

From Gritty to Chic: The Transformation of New York City's SoHo, 1962-1976

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Urban renewal, deindustrialization, and gentrification gave new textures to New York City's SoHo from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s. Individual and collective decisions stopped, slowed, or expedited these processes, and transformed an industrial district into an exuberant neighborhood. Stephen Petrus is a doctoral candidate in history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His dissertation is on the politics and culture of Greenwich Village from 1955 to 1965.

This is the story of a district transformed. In the early 1960s, New York City's South Houston was a gritty industrial area. Bounded by Houston Street to the north, Canal Street to the south, West Broadway to the west, and Lafayette Street to the east, South Houston encompassed forty-three blocks in Lower Manhattan. Its small factories and warehouses teemed with operative and unskilled workers, mostly Puerto Ricans and African Americans. Trucks crammed the narrow streets, transporting materials against a backdrop of dingy buildings. At night and on the weekend, the place became desolate and quiet, in stark contrast to the vitality of the Italian communities to the east and west, and Greenwich Village to the north. Pejoratively nicknamed "Hell's Hundred Acres," due to the high incidence of accidental fires, the district was considered by the city's power brokers to be decaying and therefore a prime location for urban renewal.

By the mid-1970s all this had changed. No longer known as South Houston, SoHo had become one of the world's art centers. It was a chic neighborhood, an effervescent mix of art galleries, trendy boutiques, fancy restaurants, and manufacturing concerns. An article in a 1974 *New York* magazine called it the "most exciting place to live in the city." Young professionals flocked to the stylish lofts, although only artists certified by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs were entitled access to the space. Hipsters and tourists alike milled about the cobblestone streets, checking out the scene. The cast-iron buildings, once dismissed as hideous relics of the late industrial revolution, were now treated like a sacred grove.¹

In this three-part article, I examine the impact of long-term economic and social processes underlying these dramatic changes. Part I discusses urban renewal, which was a pervasive planning focus throughout mid-twentieth-century America. Under the leadership of Robert Moses, New York by 1957 had spent two times more on renewal than the rest of American cities combined. Perhaps, then, it was to the good fortune of business owners and workers in South Houston that Moses had resigned from the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance in 1960. In 1962, the City Club of New York, a civic group, called for the clearance of the district in favor of low- to upper-income housing, but the study lacked the verve and punch of a Moses proposal. A second study, the Rapkin Report, funded by the Board of Estimate, disagreed and demonstrated that South Houston was of economic and social value to the city. The area was saved for the time being. But another project, an interstate expressway, threatened to bisect the place. Competing factions made their cases in the late 1960s for and against the plan. Mayor John Lindsay finally renounced the expressway in 1969.

The defeat of the project meant the preservation of South Houston's manufacturing buildings. This event happened amidst the larger economic development of the deindustrialization of New York. Many smaller firms, occupying buildings of 3,600 square feet per floor or less, were closing or leaving the city in increasing numbers. Because they needed spacious and inexpensive living and working quarters, artists started to fill the vacancies. The pending expressway, the sword of Damocles for most of the longtime residents, actually benefited the artists. It minimized their rents and building prices, and deterred developers from speculating.²

Part II considers the housing shortage of the 1960s. Municipal departments periodically cracked down on artists living illegally in manufacturing buildings. Coalitions formed in response, labored for reform, and dissolved after specific issues were addressed and artists were able to make piecemeal progress. For example, the city established the "Artist in Residence" program in 1961 and partially sponsored the Westbeth artists' center in Greenwich Village in 1968. But a larger solution was necessary. Artists living in cooperatives—co-ops—in South Houston were, as a result of their previous housing situations, the most desperate but also the best organized. They amassed their political resources and cultural cachet, used deindustrialization to their advantage, and staged a public relations coup: In 1971 they convinced the City Planning Commission to legalize artist residency in SoHo.

But this achievement did not end the story. Part III details the ways in which the process of gentrification, already underway, displaced many artists soon after their political victories. Many blamed wealthy non-artists and boutique owners for their displacement. But as sociologist Sharon Zukin has argued, "that is mythology, not urban

history.” Indeed, the popular explanation that artists are the catalysts of gentrification is impressionistic. I try to illustrate the complexity of this process by describing how it involved municipal agencies, real estate agents, landlords, developers, the media, community planning boards, historic preservationists, mortgage lenders, and others. The city revealed its support for gentrification in 1975, when it passed a law encouraging the conversion of commercial and manufacturing buildings into residential units.³

Little has been written to tell the story of SoHo’s transformation, and so far sociologists have provided the best studies.⁴ What has been missing is the historical perspective. Urban renewal, deindustrialization, and gentrification overlapped and reinforced each other. This essay intends to show how individual and collective decisions stopped, slowed, or expedited these processes and transformed an industrial district into one of New York’s most popular neighborhoods in little more than a decade.

Urban renewal threatened the South Houston industrial district in 1962. One block of the area, containing thirty buildings, was the subject of a study by the City Club of New York, a prominent civic organization devoted to housing and business redevelopment. City Club president, I.D. Robbins, visited every tenant and conducted interviews, accumulating data on vacancy ratios, rent values, and employment figures. The City Club prepared the report for the City Planning Commission, the agency instrumental in determining the district’s zoning. The Club was hardly reticent about its contempt for the area as was evident in the pamphlet’s title, *The Wastelands of New York City*.⁵

Robbins labeled South Houston a “commercial slum” and concluded that it was “ripe for immediate redevelopment.” His inquiry revealed an alarmingly high vacancy

ratio of 15.4 percent. Rent in twenty-four of the buildings was ridiculously low—\$1.00 or less per square foot per year. Despite a popular perception of high employment, Robbins found less than 160 workers to an acre. He argued that this inefficiency was most appalling, given the area's advantages to the city's "best subways, the best sewers and drainage, the best power supply, the best fire and police protection." For Robbins, the solution was unmistakable, which he emphasized in bold print and large font: **A better use should be found for the land.** By that he meant a mix of low- to-upper-income housing.⁶ Other groups and individuals echoed Robbins, although there was disagreement on details, with differing emphasis placed on the importance of middle- and upper-income housing needs.⁷

Opposed to the bulldozer methods characteristic of the Robert Moses era of slum clearance, City Planning Commission Chairman James Felt hired the economist Chester Rapkin, director of the Institute for Urban Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, to do another analysis of South Houston, and assess the viability of 650 firms in a twelve-block area. Felt approached the industrial district with discretion and curiosity. In May 1962, he remarked:

The area under consideration could be redeveloped for housing, it could remain industrial, or even possibly provide for a combination of both housing and industry. A careful study of this area is required and we feel it would be unwise to take any renewal action without taking this initial step. We must know in greater detail how important old loft building areas are to the City's economy and how dependent are the industries in these areas on their existing location.

