York City who were there on a blustery Saturday morning in early June to compete for the eighth annual Rugby Cup.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



Khamari Plowden of Intermediate School 392 in Brooklyn eluding Rugby Cup opponents.

Cuomo's Housing Game

IF YOUR INTERNET wanderings last week happened to land you on the web page for the governor of New York, you would have immediately found images of Andrew M. Cuomo scouring the bowels of the Clinton Correctional Facility, immersing his head

in the pipes and looking like Tommy Lee Jones in "The Fugitive." The dramatic escape made by two inmates from the upstate prison last weekend seemed to be keeping the governor very busy. In a news conference on Wednesday, one of several media appearances he has made since the break, Mr. Cuomo announced that the prisoners, both serving terms for murder, may or may

not have been headed to Vermont and that they were "noting to be trifled with."

South of Dunderbora, where the conference was held, in Albany and New York City, housing activists and thousands of those affected by rent regulations — set to expire on Monday if the State Legislature fails to take action — were hardly distracted.

On June 2, 35 people, including Councilman Jumaane D. Williams, a Brooklyn Democrat, were arrested outside the governor's office in Albany during a protest in support of strengthening tenant protections. The disenchanted long banners around the capital designating Mr. Cuomo "Governor Glenwood," a reference to the real estate empire

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

The Memory-Keeper of SoHo

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

artists. Though other transforming neighborhoods are now billed as centers of reinvention (many of them on the other side of the Brooklyn Bridge), it was SoHo, with the artists who flocked there, that created the template.

Fifty years ago, the neighborhood south of Houston Street in Lower Manhattan was an industrial hub of faded factories largely empty at night. Then came the creatives desperate for cheap space, arriving first as illegal homesteaders and later as legal residents. The galleries soon followed. Now many of them have departed for Chelsea, and SoHo is a weekend shopping destination and home to multimillion-dollar lofts. Its geography-mashing acronym, which Ms. Ohta traces to a 1963 city planning report, set its own trend, begetting TriBeCa, Dumbo and such broker-speak as MePa, for the Meatpacking district, and SoHa, which some sellers now call the neighborhood south of Harlem.

Like Ms. Ohta, I grew up in SoHo, and I have vivid memories of its former self. So when a high school friend told me about the memory project, I reached out and invited myself over. Approaching Ms. Ohta's Mercer Street building, and hearing the voice of her partner, Arnaud Gibersztajn, announce on the intercom, "I'll send the elevator down," sent me back. Once upon a time, almost all residents in SoHo had locked elevators that needed to be sent down for visitors.

Compact, with shoulder-length black hair, Ms. Ohta grew up in the building with her mother, sister and father, a lacquer artist who had emigrated from Okazaki, Japan. Now she lives with her 7-year-old daughter and Mr. Gibersztajn, an abstract painter. Her sister's family and another family who are also longtime inhabitants of the building live in apartments on the 3,000-square-foot floor.

Ms. Ohta's parents bought the building in 1991, after living in SoHo for 23 years, and converted it into condominiums that they sold. It was a savvy real estate move for which Ms. Ohta, who has worked in publishing and in the nonprofit world, is still grateful. She also owned a women's accessory and clothing store in Park Slope for 10 years.

All along, from her Mercer Street perch, she has watched SoHo evolve into the tourist-heavy, commercial center of today, with its Bloomingdale's, Tiffany & Company and Trump SoHo Hotel. Such relentless transformation could have left her feeling the way I, and many of my SoHo compatriots, feel: strangely betrayed. Instead, it has stirred in her a yearning to celebrate the neighborhood's bohemian past.

"If I were embittered, I wouldn't be able to do this work," she told me recently. "I'm a person who believes cities change. That's what they do. They evolve. That doesn't mean I'm not nostalgic."

THERE IS NO BETTER evidence of Ms. Ohta's nostalgia than the handsome museum cart that shared real estate this spring with her partner's oil and enamel canvases in their building's basement. The cart was designed by the Uni Project, a four-year-old nonprofit that builds portable libraries and museums. This is what Ms. Ohta hopes her museum will be in its



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: VICTOR A BELLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; JAIME DAVIDOVICH; JOHN B. SNOOK; THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION; YVA GELT; ANNELO PEREGRINO; JOURNAL MAGAZINE PHOTOS



A lifelong resident of Mercer Street collects its sights and smells.

laws that made it illegal for artists to live in lofts.

A treasure-trove of photocopied material from Julie Finch, a preservationist, details the neighborhood's fight with the city over the Lower Manhattan Expressway, which was planned for the Broome Street corridor. The plan, pressed by the polarizing city planner Robert Moses, was eventually scrapped.

Ms. Ohta also possesses a copy of a five-page report written in 1971 by a group of downtown parents, many of them from SoHo, who founded Public School 3, a progressive elementary school in the West Village. The parents, according to the report, wanted to form a school where a child could "discover his soul."

"Discover his soul," Ms. Ohta said, chuckling. "It's not even in quotation marks."

