ONCE UPON

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TIME

Walk down Broadway, stroll across Spring or Broome Streets, up Mercer, down Greene—wherever you look you will find galleries, design firms, high-end chains, and fashionable shops housed in grand Victorian marble or cast-iron palaces. Here are stylish housewares, there is a purveyor of "decorative gifts." The words *custom design, gourmet,* and *elegance* alternate up and down the blocks. Against a dazzling blue sky, uniform six-story brick and iron fronts march down the streets with cafés, galleries, and boutiques stretching as far as the eye can see. On West Broadway, the spine of the gallery district, luxury peers around every corner, with banners flying.

And all these emporia of fine design—from paintings to pottery to picnic baskets—find themselves framed within classical columns, rusticated blocks, or rows of arches. Along the designer shopping mall of Broadway, the store windows at Lechters, Banana Republic, Laytner's, and Old Navy are surrounded by exquisite Victorian details. On the corner of a building at West Broadway and Broome, cast-iron flowers grow head downward. Renaissance arcades here, abstract floral patterns there: It all seems to have been tailor-made to fit the offerings graciously presented to the public.

Walk into almost any gallery: With high ceilings supported on rows of slender, elegantly detailed cast-iron columns, these large, airy spaces are ideal for displaying oversize paintings or sculpture. And they make even better boutiques—open space, lots of natural light, huge store windows for displays.

How is it that these mid-19th-century buildings fit SoHo's late 20th-century enterprises so perfectly? Simply because the cast-iron wheel has come full circle. These extraordinary buildings are the hardy survivors of an epoch a century ago and

riches to rags and back again). By Anthony Robins

more when the neighborhood blocks were lined with hotels and restaurants, department stores, and fancy goods merchants serving the carriage trade—when SoHo functioned as a mid–19th-century Midtown Manhattan. And when fashion moved on, as fashion will, the buildings managed to survive during long decades of neglect in which the area came to be known not as SoHo, but as Hell's Hundred Acres.

In the 1850s, '60s, and '70s, New Yorkers came to these Broadway blocks in all their finery to shop at Tiffany's, Lord & Taylor, and Arnold Constable, while visitors tarried at the Metropolitan and St. Nicholas hotels and enjoyed New York's entertainment district—Brougham's Lyceum, Buckley's Minstrel Hall, and the American Musical Institute. It was in these decades before and after the Civil War that the streets blossomed with the world's greatest trove of cast-iron architecture—five- and six-story buildings whose designers mined techniques forged in the Industrial Revolution to create prefabricated knockoffs of Europe's treasures. New World merchant princes modeled their grand extravaganzas on the Renaissance palaces of the merchant princes of Florence and Venice—which they could order, at affordable prices, from that most modern of American marketing tools, the sales catalogue.

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"New York intensified," Junius Henri Browne called Broadway, dubbing it "the reflex of the Republic—bustling, feverish, crowded, ever-changing....Ere the century is ended, it promises to be the most splendid street, architecturally, on either side of the Atlantic." Walt Whitman, poet and editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, also rhapsodized about the grand boulevard: "Trottoirs throng'd—vehicles—Broadway—the women—the shops and shows, the parades, processions, bugles playing, flags flying, drums beating." The wonderful palaces of stone and iron on Broadway and nearby streets sported elegant facades in the latest styles, while cast-iron storefronts made possible enormous show windows and opened the gas-lit interiors to natural light. Those large airy interiors allowed the display of the finest goods on long mahogany counters.

Of course, there was a darker side to the neighborhood's luxury. Just behind the scenes, especially one block west of Broadway along Mercer Street, the gentlemen staying at the plush Broadway hotels, on the prowl after the theaters closed, could find the city's red-light district. Its offerings, as vividly detailed in a guide to the nation's brothels, included Mrs. Hathaway and "her fair Quakeresses," and Miss Lizzie Wright and her "French Belles." Walt Whitman too frequented Mercer Street, but not for the bordellos. He was drawn instead to the tough, working-class men at the Fireman's Hall at 155 Mercer. In 1855, when Ralph Waldo Emerson, distinguished elder American man of letters, came to New York to visit the author of the newly published *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman made a point of taking him to the Fireman's Hall for a beer.