Felt said that the commission would make a recommendation after considering the findings, which were published in 1963.⁸

The Rapkin report clearly demonstrated that the earlier City Club investigation was not only inadequate but also full of mistakes. Rapkin found 12,700 workers employed in the area, or an impressive 410 per acre. He determined the vacancy ratio to be 5.7 percent, low for a manufacturing district. Rent was on average \$0.81 per square foot per year, cheap by any measure. These employment and vacancy figures sharply contrasted with those presented by the City Club. Robbins had wrongly assumed that the one block was representative of the entire area. Employment density, however, varied significantly by street. The vacancy ratio also ranged considerably by block. In four blocks it was just 3 percent or less, while in two others it peaked at 12 percent.⁹

Unlike Robbins, Rapkin focused on the demographics of the workforce. Approximately 40 percent were Puerto Rican, 20 percent African American, and 40 percent a *mélange* of Jews, Italians, Irish, and Slavs. Women made up 47 percent of the labor force, predominating in textiles and apparel. Manufacturing activities accounted for 64 percent of the establishments and 81 percent of the workers, mostly operative and unskilled Puerto Ricans and African Americans. The New York City Department of Labor predicted a decline in manufacturing between 1960 and 1970 and an attendant decrease in employment of 2 percent. The labor department also projected the continuation of a shift from blue- to white-collar employment, foretelling declines in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations. Had the department factored in already committed urban renewal projects, which called for the demolition of 9 million square feet of loft and factory space, anticipated rates of deindustrialization would have been significantly higher. As a result of discrimination in hiring and in apprenticeship systems of craft unions, minority groups had little opportunity to cultivate existing skills or

acquire new ones. Their prospects for a white-collar future were doubtful. And they would be the hardest hit were the South Houston industrial area to be demolished.¹⁰

Rapkin stated that the district's economic value lay in its function as an "incubator." Roughly two-thirds of existing firms were small, and employed fewer than twenty-five people. In an environment where rent was inexpensive and overhead low, fledgling businesses had the opportunity to take root and even expand. Rapkin's data bore out this view and, further, showed that these small businesses had remained stable.

The most urgent redevelopment problem involved the condition of the manufacturing buildings themselves. Most of them, constructed in the late nineteenth century, were obsolete and deteriorating. Rapkin recommended minimal investment to bring the structures into compliance with fire and building codes. But overall the economic vitality of South Houston was evident, and its preservation a necessity. Rapkin concluded that "there is little doubt regarding the sound status of the establishments."¹¹

The City Planning Commission and Mayor Robert Wagner were persuaded by the Rapkin report. The commission agreed that urban renewal would destroy many burgeoning businesses and increase the unemployment rate among minorities. The planners added that there was no scheme to compensate the firms for moving. Robbins, who had recently endorsed a plan backing the development of middle- and lower-income housing, became livid upon hearing the news. Slighting Rapkin's incubator thesis, he charged the city planners with racial and ethnic pandering. They were, he said, "waving the bloody shirt of discrimination."¹²

But the South Houston industrial district was not immune to yet larger development pressure. In the late 1960s, the impending construction of the Lower

Manhattan Expressway threatened many of its manufacturing buildings. This 1.2-mile, ten-lane roadway was to run along Kenmare and Broome Streets, linking the Holland Tunnel and the West Side Highway with the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridges on the east. First proposed in the Regional Plan of 1929 and approved by the City Planning Commission in 1941, the expressway was to facilitate the flow of traffic from New Jersey to Brooklyn and to relieve congestion in Lower Manhattan. Intense debates ensued: Proponents argued it would save the city from losing hundreds of thousands of low-skilled jobs to the suburbs and lower the cost of conducting business, while critics charged it would displace approximately 1,200 families and result in the loss of anywhere between 6,000 and 10,000 jobs, held mostly by minority workers.¹³

Powerful coalitions pressed Republican Mayor John Lindsay to support the expressway. These included the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, which represented 200 business firms, and the Council of Organizations for the Lower Manhattan Expressway, a group of 28 organizations comprising business associations, civic leagues, organized labor, housing, real estate, contracting, and transportation industries. Notable advocates were David Rockefeller, president of Chase Manhattan Bank, Robert Moses, chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, and Peter Brennan, president of the Building and Construction Trades Council. As a congressman and mayoral candidate in 1965, Lindsay had opposed the expressway, and, after taking office in early 1966, he decided against the project altogether. Brennan, among others, was outraged and threatened a work stoppage by almost 200,000 construction workers on June 22, 1966, if the mayor did not proceed with the expressway and other projects. Bowing to the pressure, Lindsay said his administration would study the matter more

thoroughly. By March 1967, he halfheartedly endorsed the expressway, but no construction began. The Regional Plan Association weighed in on October 29, 1967, and claimed that the Lower Manhattan Expressway “would quadruple speeds over the busiest truck route in the world.” On April 30, 1968, the *New York Times* editorialized, “The need for a high-speed route for traffic between the East River bridges and the Holland Tunnel has been apparent ever since the tunnel was opened forty years ago.” The coalitions stressed that the project would cost city taxpayers almost nothing since the expressway connected New Jersey and New York and, therefore, qualified as part of the interstate highway system. The federal government would subsidize 90 percent of the \$150 million price tag for construction, and the state would pay the bulk of the remaining costs.¹⁴

Mayor Lindsay encountered tremendous opposition from local leaders. Most ardent was Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton, who emphasized the demolition of residential units and the loss of jobs. City councilman and soon-to-be congressman Ed Koch predicted other disastrous consequences. In a May 3, 1968, letter to the *New York Times*, Koch wrote:

The expressway would suck more cars and their poisonous fumes into a city already afflicted with traffic congestion and polluted air. It would destroy healthy neighborhoods. The blighting effects of the expressway would extend beyond the areas it would physically destroy, into such neighborhoods as Greenwich Village and Chinatown.

Koch later argued that the Lindsay administration was beholden to the highway lobby, unions, and industry and that it had “sold” the federal government “a bill of goods” in creating a sense of urgency for the road. The case of anti-expressway advocates strengthened in January 1969, when the New York Scientists’ Committee for Public

Information released a report estimating that the anticipated carbon monoxide levels “would be sufficient to cause the physical collapse of some people near the expressway.” Sutton, Koch, Congressman Leonard Farbstein, and others, seized on the study. They delivered a statement demanding that the Lindsay administration abandon the current plans for the expressway “on the grounds that it is an unnecessary and potentially harmful project.”¹⁵

Grassroots activism was no less vigorous. On April 10, 1968, residents who were to be displaced, or in some way affected by the project, vented their frustration at a public hearing. The most urgent issue was housing. Commissioner Frank Arricale, head of the city’s relocation department, announced, “I’m simply saying housing will be available for everyone.” Arricale did not offer details, and the crowd was not satisfied. Reverend Gerard La Mountain, pastor of the Most Holy Crucifix Church on Broome Street, which was to be destroyed and replaced by a park and fountains, stated that

[Lindsay’s] promises don’t seem to mean anything and he seldom shows up at public meetings. My parishioners are poor. Where is the city going to move them? To housing already allocated to the people of Cooper Square? As much as I love the people of Broome Street, they should not dislocate the people of Cooper Square. This hearing is a swindle.

Jane Jacobs, antimodernist and author of the highly influential *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), was present to denounce the expressway. This was the type of project that she had condemned in her monumental work. Jacobs was an outspoken critic of the automobile in the heart of the city. She implored, “With the amount of unemployment in this city, who would think of wiping out thousands of minority jobs?” Congressman Farbstein encouraged residents to remain steadfast. “If you will permit me to urge militancy,” he told them, “I assure you they will not drive you

out of your homes.” The public hearing ended in an uproar as Jacobs was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct for allegedly trying to break up the assembly. The people went home still uncertain about their fate.¹⁶

Out of all this turmoil in 1968 emerged a coalition of artists, for the most part living in lofts in the South Houston industrial district and calling themselves Artists Against the Expressway (AAE). Artists had begun to trickle into the area in the late 1950s and early 1960s, enticed by low rents and ample space in which to live and work. A colony of approximately 600 artists was burgeoning, and their living and working space was threatened by the Lower Manhattan Expressway. “The expressway would kill the last suitable place in the city for lofts,” said Julie Judd, chair of the AAE and wife of the sculptor Donald Judd. “There’d be scarcer space and higher rents. And we don’t want to be urban-renewed.” Not only did the AAE mobilize locals, it also contacted artists, dealers, critics, curators, trustees, and other influential people from all over the world including eminent figures such as Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella.¹⁷

The AAE organized a meeting of about 250 artists and their allies on June 19, 1969, at the Whitney Museum, to rally the opposition. Speaker after speaker discussed the catastrophes the road would cause. James Marston Fitch of Columbia University’s School of Architecture pointed out that many of the city’s remaining cast-iron buildings would be destroyed. William Woods, representing a group of architects and engineers, argued that the road would cost closer to \$500 million than the estimated \$150 million. The painter Barnett Newman was most passionate. He blasted David Rockefeller, the chairman of the board of the Museum of Modern Art and an advocate of the expressway.