Though much of her collection focuses on the late '60s and '70s, she hopes eventually to highlight other eras in the neighborhood's history. There are, for instance, SoHo's time in the 1700s as a farming community for former slaves freed from the Dutch West India Company, and its period as home to a squatter's colony during the Depression. In the early 1800s, it also served as a shopping hub and entertainment district for the well-to-do.

Some historians say SoHo began to be transformed into an artists' enclave as early as the 1950s. The first reported artist cooperative was on Wooster Street, founded in the late '60s by George Maciunas, a creator of the Fluxus movement and sometimes referred to as "the father of SoHo."

Ms. Ohta is not the only person collecting SoHo history. The New York Historical Society has the black-and-white abstract ceiling mural from Keith Haring's former Pop Shop on Lafayette Street, along with drawings by John B. Snook, the architect who designed many of the neighborhood's cast-iron buildings. Down the street from Ms. Ohta, the Judd Foundation in 2013 completed a \$23 million renovation to chronicle the life and art of Mr. Judd. The Museum of the City of New York has a series of SoHo maps, photographs, prints and paintings. The Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian also has a collection of SoHo papers.

Ms. Ohta said her collection would be different because it would be concentrated in one place and presented as part of a broader experience. In addition to opening a storefront museum, she hopes to host conferences, talks, film screenings and special exhibitions.

There are 688 registered historical societies in New York State, according to the State Board of Regents, a number growing every year. Eventually, if Ms. Ohta goes ahead with her plan, she will need to apply for a state charter.

Bob Beatty, chief operating officer at the American Association for State and Local History, said a historical society did not have the same start-up costs as a museum, requiring less overhead and far less staffing.

"Often, all it takes is a person or a group of people with an idea or a geographic place they want to rally around," he said.

To watch Ms. Ohta enthusiastically sift through ephemera she has seen dozens of times — a faded 1978 edition of *The Villager*, a local newspaper; a SoHo Alliance-issued T-shirt that reads "Keep SoHo Low"; a tarnished door hinge — it is easy to imagine her as that person.

Even her partner, Mr. Gibersztajn, said she had always been "in a relationship with the past, her past."

Ms. Ohta would agree. "I'm volunteering to be the memory keeper," she said.



first iteration, traveling from one neighborhood block to another, starting in the spring of 2016. The plan is to eventually procure a permanent storefront location somewhere in the area, financed by big-ticket donors. The cart was home to Ms. Ohta's collection of small jars. One is packed with crushed peppercorns, replicating the odor emanating, circa 1970, from a Broome Street pepper factory. Another is filled with the scent from a Wooster Street industrial bakery. There is a mock-up of a miniature SoHo loft, including found furniture like a large electrical-cord spool that served as a coffee table in many

Marty the Seltzer Man now sells jewelry on Prince Street.

a loft. There is a crate filled with broken doll parts, buttons and discarded scraps of fabric that served as found toys for children growing up amid the city's last remaining factories.

On an iPad mini, viewers can listen to a 74-year-old jewelry designer from Munich discuss the rehab of her Bowery loft space, which had served as a flophouse before she arrived. And on a creaky tape record-

er, visitors can listen to a 1979 conversation on the WNYC radio show "Artists in the City," now defunct, about the longstanding battle between the city and loft tenants, many of whom had ensconced themselves illegally in industrial spaces.

ON A RECENT AFTERNOON, standing in front of a framed cover of Billy Joel's album "An Innocent Man," which was photographed on Mercer Street, Ms. Ohta picked through archival material that did not make it into the portable exhibition. There were dog-eared gallery guides from the early '70s, faded fliers for artists' happenings, announcements for art auctions with works by Art Spiegelman and Claes Oldenburg, and an ad for Marty, the Seltzer Man, who delivered crates of bubbly water to tenants for 30 cents a bottle.

"I could talk about this stuff forever," she said, after a short discourse on Marty, who now sells jewelry on Prince Street. "Just tell me when to stop."

So far, many of the papers she has gathered have come from the SoHo Alliance and its predecessor, the SoHo Artists Association, neighborhood advocacy groups, although artists and former SoHo residents have donated, too.

She has transported much of it through the city on hand trucks and in taxis. It is now stored in plastic bins in her basement,



Clockwise from top: A new mock-up of a portable exhibition at Yulke Ohta's studio; SoHo in grittier days, in the 1970s, when galleries were young; a traffic jam of trucks on Greene Street in 1970; and the Fanelli Cafe, a former speakeasy, on Prince Street.

waiting for a permanent home.

Jaime Davidovich, an Argentine-born conceptual artist, gave Ms. Ohta slides he took of SoHo's desolate streets in the early-to-mid-'70s, including one with a handwritten cardboard sign indicating the direction of the now world-famous Paula Cooper Gallery, which today, like so many other galleries, is in Chelsea. Mr. Davidovich said he hoped the slides would help remind people that SoHo was not always "so stylish."

With newspaper clippings and phone-tree lists, Ms. Ohta has chronicled the battle between artists and the city over zoning