Previous page: **Broadway and Broome Streets, circa 1935.** ***Above:*** **Mulberry and Prince Streets.** ***At right:*** **Broome Street, circa 1935.**

If the Victorian palaces of yesteryear seem a perfect fit for today's SoHo, that's no accident. But it wasn't always so. By the end of the last century these blocks had fallen from favor, deserted by posh stores, hotels, and restaurants that packed up and moved north to more fashionable precincts.

Though now it seems hard to believe, when a handful of pioneering artists moved to SoHo 35 years ago, they found themselves tucked into the cracks of a bustling industrial twilight zone virtually ignored by the rest of the city. The artists came for cheap, raw space, into which they moved without benefit of city permits. Here on Broadway, Mercer, and Broome, in deteriorating lofts hidden behind rusting Victorian facades, their neighbors made children's underwear, envelopes, and folding boxes. Upstairs might be a small printing press, downstairs a machine shop, next door a doll factory. All around them, hundreds of manufacturers of chemical, rubber, leather, and paper goods employed over 12,000 New Yorkers—black, Hispanic, Irish, Italian, and Jewish.

You can still get some sense of the old SoHo on some of the blocks of Wooster Street—small trucks navigate the broken pavement, while the occasional window vents steam. If you look through certain doorways, you can see endless staircases stretching up through the buildings, and imagine the footsteps of thousands of laborers who toiled here for the better part of the 20th century.

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Back in the late 1950s, the lofts were unfinished, the windows drafty, and the rents cheap. The manufacturers had been there for decades, lured by low costs, good subway connections, and convenient truck routes—the bridges to Brooklyn, the tunnel to New Jersey. There were no vacancies. The streets were jammed with trucks, the sidewalks littered with overflowing barrels of fabric remnants; only the occasional AIR sign ("artist in residence") hinted at the odd painter who'd found a landlord willing to look the other way. City planners studying the area in the early 1960s found it, in the words of one, "absolutely hidden by itself and alone—nobody bothered it, nothing was happening, except that all the industries went on and on without being visited or disturbed, like a blank on the map." They first dubbed it, simply, the South Houston Industrial Area, until someone suggested "SoHo"—shorthand for "south of Houston."

Conditions were far from luxurious. Despite their cast-iron facades, the buildings were hardly fireproof. The manufacturing lofts were littered with flammable clutter of all kinds—scraps of cloth, oily rags—and fire violations were endemic. The many blazes that broke out in the factories led to the name Hell's Hundred Acres, bestowed by the city's fire fighters.

Oddly enough, it was Robert Moses, the now reviled but once omnipotent master builder of the city's highways, who paved the way for the artists. His threatened Lower Manhattan Expressway —which would have plowed through half the neighborhood, more or less along Broome Street—eventually died, but stayed on the books long enough to make the loft buildings on the proposed route hard to rent, except to the artists who were used to the threat of sudden eviction.

Though the blocks of SoHo proper in the late '50s and early '60s lacked most residential amenities, human warmth could be found in an adjoining neighborhood just a few blocks to the west in the tenements on Thompson, Sullivan, and MacDougal streets from Broome to Houston—an area that real estate agents would shortly be touting as the "South Village."

Though now the two districts seem to have merged into a greater SoHo, in those days they were still quite distinct. In fact, they'd been separate neighborhoods almost from the beginning, and the streets west of West Broadway had gone through as many transformations as their neighbors to the east. Even before Broadway had begun serving the carriage trade, the area to the west had become "Little Africa." Thompson, Sullivan, and MacDougal were settled by a wave of newly free blacks created by the abolition of slavery in New York State in 1827. An African Free School stood on West Broadway, just north of Canal. Meetings proposing the total eradication of slavery were promoted throughout the neighborhood in the early 1830s—and led to New York's first anti-Abolitionist riot in July 1834. So fierce was the rioting that the National Guard joined in, and the troops and rioters clashed in bloody battle on Thompson Street near Prince. African Americans continued to live here through the Civil War and on to the century's end—the 1892 edition of *King's Guide to New York* singled out Thompson Street as "the centre of one of the largest negro colonies in the City."

By the turn of the century, most of the black population had moved north, making way for the first Italian immigrants. For a few years, the poorest of both worlds mingled in the reviled "black and tans," saloons described by crusading reformer Jacob Riis as "vile rookeries." "The moral turpitude of Thompson Street has been notorious for years," he wrote. He described the black and tans as "the borderland where the white and black races meet in common debauch...Than this commingling of the utterly depraved of both sexes, white and black, on such ground, there can be no greater abomination. Usually it is some foul cellar dive, perhaps run by the political 'leader' of the district, who is 'in with' the police. In any event it gathers to itself all the lawbreakers and all the human wrecks within reach."