“Let us not overlook that the strongest forces against artists are the art lovers,” Newman said.¹⁸

On July 16, 1969, Mayor Lindsay, facing enormous pressure, abandoned the expressway “for all time.” The decision was purely political—based on the needs of his troubled re-election campaign—and culminated developments of the previous two months.¹⁹

Reaction in the communities, of course, was positive, though it was tempered with skepticism and frustration. Reverend La Mountain expressed relief but refrained from celebration, noting that Mayor Wagner had condemned the expressway in 1963, only to revive it shortly thereafter. “We’ll wait until the city demaps the road officially,” he said. Mary D’Annuziata of Mulberry Street in Little Italy was glad to be free of the anxiety. “My family came to this neighborhood 55 years ago from Naples, where they lived in fear of Mount Vesuvius,” she said. “Here, we’ve been living in fear of the expressway. It’s a great load off my mind that we won’t have to move after all.” Indeed, the unbuilt road took its toll on many neighborhoods. “This thing has been lingering for so long that the city must be blamed for creating slums here,” contended Barnett August, executive vice president of the East Side Chamber of Commerce. “Landlords couldn’t get mortgages on loans for improvements because the banks thought the neighborhood was doomed. The buildings just deteriorated.” Ironically, a negative for real estate interests was a positive for the artists of South Houston. The specter of a major expressway had kept building prices and rents low. It had also discouraged real estate developers from lobbying again to level the industrial district for middle-income housing.²⁰

Still, this was a time of disquiet for the artists. To be sure, they took pride that the Artists Against the Expressway had played a part in pressuring Lindsay to kill the project. Although their living and working quarters would not be destroyed, other problems loomed. The artists were residing illegally in an area zoned for light industry, and, though rent was cheap and space abundant, they suffered the consequences. They faced the constant threat of eviction; their landlords occasionally engaged in rent gouging; their buildings usually did not comply with standard codes and fire regulations; and they did not receive basic city services, such as garbage collection. While other residents began anew after the defeat of the Lower Manhattan Expressway, the artists of South Houston anticipated many more bouts of political posturing and legal wrangling.²¹

Housing for artists in New York had become a contentious issue in the early 1960s. A shortage impelled many of them to demand political reform as urban renewal projects endangered their loft space in manufacturing buildings. Between 1956 and 1963, the city lost approximately 7.1 million square feet of loft space. The construction of the World Trade Center dispersed an artists' community in the electronics district off Vesey Street. Middle-income housing units and an addition to Pace College replaced loft buildings by the Brooklyn Bridge. Commercial developers demolished studios in Chelsea. The seemingly constant destruction and rebuilding filled many with resignation and a sense of foreboding. In 1962, one artist said that "When we're driven out, we're done for. And, there's a damned good chance that the city'll be through as a cultural center. Disperse the art community and you kill us. It's not a question of moving to another city. This sort of thing is happening throughout the country." But many others

refused to yield. “The artist,” proclaimed one, “has always found a way to survive This is an incredible city and I’ll resist like hell leaving.”²²

To make matters worse, in 1960 the city’s building inspectors began to enforce the existing fire codes. Several conflagrations precipitated the crackdown on artists living in non-residential buildings. The Fire Department and municipal politicians pressured the Buildings Department to evict illegal residents. At least 100 artists were expelled from their living and working quarters.²³

In response, some 500 artists organized in the winter of 1960-1961, and formed the Artists’ Tenant Association (ATA). In the summer of 1961, they announced that its members would withhold their work from the city’s art galleries and museums unless the Buildings Department relaxed its eviction policy. Seeking to assuage artists as he ran for re-election, Mayor Wagner compromised with the ATA. “The artist working in New York is assured of the city’s continuing interest in his welfare and his work,” the mayor said. In August 1961, his administration agreed to allow artists to reside in commercial buildings provided certain standards were met. The building required a sufficient means of egress and ingress; it had to pass a limited inspection by the Buildings Department; the artist was responsible for putting a sign on the building’s exterior informing the Fire Department of an “Artist in Residence”; and only two artists were allowed to live in the loft building.²⁴

The A.I.R. program, as it became known, was unsuccessful in solving the housing problem. By June 1963 only 81 of 146 applications were approved by the Buildings Department. Apprehensive of rejection, many artists avoided the registration process. And in December 1963, the city began rezoning districts, which signified that residency

in industrial buildings would not be permitted in light manufacturing and dense commercial areas. Artists living in parts of Chelsea, the West Village, and Lower Manhattan now faced the menace of eviction. Claiming that the city had acted in “bad faith” in betraying the August 1961 agreement, the Artists’ Tenant Association once again mobilized its forces. On April 3, 1964, it organized a protest of roughly 1,000 artists in front of City Hall and persuaded more than eighty galleries to close that day in solidarity. The coalition spread word of its intentions, sending information to 2,000 people, buying advertisements, and putting up posters in the subways. ATA executive members won the support of Manhattan Councilman-at-Large Paul O’Dwyer and met with City Planning Commission Chairman William F. R. Ballard, Buildings Commissioner Harold Birns, and Acting City Administrator Maxwell Lehman. ATA leaders also received backing from representatives of the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²⁵

On another front, the ATA won a legal battle to permit artist residency in a commercial building in Greenwich Village. The newly-formed Citizens for Artists’ Housing (CAH) and the ATA worked with state senator MacNeil Mitchell to advance the zoning change. Ann Lye of the CAH commented,

When you think of the strong, safe loft buildings all over the city, it’s shocking that so many artists have been forced to move to Hoboken. We want to conduct an experiment to show that the West Village lofts can be turned into legal, living studios for artists.

In April 1964 the New York state legislature amended the Multiple Dwelling Law, passing Article 7-B, which legalized residential use of the building on Greenwich and Twelfth Streets and, more broadly, allowed artists to live and work in manufacturing and

commercial buildings in New York City. State legislators acknowledged the relatively low income of artists, the high cost of living in the city, and the large amount of space artists required for their work. Not addressing these conditions, they wrote, would “threaten to lead to an exodus of persons regularly engaged in the visual fine arts from cities to the detriment of the cultural life thereof and of the state.” The state defined an artist as one occupied “in the visual fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, on a professional fine arts basis and so certified by an art academy, association, or society, recognized by the municipal office of cultural affairs or the state council on the arts.” But Article 7-B also contained stipulations that diminished the legislative triumph. Section 277 established rigid fire codes and did not permit manufacturers and artists to use the same building. This, in effect, meant that it would be too expensive for landlords to improve their buildings for artist residency.²⁶

Frustrated, most artists reverted to living illegally and covertly and either evaded authorities or bribed them. Many artists also went back to posting Artists In Residence signs on their buildings for the sake of firemen. They did not inform the Buildings Department, however, because they were worried that an official inspection would end in their expulsion.²⁷

