

# SoHo Wins Historic Designation

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

The long-awaited designation of SoHo as an historic district was made official today by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

The lower Manhattan district, unique in its abundance of mid-19th century cast-iron architecture, is the first commercial area to be designated an official landmark. The city's more than 20 historic districts are all in residential neighborhoods.

The designation of the 26-block area bounded by W. Broadway, Canal, Houston and Crosby Sts. comes three years after the Landmarks Commission held public hearings on the proposal.

Since those hearings there has been intense community pressure for designation, considerable public debate over its potential impact and much concern that because of real estate pressure the commission would not designate the full 26 blocks as originally proposed.

## U. S. Contribution

SoHo takes its name from its location south of Houston St. and has the largest concentration in the country of cast iron architecture, one of the few original American contributions to architectural history.

Cast iron refers as much to a method of construction as an actual architectural style. It was an early form of modular construction and a product of the Industrial

Revolution. The facades of buildings—including the Doric, Ionic or Corinthian columns and all the intricate ornamental details—were cast in off-site New York foundries and assembled on the building sites, in much the same way prefabricated building is done today.

All the cast-iron techniques, the commission notes in its designation report, "contributed significantly to the subsequent development of the skyscraper which is this country's outstanding contribution to world architecture. . . . The metal and glass skyscrapers of present day New York are, in this regard, direct descendants of their modest prototype between Canal and Houston Sts."

The district was threatened in the 1960s by the proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway, which was finally killed by the Lindsay Administration after great community opposition. With the Expressway out of the way, the commission held its 1970 hearing on the district's landmark proposal.

Under the 1965 Landmarks Law, the commission could have designated SoHo anytime after its public hearing in 1970. All structures within an historic district carry the same protection as an individually designated landmark—they may not be torn down or externally altered without commission approval.

SoHo flourished as this

city's center for the mercantile and dry goods trade until the end of the 19th century when it entered a period of decline. In the 1960s artists seeking low rents and high ceilings to accommodate their larger and larger canvasses began to move into the area where they have been co-existing well with the more than 20,000 people who still work in the variety of light manufacturing industries.

In January of 1970, the city legalized the residential use by artists of lofts in commercial buildings and since that time real estate values have risen, spurred by the influx of art galleries, boutiques, restaurants and a few artist-entrepreneurs.

Supporters of landmark designation have argued that

preservation of SoHo's unique cast-iron buildings will stabilize the community, prevent large scale new development and thus maintain its unusual commercial-residential character.

In announcing the SoHo designation, Landmarks Commission Chairman Harmon H. Goldstone noted: "This recent conversion of abandoned lofts into artists' residences, studios and galleries has added new vitality to the area. With this revitalization the ongoing and important commercial and industrial activities continue, thus providing a combination of uses.

The district demonstrates one way in which the core of an old city can be given new life without the destruction of its cultural heritage."

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With its cast-iron facade, its columned windows and triangular pediment, 169 Prince St. is a classic example of SoHo architecture.

Post Photo by Frank Leonaro

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Shorter version of article but with picture,

## SoHo Made a Historic District

By EDWARD B. GRATZ  
SoHo, a 26-block area in lower Manhattan with an abundance of mid-19th-century cast-iron architecture, was designated yesterday a historic district by the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

The area flourished until the end of the 19th century as the center for the city's mercantile and dry-goods trade. In the 1920's, however, artists seeking low rents and high ceilings began to move into the once highly commercial area.

In 1970 the city legalized the residential use by artists of lofts in commercial buildings—a move that spurred a rise in real-estate values and an influx of art galleries, boutiques and restaurants.

Designation by the Landmarks Preservation Commission means that no structure in the area may be torn down or altered externally without the approval of the commission.

**An Architectural Milestone**  
The area became known as SoHo because it is south of Houston Street. It is bounded by West Broadway, Canal, Houston and Crosby Streets.

The commission noted that the district contained the largest group of cast-iron structures anywhere and that it illustrated an important stage in the history of structural technology. The use of



The New York Times, Aug. 15, 1973

cast iron was said to have led to the development of the skyscraper, which the commission described as "this country's outstanding contribution to world architecture."

With the decline of the mercantile and dry-goods center at the end of the century, small industries and industrial concerns moved into the roomy lofts. Many are still there and employ many thousands of workers.

The recent conversion of abandoned lofts into artists' residences, studios and galleries has added new vitality to the area, the commission said. "With this revitalization the ongoing and important commercial and industrial ac-

tivities continue, thus providing a combination of uses. The district demonstrates one way in which the core of an old city can be given new life without the destruction of its cultural heritage."

Most of the cast-iron storefronts and facades were misuses of their contemporary masonry facades, the commission said, though there are also examples of stone work imitative of cast iron. The popularity of cast iron was not necessarily because of cost, the commission explained. The primary advantage was the speed with which highly ornamental cast-iron forms could be produced, compared with the weeks carvers would need to achieve the same result.

The cast-iron technique lost its popularity during the 1870's when steel-structure construction and a safe form of high-speed elevation was developed. This made possible buildings of much greater height than had hitherto been feasible.

By an irony of architectural history, the commission reported, it was not until after World War II that there was renewed appreciation of panel and curtain-wall construction. The metal and glass skyscrapers are direct descendants of their modest prototypes between Canal and Houston Streets, the commission said.

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Phot. Philip J. Frank Lorraine

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