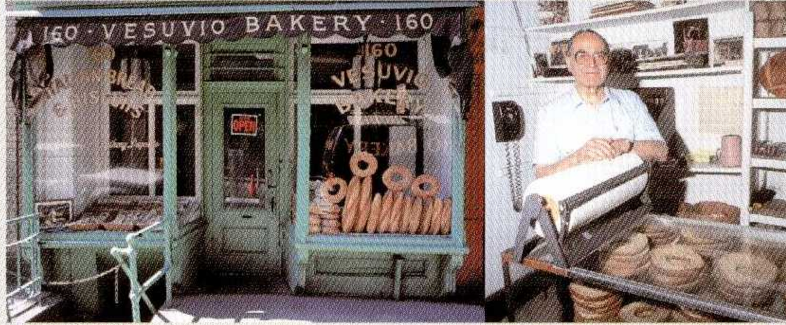
By the early years of the century, Thompson Street and its surroundings had become a thriving extension of Little Italy. Italian language newspapers advertised establishments catering to the immigrant population. "A. Biffoni & Co., 23 Thompson Street. Neapolitan pork sausage at very moderate prices. Specialists in every kind of sausage of the Bologna or Milan type. Impeccable service." "Hotel Caprera, 97 Thompson Street. The oldest Italian hotel in New York." "J. Lombardi & Bros. 181 Thompson Street. Direct importers of very fine oil from Lucca. Specializing in Chianti and California wines."

Immigrant life was not easy. Tiny tenement apartments, 400 square feet up five flights of stairs, housed families with eight and ten children, who struggled through cold, damp winters without heat or hot water. But by the late 1950s and '60s, conditions had improved. And to the newly arriving artists, the tiny apartments seemed cheap, warm, and cozy, and the neighborhood was pleasant and welcoming. A walker on the sidewalks passed delis, groceries, laundries, and social clubs. A live poultry market flourished on Broome Street near Thompson. Rocco and his Brothers, a long-since vanished Spring Street deli, had the air of a stage set—postcards from Italy tacked up on the wall, and taped to the cash register a handwritten warning: "Anyone caught shoplifting will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law—neighborhood law, that is."

The restaurants and bars of today's Thompson Street are a far cry from the black and tans of a century ago, or even the pizzerias and family restaurants of the 1950s and '60s. But among the upscale shops and cafés now occupying the tenement storefronts, some of the old neighborhood places do manage to survive: Ennio Jeweler, Fanelli's cafe—and the immortal Vesuvio bakery, run by Anthony Dapolito, head of the local community board for so many years that he's often called the Mayor of Greenwich Village. But luxury condominiums are rising on Thompson Street next to the tenements. What used to be a truck garage across the street today serves as the garden of the elegant Barolo Restaurant. And new luxury hotels have come to the neighborhood—a century and a half since anyone thought to build a hotel south of Houston Street.

Today it's hard to imagine SoHo as anything other than admired and prosperous—it's been around for so long that visitors and natives alike take it for granted. In this city of evanescence, where 30 years can plausibly pass for eternity, the neighborhood feels like it's been there forever. But history rolls on, and neighborhoods evolve, so enjoy SoHo now—who knows what it will look like in another 35 years? ■

VETERANS OF AN EARLIER SOHO



Vesuvio Bakery *(left)*, in business in SoHo for 78 years, is the "most photographed store in the world," says its owner and 50-year SoHo resident Tony Dapolito *(right)*.

Ennio Jeweler *(right)* was opened by its owner Ennio Romano *(left)* in 1947. Romano is also an orchestra leader and composer who played the guitar and violin with orchestras all over 1950s New York.

One of New York's oldest restaurants, Fanelli's Cafe *(left)* can be found on Prince Street in SoHo. And perhaps one of SoHo's most interesting inhabitants is Lucky, a retired seaman in his 80s who lives on Thompson Street and is known for kissing the trees of SoHo as he goes on his daily walks.

Frank's Hairstyles *(left)* on Spring Street was opened by original owner Frank over 80 years ago. He sold it to its current owner and moved to Italy in the '30s. Today it is a popular hangout for those who know the history of SoHo best, like Rocky Orgo and Lucky *(right)*.