New York’s first publicly sponsored artist center interestingly emerged not in the South Houston loft district but in the vacant Bell Telephone Laboratories in Greenwich Village. In March 1968, the Board of Estimate approved the conversion of the thirteen-story building into studios and rehearsal rooms for artists. Westbeth, as the project came to be known, included 383 rental units. In order to qualify, an artist required certification by a board of advisers. The applicant’s income had to fall between \$6,000 and \$10,000 a

year, and residency was for a limited period. Bounded by Bank, West, Bethune, and Washington Streets, Westbeth was financed through the Federal Housing Authority, and was supported in part by the J.M. Kaplan Fund and the National Council on the Arts. The city granted a tax abatement, and Bankers Trust provided a loan. The center officially opened in 1970.²⁸

Still, there were rumblings of discontent, and the loudest were in South Houston as the construction of the expressway seemed imminent. Artists continued to live illegally and precariously, hiding from and bribing inspectors, all the while subject to the whim of landlords. Though renters could simply move away if inspectors were vigilant, cooperative owners were not so flexible. They had the fewest options. One co-oper recalled, "Inspectors wanted \$100 a floor at most up until about 1968, but then their greed drove many of us to go for legalization to stop the graft." Another said, "We felt certain we would lose our homes."²⁹

The official march to gain legal residency in the South Houston industrial district began in 1968 with the formation of the SoHo Artists Association (SAA). The SAA, which recruited from the Artists Against the Expressway, included a coordinating committee involved in political and bureaucratic matters. The committee established regular contact with the City Planning Commission and Community Board Two, the local advisory planning board. The committee also ran meetings, managed public relations, and organized demonstrations.³⁰

Though all members of the SAA were artists living illegally in lofts, there was division within the organization as a result of conflicting interests between renters and co-ops. The renters constituted the majority of artists in South Houston and were most

likely unable to afford cooperatives. Most of them supported the insecure status quo and opposed the movement for legalization. “They felt it would drive up rents, and expose us to more inspectors, perhaps those from the Fire Department,” said one co-oper.³¹ The co-ops attempted to appeal to the renters and established a renters’ committee within the SoHo Artists Association. The new committee, however, attracted few people. The SAA further tried to reach out to the disgruntled majority by insisting upon rent control provisions, as it negotiated with the City Planning Commission in June 1970. The CPC Chairman Donald Elliott immediately rejected the demand. Enlarging the scope of rent control to include commercial and manufacturing buildings, Elliott said, was simply asking for too much. Not willing to agitate further, the SoHo Artists Association succumbed. Recalled a co-oper on the coordinating committee:

Renters felt we were selling them out. But rent control, which is what they needed, was an issue too large to fight out in this arena. Besides, we felt that the certification [of all residents as artists by the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs] would limit the area to artists and to keep the push factor out of the rent situation in the remaining lofts. We were naïve.³²

But the paramount objective of the SAA was not to accommodate renters; it was to persuade the CPC to amend the zoning regulation to permit residential use of manufacturing and commercial buildings. It was a formidable task, given the CPC’s interest in light industry. Chester Rapkin had become a member of the Planning Commission in 1969, and he reiterated his concerns from his 1963 report. The planning commission ultimately envisioned middle-income housing in the area. These points were underscored in the 1969 *Master Plan* approved by the City Planning Commission about the city’s social and economic future.

Inevitably, white-collar activities and housing are going to supplant manufacturing in [South Houston]. The problem is to pave the way without losing blue-collar jobs. In time, the industrial renewal program will provide redeveloped land elsewhere which can be used to rehouse Manhattan firms. A long-range program must be developed, however, if the relocation is to work.³³

Trying to defuse potential sources of opposition, the SAA approached many of the 1,100 businesses in South Houston as well as the local chapter of the Warehousemen's Union. To the relief of the artists, no interest group had coalesced to urge development in the area. Industries were varied and not organized. Manufacturers and warehousing and wholesale businesses employed approximately 27,000 workers in 1971, mostly unskilled Puerto Ricans and African Americans. This figure signified a decline in employment since 1962, bearing out the process of deindustrialization. In particular, employment in service, retail, and wholesale jobs had dropped precipitously. The Warehousemen's Union, according to an SAA official, was "neutral." Three years after legalization, CPC Chairman Elliott recounted,

There was no countervailing force claiming the neighborhood. The Lower Manhattan Expressway had prevented land assembly and kept the traditional developer out. . . . Industry never came to the hearings. The landlords wanted no restriction at all, and had no vested interest in incubator industry.³⁴

In 1969 the SAA landed its most influential supporter, the wealthy art patron and Cultural Affairs Commissioner, Doris C. Freedman. Freedman revived the Citizens for Artists' Housing (CAH), which included prominent artists, dealers, and collectors. She attracted political notables into the CAH, such as Mrs. Jacob K. Javitts and Mrs. August Heckscher. Above all, she assisted the SoHo Artists Association in reassuring the City Planning Commission that it need not worry about the sudden displacement of light

industry. The CPC had believed that the opening of South Houston to residential use would create fierce competition for loft space, ultimately favoring affluent non-artists and uprooting light industry as well as artists. Freedman argued that South Houston should be restricted to artists and that her office be in charge of certifying potential residents. Otherwise, she claimed, “you’d have a swarm of developers rushing in with hi-risers.” In her plan, artists and light industry would co-exist, and rent values would remain relatively low. The SAA agreed and included her recommendations in its proposal to the City Planning Commission.³⁵

Still not convinced by early 1970, the CPC wanted to know how rezoning would benefit the city. Michael Levine, a sympathetic CPC aide and liaison to Community Board Two, advised the SAA to stress economic factors in its argument, not aesthetic ones. An artist commented, “We took the approach that we were workers who need to work where we live for both economic reasons and the nature of our work. We hit [the CPC] with vacancy rates [in the loft buildings] and employment figures. We offered to put property back on the tax rolls.” The SAA drew up a justification in terms that would resonate with the planning commission. The report said:

[Artists’] economic value lies not only in the volume of trade and employment in the art industry—some \$100 million worth—but also in the fact that their presence contributes to making the City an attractive place to be. This ‘glamour’ attracts, among others, the office and executive elite, whose exodus would disintegrate the healthiest elements in the City’s economic structure.³⁶

The SAA contended that artists were not forcing out light industry, but moving into vacant, small buildings, unlikely to attract, or displace, manufacturers. A 1969 SAA survey of South Houston revealed that 86 percent of artists lived in such buildings. The CPC did not object, but it opposed residency in larger buildings, which, it wrote in the

Master Plan, were “still suitable for manufacturing.” Addressing the planners’ concerns, the SAA’s May 1970 proposal stated, “the owner of a new space to be occupied shall provide an affidavit from the previous tenant that the latter’s occupancy was terminated of his own volition, or that the space has been vacated for at least six months.”³⁷

Just as negotiations were intensifying, the mass media joined the fray. Many in South Houston had opposed the idea of publicizing their illegal residency, fearing retribution from the CPC. Others had realized that the press would inevitably follow the story, and the best strategy would be to cooperate and indeed try to win favor with reporters. Before the SAA could unite on an approach, *Life* magazine decided to run a feature in March 1970, the first to expose the underground colony to the public. The article included illustrations of beautifully remodeled lofts, and it noted the camaraderie in the grimy manufacturing district. The sculptor Bill Tarr, and his wife Yvonne, found that “the feeling of community generated by the other artists in their neighborhood more than makes up for its inconveniences,” namely no garbage collection, no public schools for their son, and no nearby supermarket.³⁸

Now that everyone was made aware of the lifestyle, the SAA worked assiduously to express its concerns to anyone who would listen. “The *Life* magazine story on chic loft living down here blew our cover, so there was no point in laying low,” remembered an SAA leader. “We wanted to get the record straight.” That meant creating a sense of urgency about the dire predicament of artists in New York, portraying South Houston’s artists as a unified group, and launching a public relations campaign to gain the sympathy of New Yorkers, and ultimately, the approval of the CPC. To those ends, the SAA organized a three-day festival in early May, with some 100 artists opening their studios

and displaying their work to a curious public. In addition, the group arranged a jazz concert, poetry reading, multi-media rock show, and fountain sculpture. Admission to all events was free. Said one activist,

The festival was our way of putting pressure on the CPC. We invited the commissioners to come along with the public to see that we lived like human beings. We stressed middle-class virtues—like hygiene, and the city’s definition of a bohemia got radically altered.³⁹

Journalists from *Time* and the *New York Times* provided glowing coverage, beaming at what they described as a neighborhood rejuvenated. “Above all,” wrote *Time*, “[visitors] saw evidence of the hard work and ingenuity that have transformed 40 blocks of bleak, empty spaces into home, work space and playground all in one.” Grace Glueck, the art reporter for the *New York Times*, used the event to write a feature on the artists’ enclave. She portrayed South Houston as “the only area left in Manhattan where the loft space [artists] need is still available at reasonable rates.” Glueck depicted the artists as underdogs against the mighty forces of the City Planning Commission and real estate, and she crafted a mosaic of dystopia if the artists were to be priced out of the city.⁴⁰

The media coverage galvanized the SAA while it alerted the CPC that the fate of the artists deeply concerned many New Yorkers. After a public hearing on September 23, and a few more rounds of negotiations, the gap between the two groups closed. By late 1970 they were on the verge of an agreement. The final terms were less than the SAA had pressed for, but the best it could do. The CPC divided South Houston into two areas, setting different requirements for artists’ residences. The provisions signified that approximately 1,000 lofts would be available for artists. The city’s Department of Cultural Affairs would certify who was an artist and thus entitled to live in the area. The

CPC also announced that it would consider allowing artist residency in commercial and manufacturing districts above and below South Houston.⁴¹

All that remained was legal approval by the city and the state. After chairman Elliott endorsed rezoning in the fall, Mayor Lindsay backed the plan. In September he issued a statement saying that the “creation of a SoHo artists’ district will insure New York’s position as the art capital of the nation and one of the great creative centers of the world.” On January 20, 1971, the City Planning Commission voted to legalize the residential use of manufacturing lofts by artists in the forty-three-block area. The Board of Estimate approved the plan on January 28. The South Houston industrial district publicly became known as “SoHo,” though some locals and planners had been using the acronym for years. In June the state legislature, despite reservations, amended Article 7-B of the Multiple Dwelling Law, relaxing fire and building codes, and authorizing the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs to certify the artist-residents. Governor Nelson Rockefeller signed the amendment into law on July 6. In 1974, Elliott reflected on the legalization process.

The problems of moving against buildings privately acquired was insuperable. No one would have moved out, so this prevented the setting up of an industrial renewal program. Any new industrial construction implies the need for a huge subsidy from the city, but with SoHo, the city lost no revenue. . . . The laws were being flaunted there, and the city was embarrassed by this. The flaunters produced an inequity, and there were complaints, and the petty corruption of inspectors and city services. In the long run, how could we not enforce laws in SoHo that we were trying to enforce in the rest of the city? And we also felt that the illegal living was a real cost to the residents psychologically.⁴²

The 2,000 newly legal residents, some 600 artists and their families, expressed tremendous relief. Many said they were simply eager to return to their calling full time. Much credit went to the coordinating committee of the SAA, and rightly so. But if it had

not been for the complex economic and political context, “SoHo” would never have been born. As a result of deindustrialization, abandoned urban renewal projects, and a housing crisis, SoHo ostensibly emerged as an artists’ sanctuary that would enhance the city’s culture and strengthen its economy. But the halcyon days would never come. There soon would be open and cutthroat competition for SoHo’s lofts, and those who could not contend would be forced out.

The gentrification of SoHo began well before legalization. The conflict between renters and co-ops, evident since 1968, represented the first battle for space among the district’s residents. Simply put, co-ops could buy their lofts, and renters almost invariably could not. The co-ops’ ability to purchase drove up prices. Buildings that had sold for \$30,000 in 1960 went for \$150,000 in 1970. During that span, rents doubled and tripled. Rent gouging was another problem. After renters completed the burdensome and expensive task of converting an industrial loft into living and working space, they frequently fell victim to unscrupulous landlords. A filmmaker who rented from 1963 to 1970 explained that “The artists fix up their pads, put money into plumbing and wiring. Then the landlords evict them to take advantage of what they’ve accomplished to raise the next tenant’s rent.” As a result of their illegal status and lack of financial resources, those evicted were virtually powerless to take legal action. After legalization, an absence of rent control meant that it was just a matter of time before most renters could no longer afford SoHo. The monthly rent of a 2,500-square-foot loft increased enormously during the course of 1971, in many cases doubling from \$150 to \$300.⁴³

The failure to enforce the 1971 amendment expedited the gentrification. The Department of Cultural Affairs established a certifying committee of twenty people “to evaluate the artist’s commitment to his work and his need for large space.” The group consisted of ten artists, including five living in SoHo, and ten representatives from art institutions. Few residents applied for a certificate of occupancy. Of the 700 artists in the spring of 1971, only 107 were legally certified. Most were simply indifferent. “I know I’m an artist,” said one. “What do I need to have somebody else tell me I’m an artist for?” The Artists’ Certification Committee strongly urged its constituents to obtain official approval. A flyer that it distributed argued:

By being certified you will: 1. Keep down the number of non-artists flocking into SoHo who are driving up rents and taking the legal space reserved for artists. 2. Establish the large numbers of artists who need joint living-working space and in doing so help open up other areas of the city for such purposes. 3. Prepare for the day when the Building Department starts to inspect lofts in SoHo. You will need to be certified to avoid violations even if your loft is legal.

Most artists did not seem to be interested. By June 1972, just 344 of 2,000 residents were certified.⁴⁴

No one pursued non-artists. Chief Inspector Lawrence Clarke of the Buildings Department claimed that his agency was focusing on more urgent matters. “With our manpower, we have to set priorities,” he said. The issue did not concern landlords or real estate agents. “If someone buys a loft from me, it’s his responsibility to get certified,” said a SoHo agent. “But really, who cares who’s an artist?” By November 1974 approximately 80 percent of SoHo residents were artists and their families. According to SAA president Charles Leslie, the rest of the population included gallery owners, art dealers, art critics, publishers, and local businessmen. All of them, he granted, had “a

clear reason for making their home in SoHo,” but he did not mention a goodly number of stockbrokers, lawyers, and other professionals. “We promised Don Elliott that we would be self-policing,” said Leslie in an interview with the *New York Times* in 1974. “But a few years back we blew the whistle on five buildings—and nearly ruptured the community.” The sculptor Donald Judd seemed resigned that certification could not be enforced. “You can’t turn an area into an occupational ghetto,” he said. “You can’t say who is and isn’t an artist. You can’t throw citizens out.” An SAA newsletter from late 1973 exuded deep ambivalence:

We’ve taken no cudgels to non-artists moving into the neighborhood—nor to unsavory landlords. . . . Maybe we should have, maybe not. We’re pretty civil libertarian types ourselves, and even though we personally feel that artist certification and some organized resistance to creeping speculation would safeguard lofts for a lot of people who really need them, we just aren’t the belligerent sort. But maybe we should be.⁴⁵

The spacious lofts attracted non-artists. Loft living became chic in New York in the 1970s. Major periodicals introduced readers to the new style. The March 1970 *Life* exposé first revealed the glamour. It displayed vast interiors, high ceilings, and smart decorations. *New York* magazine followed with a feature in August. Reporter Peter Hellman noted the creativity of artists who converted raw manufacturing space into modern kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, and bathrooms—in addition to studios. *New York* returned less than four years later, devoting twenty-seven pages to SoHo. The issue featured seven handsome lofts and told of the owners’ prodigious investments. These were the luxurious dwellings, wrote Joan Kron, which led to the “influx of affluent non-artists.” Later in 1974, *Progressive Architecture* and the *New York Times Magazine*

exhibited magisterial lofts, plastering their pages with spectacular photographs and detailed floor plans.⁴⁶

The prices for living space skyrocketed in the early 1970s. An unimproved 3,600-square-foot co-op on West Broadway—SoHo's main strip—sold for just under \$10,000 in 1969. By 1974 the rate was between \$25,000 and \$45,000, and monthly maintenance ranged from \$250 to \$500. Improved space went from \$28,000 to more than \$100,000. For a 2,000-square-foot loft, rent increased from less than \$200 in 1970 to \$500 three years later. Residents frequently had to pay fixture fees to previous tenants or landlords for the money already invested in the loft. A building on West Broadway that sold for \$150,000 in 1970 was priced at \$450,000 in 1974.⁴⁷

An influx of businesses further contributed to the gentrification. Some early entrepreneurs were art dealers. Paula Cooper opened the first gallery in 1968. She was followed by the elite of upper Madison Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street, including Leo Castelli, Andre Emmerich, and Ileana Sonnabend. They, like the artists, were attracted to low rents and abundant space. "They're going after the market and going in for the whole promotional thing," said an artist in 1970. Castelli, Emmerich, and Hague Art Deliveries invested almost \$500,000 in remodeling an industrial warehouse on 420 West Broadway. After taking a tour of the former A.G. Nelson Paper Company building, Castelli thought, "Why can't the space . . . be used to show art?" On the eve of legalization, more than a dozen art galleries dotted South Houston. "Now it's becoming another Establishment area," observed the painter David Diaó.⁴⁸

Many resented the dealers' encroachment and attendant ostentation as well as the ensuing rise in property values. The antagonism intensified due to dealer exploitation. In

some cases, artists, if their work was being shown at all, were receiving only a 50 percent commission from Madison Avenue dealers. Many in SoHo responded by selling their work out of their own studios. A group on 55 Mercer Street collaborated in such an endeavor. “We don’t want to call ourselves a gallery,” said one of the artists in December 1970. “We do not have a dealer nor a director and no razzmatazz façade. We have only a space to show our work.” Despite loft openings and other attempts to avoid middlemen, private art galleries mushroomed in SoHo. By 1978, sixty-eight of them blanketed the neighborhood, in addition to seventeen cooperative galleries, owned and run by artists themselves.⁴⁹

“We want no boutiques, no Macdougall Street [Greenwich Village] scene,” said SoHo Artists Association leader Gerhardt Liebmann at a public hearing in 1970. “We want an area where we can work in security and dignity.” But, by 1973, boutiques were a staple of the neighborhood, selling, among other things, clothing, furniture, and jewelry. Retail stores rapidly commercialized ground floors of industrial buildings, outbidding manufacturers. Ivan Karp, owner of the upscale O.K. Harris Gallery, predicted that the craze would end. “There must be a limit to the plunder,” he said. “Many artists, perhaps 50 or more, are getting together and buying their own buildings.” Notwithstanding Karp’s forecast, the “plunder” continued unabated. By 1978, sixty-five shops and twenty-six restaurants lined the streets. Michael Kompa, who worked in a family-owned trucking business in the neighborhood, could not help but make an observation: “I don’t know why they call this SoHo,” he said, looking around. “This is really Greenwich Village.”⁵⁰

Ironically, one voice that strongly opposed the gentrification did much to promote it. The *SoHo Weekly News*, founded in 1973 by former press agent Michael Goldstein, teemed with editorials, columns, and articles that railed against the commercialization.⁵¹ But this is not to imply that the *Weekly News* considered its central role to be neighborhood watchdog. Indeed, it above all fashioned itself as a competitor of the alternative *Village Voice*. The *Weekly News* paid special attention to SoHo, showcasing the galleries, boutiques, and restaurants. For instance, in a two-part series for the 1973 holiday season, the *Weekly News* took readers on a tour of more than two dozen neighborhood shops. Most significantly, the *SoHo News Weekly* included an extensive classified section, listing lofts for rent or sale. The precise impact of the ads is impossible to quantify, but the popularity of the paper offers a clue. Advertising revenues increased quickly, and by January 1976, the paper was available on approximately 400 of the city's newsstands, and the circulation was about 28,000. This made the *SoHo Weekly News* second in distribution to the *Village Voice* in terms of English-language weeklies in the city.⁵²

As a result of gentrification, artists could no longer afford to move to SoHo, and most renters without a long-term lease could not stay. Many who remained had to take full-time jobs, whereas those priced out often went to NoHo—North Houston—or Washington Market, manufacturing districts above and below SoHo, respectively. There, due to their illegal residency, they encountered many of the same problems as South Houston's artists had before legalization. Some others left Manhattan for Hoboken, New Jersey or Williamsburg, Brooklyn.⁵³

The SoHo Artists Association never coordinated an extended strategy to stem gentrification, but it did contest specific projects. SAA president Charles Leslie put it best when he said, “Artists aren’t organization people so the association is primarily a crisis group.” In 1971 it joined the neighboring Italian community of the South Village in defeating a proposal to establish a commune on Spring Street just off West Broadway. The complex would have been a sheltered residence and workshop for women recently released from jail. The artists too were hostile to the idea of a rehabilitation center for female ex-convicts, many of them African American. Edward Chaplin of the SAA explained, “We are basically against any non-art-related residential use. We want to keep the blue-collar industry that is here. . . . Therefore we oppose.”⁵⁴

The SAA next confronted real estate developer Charles Low, who proposed in 1972 to construct an \$11-million, twenty-one-story public sports center on West Broadway. Most artists opposed the complex, contending that it would lead to an increase in rent values, facilitate commercialism, cause traffic congestion, block needed light for work, and disrupt the architectural rhythm of the surrounding five- and six-story cast-iron buildings. The SAA won the support of the Village Independent Democrats, the Environmental Protection Agency, and public and private art groups. It also persuaded the *New York Times*, which, in an editorial on September 21, 1972, argued that for reasons of “scale, function, and the inevitable impact on density, circulation and character,” the sports center was inappropriate. “It would be an egregious example of that sad, speculative spiral of the city destroying itself.”⁵⁵

A formidable coalition, however, supported Low’s plan. Italians in the South Village and Little Italy, west and east of SoHo, respectively, backed the project. The two

Roman Catholic churches in the South Village area were enthusiastic. “The center will be a big improvement over the parking lot that is there now,” said Reverend John Keegan, associate pastor of St. Alphonsus. Low enticed the Italians by promising local children “\$100,000 worth of free time.” Gauging its constituency in the ethnic enclaves, Community Board Two endorsed the proposal while the local planning board added that the center would enrich the neighborhood. On November 14, 1972, the Board of Standards and Appeals unanimously approved Low’s plan. Samuel Lindenbaum, Low’s lawyer, prepared to submit the final proposal to the Buildings Department.⁵⁶

The SoHo Artists Association worked feverishly to overturn the Board’s approval, and, in the end, succeeded. It announced that it would back a legal suit in state supreme court initiated by those co-ops who would be affected by the sports center. The SAA’s lawyer, Charles Jurrist, contended that the Board improperly granted a zoning variance. Representatives of the federal Environmental Protection Agency planned to testify that automobile pollution was already high in the area and that Low would have to demonstrate, in a study, that the center’s presence would not exacerbate the problem. The project lost many of its financial sponsors. In June 1973, after eight months of legal wrangling, Low decided to withdraw his plan.⁵⁷

The SoHo Artists Association’s most significant victory against real estate was the designation of twenty-six blocks in SoHo as a historic district in 1973, although the artists themselves were not central to the effort. The district, bounded by Houston, Canal, West Broadway, Broadway, Howard, and Crosby Streets, is home to the largest concentration of full and partial cast-iron facades in the world. Almost all the buildings, 139 of them, were constructed between 1860 and 1890, when the area thrived as the

center for the city's mercantile and dry-goods trade. Cast-iron structural technology profoundly influenced the development of the skyscraper. Architects used cast iron for building fronts and interior columns. Due to the advent of internal steel skeletons in the mid-1880s, the load-bearing wall technique for support became obsolete, and the employment of the alloy declined.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), founded in 1965 after decades of urban renewal, sought to landmark twenty blocks in 1970 and articulated its case in public hearings. Local, civic, and preservationist groups protested, demanding wider landmarking, and the LPC's proposal was tabled. The groups that pressured the LPC included the SAA, the Historic Districts Council, Community Board Two, and the Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture (FCIA). The FCIA was most adamant. It was led by Margot Gayle, who wrote extensively on the subject and frequently gave walking tours of the area. The next summer, students from Pennsylvania State University and the University of Milan, Italy, assisted the LPC in conducting research and compiling a report on the district's architectural history. On August 16, 1973, the LPC designated the twenty-six blocks a historic district, making it the first commercial area in the city to receive landmark status. Such distinction meant that no building within the zone could be torn down or altered externally without the permission of the LPC. The City Planning Commission approved the designation, and the Board of Estimate confirmed it on October 4. This development ended the threat of high-rise speculation. Real estate agents, however, could use the historic value of the buildings as a marketing tool.⁵⁸

Preservation by no means limited the exploitation of existing loft space. Developers scored a major victory in December 1975, when Democratic Mayor Abraham

Beame signed a bill into law encouraging investors to convert commercial and manufacturing buildings into residential dwellings. The tax abatement and exemption program, known as J-51, originated due to economic and demographic trends. It above all reflected deindustrialization. Vacancy rates in the city's loft buildings reached 25 percent in January 1976. Many properties fell into foreclosure, their prices depreciating significantly. The city council, which wrote J-51, sought to decrease vacancies and tax delinquencies, increase housing supply, and restore buildings. In addition, the council aimed to end illegal conversions and bring buildings into compliance with the Multiple Dwelling Law. The program allowed developers to recover 60 percent of their investments by decreasing their real estate taxes for at least nine years. For major rehabilitation, developers would be able to avoid paying any real estate taxes for the nine-year period. Banks would be more inclined to give permanent mortgages for legal conversions. "The possibilities are very good," said William Berley, president of Berley and Company, a real estate-management firm. Indeed, in the middle of the fiscal crisis, J-51 made sense to politicians and investors. The process of conversion did not result in a loss of tax revenue for the city, and it did not require subsidies from the federal government. Further, it encouraged the middle class to stay in the city, slowing the exodus to the suburbs. By 1977, most residents in converted buildings had a college degree, worked as white-collar professionals, and were between twenty and forty years old.⁵⁹

In SoHo, the short-term effect of J-51 was slight, but the message was dire. There were 555 industrial buildings in the forty-three-block district in 1977. Of those, 178—or 32.1 percent—were converted for residential use. Only thirteen of the conversions were

legal, and just six received J-51 benefits, the low numbers largely a result of an absence of regulations, which eventually took effect in September 1977. Provisions regarding artist occupancy remained in place, but they still were not strictly enforced. The planning commission indicated that it would protect viable industries from incursions by real estate developers, but no mechanisms were implemented to curb speculation. The artists and industries made no mistake about what was happening. The J-51 program demonstrated the city's commitment to gentrification and deindustrialization. It signified an official revision of the 1971 SoHo experiment.⁶⁰

Working-class New Yorkers did little to combat deindustrialization. Of course some unions, notably the printers and longshoremen, recognized the trend early and protected their members through different programs. But there was not much that could be done to stem suburbanization, automation, and relocation to the South and West. Still, as historian Joshua Freeman argued, labor might have been able to do more had it not been for several factors. First, most civic, business, and political leaders endorsed the changes. Second, workers themselves were often too divided along industrial and political lines to address the matter. Third, most workers not surprisingly viewed the shift from blue- to white-collar employment as progress. Politicians, businessmen, and professors had long been promising that the development would bring increased prosperity and security.⁶¹

In SoHo, the mass media muted deindustrialization. Indeed, reporters celebrated the artists who moved into the industrial buildings. Their routine use of frontier imagery made the process seem heroic and noble. In 1973, Nancy Mills of the *Daily News* wrote that "The American pioneering spirit lives on in Soho. Homesteading couples are buying

old warehouses and turning them into large, comfortable houses.” Laurel Delp of the *SoHo Weekly News* in 1975 described early SoHo as “a land full of hazards, true pioneer stuff: instead of Indians, there were fire inspectors, instead of cowboys, artists; and no one knew where to put his trash.” Jim Stratton, Delp’s colleague, employed the metaphors throughout his book, *Pioneering in the Urban Wilderness* (1977). This type of rhetoric was just as appalling in the 1970s as it had been in the 1870s, as it largely ignored or marginalized the uprooted. The workers of SoHo shared one thing in common with the Native Americans of the West: boosters of economic development deemed them both unworthy of fertile space.⁶²

As pioneers were driven off their land, commentators bemoaned the demise of the neighborhood. The poet and art critic Carter Ratcliff penned the most scathing indictment. He likened SoHo to an “aesthetic Disneyland,” a tourist attraction whose artsy style titillated gawking visitors. Ratcliff saved his fiercest denunciation for the SoHo artist, nothing more than a role player in the “traditional conflict between bourgeois and bohemian.” Fellow art critic Judy Beardsall, who moved out in 1975, predicted dystopia. “Soon it will be Greenwich Village,” she said, “a completely fake Bohemia, filled with dead ideas and dead art.” Most people interpreted the changes in declension terms, longing for a glorious past, which in reality had never existed. The painter Ken Showell, who was forced out by high prices, articulated the prevailing sentiment. “In ten years it turned from studios to apartments. It ruined the artist. It’s a shame it’s called Soho. It used to be my neighborhood.”⁶³

To be sure, the jeremiads were unduly harsh. The neighborhood was not entirely overrun by boutiques, restaurants, and “attaché cases,” as Donald Judd called the non-

artists. As late as 1977, artists resided in 60 percent of the households. But the critics astutely observed the trend taking place. SoHo's wild popularity was undermining its vitality as a mixed-use neighborhood. As the artists and industries were disappearing, the place was becoming more and more homogeneous. Urban theorist Jane Jacobs recognized that such an area was conducive to this type of change. "We must understand that self-destruction of diversity is caused by success, not by failure," she wrote. Jacobs outlined four generators of diversity that were essential for "exuberant" neighborhoods. These ingredients were all present in SoHo: The neighborhood served many primary functions as an industrial, commercial, and residential district; its blocks were relatively short in contrast to most of those just north in the monotonous grid; its buildings ranged in age and condition and were used for different purposes; and its streets abounded with workers, residents, and tourists at various times. By themselves, these factors did not make SoHo a vibrant neighborhood, which for Jacobs largely meant an economically successful one. An army of gentrifiers accelerated that development. The extreme success was leading to a decrease in diversity and an increase in banality. No wonder all the *New Yorker* Sylvia Miles could say in 1975 when asked about SoHo was, "So ho. Ho hum. Yawn."⁶⁴

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1. Dorothy Seiberling, "SoHo," *New York*, 20 May 1974.
2. Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, 1974), 12.
3. Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore, Md., 1982), 174-75; for examples of arguments that artists are the agents of gentrification see "Golden Touch," *Nation*, 5 Jan. 1963; "Artists Are Realtors' Best Friend, Edit Says," *Village Voice*, 17 Jan. 1963 (hereafter *VV*); Jim Stratton, *Pioneering in the Urban Wilderness: All about Lofts* (New York, 1977), 7-8, 16, 40-41.

4. Zukin's work on the rise of loft living is most trenchant. Her analysis of the convergence of the cultural avant-garde and the real estate market has enriched our understanding of the 1970s urban political economy. Charles Simpson wrote a series of loosely connected essays, considering, among other things, the art market, urban planning, and family life. His depiction of SoHo as contested territory from the start is the antidote to any notion that there was a "decline" from a "golden age." Charles R. Simpson, *SoHo: The Artist in the City* (Chicago, 1981). One problem with this work, however, is sloppy documentation. Having researched eighteen endnotes, I found that ten were erroneous. Dates and pages of newspaper articles were incorrect. Nevertheless, Simpson's portrayal is fundamentally convincing. James Hudson interrogated the complicated relationship between loft conversions and urban planning. He revitalized human ecological theory, stressing the actions of social groups and individual actors in determining land use patterns. James R. Hudson, *The Unanticipated City: Loft Conversions in Lower Manhattan* (Amherst, Mass., 1987).

5. I. D. Robbins, *The Wastelands of New York City: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Nature of Commercial Slum Areas, Their Potential for Housing and Business Redevelopment* (New York, 1962), 2-9.

6. Ibid., 6-11; "'Hell's Hundred Acres,'" VV; Caro, *Power Broker*, 12, 704, 777, 1006; Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus, Ohio, 1993), xv-xvi, 131-32; Joshua B. Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York, 2000), 114; Chester Rapkin, *South Houston Industrial Area: Economic Significance and Conditions of Structures in a Loft Section of Manhattan* (New York: Department of City Planning, 1963), 285-87.

7. Urban Renewal Study Program, 1962-1963, Mayor Robert F. Wagner Papers, Departmental Files, Roll #8; Letter from Charlotte Schwab, Chairman of MI-COVE, to Mayor Robert F. Wagner, June 21, 1960, Wagner Papers, Subject Files, Roll #89; Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York, 1990), 314; "South Village Site Picked For Huge Mid-Income Co-op," VV, 18 Aug. 1960; "Libs Would Use S. Village Loft Area for Housing," VV, 1 Dec. 1960; Charlotte Schwab, "MI-COVE'S Aims," VV, 16 March 1961; Mary Perot Nichols, "Huge S. Village Project Gets Boost, Then Blast," VV, 7 Dec. 1961; "S. Village Pastor Backs Huge Mi-Cove Project," VV, 21 Dec. 1961; "Mi-Cove Gets Sponsor, Fall Dance Scheduled," VV, 15 Nov. 1962; "'Hell's,'" VV, 22 Nov. 1962; "Mid-Income Housing Looms for Loft Area," VV, 2 May 1963; Bernard Weintraub, "Renovations on Lower East Side Creating New Living Quarters," *New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*), 5 May 1963; Jerome Zukosky, "City Boards in a Hassle Over Houston St. Housing," *New York Herald Tribune*, 29 May 1963.

8. Department of City Planning Newsletter, May-June 1962, Wagner Papers, Departmental Files, Roll #8; City Planning Commission statement, 10 May 1962, Wagner Papers, Departmental Files, Roll #8; Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York* (New Haven, Conn., 1995) s.v. "Felt, James," by Brooke J. Barr, p. 596; "'Hell's Hundred Acres,'" VV; Zukosky, "City Boards . . . Houston St. Housing," *Herald Tribune*.

9. Rapkin, *South Houston Industrial Area*, 12, 18, 248-49, 261.

10. *Ibid.*, 12-17, 37-45; Department of City Planning Newsletter, Nov. 1962, Wagner Papers, Departmental Files, Roll #8.

11. Rapkin, *South Houston Industrial Area*, 18-19, 46-63, 145, 166, 297-99; City Planning Newsletter, Nov. 1962. Between 1957 and 1962, 64 percent of the firms demonstrated economic growth, 21 percent revealed minimal or no change, and 15 percent decreased in business volume. Between 1950 and 1962, the average annual increase in employment was 7.8 percent. The stability of the firms was also clear. More than 78 percent of them were established before 1952, 12 percent between 1952 and 1957, and 10 percent after 1957.

12. Zukosky, "City Boards . . . Houston St. Housing"; Susan Goodman, "Incubator, Industrial Slum: Which Is the Loft Area?" *VV*, 2 April 1964; Simpson, *SoHo*, 136-37; "Hell's Hundred Acres Acts Up Again," *VV*, 3 Feb. 1966.

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62. Urban anthropologist Neil Smith has brilliantly analyzed the relationship between frontier imagery and the gentrification of American cities in the 1970s and 1980s. He persuasively argues that "the myth of the frontier is an invention that rationalizes the violence of gentrification and displacement." See his essay on the struggle over Tompkins Square Park in New York's Lower East Side and the anti-gentrification movement of the 1980s. Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), xiii-xvii, 3-29; Nancy Mills, "A warehouse is not a home except in Soho," *Daily News*, 5 Oct. 1973; Delp, "When the SoHo Romance Is Over," *SWN*. For other examples, see Kron, "Lofty Living," 54, 66; Weissman, "Standoff," *Art News*, Nov. 1974; Marshall J. Schneider, "Artists Move Still Farther South," *SWN*, 9 Oct. 1975.

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In 1962, the City Club of New York, a civic group, called for the clearance of the district in favor of low- to upper-income housing, but the study lacked the verve and punch of a Moses proposal. A second study, the Rapkin Report, funded by the Board of Estimate, disagreed and demonstrated that South Houston was of economic and social value to the city. The area was saved for the time being. But another project, an interstate expressway, threatened to bisect the place. In May 1962, he remarked: The area under consideration could be redeveloped for housing, it could remain industrial, or even possibly provide for a combination of both housing and industry. A careful study of this area is required and we feel it would be unwise to take any renewal action without taking this initial step. Urban renewal, deindustrialization, and gentrification gave new textures to New York City's SoHo from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s. Individual and collective decisions stopped, slowed, or expedited these processes, and transformed an industrial district into an exuberant neighborhood. Stephen Petrus is a doctoral candidate in history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His dissertation is on the politics and culture of Greenwich Village from 1955 to 1965. This is the story of a district transformed. In the early 1960s, New York City's South Houston was a gr... New York City is composed of five boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn (on the South of Long Island), the Bronx, Richmond and Queens. Immense bridges join the boroughs with each other and with the suburbs in New Jersey across the Hudson. Eastern New York State includes the whole valley of the Hudson river, but the state extends 500 km to the west to Lakes Ontario and Erie, with Niagara Falls between them. The state is as big as England. Half of its 17 million people live in or near New York City, while the rest are mainly concentrated in the line of Hudson valley towns near the Great Lakes, leaving