

## SoHo—Still Not a Landmark



Post Photo by Frank Leonardo

Building at No. 74, called the "King of Greene St.," is, with its cast iron facade, columned window and a triangular pediment, a classic example of SoHo architecture.

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ and PETER FREIBERG

Almost three years after a public hearing, the Landmarks Preservation Commission still seems a long way from designating SoHo a historic district and formally recognizing the unique character of its mid-19th century cast iron architecture.

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

Margot Gayle, chairman of the Friends of Cast Iron and a leader in the designation movement, said the Commission was "dragging its feet on one of the most important resources for New York City.

"The area has tourist value," she said, "and a great potential for adaptive reuse of existing buildings because of the great flexibility of the buildings' interiors."

In addition, Mrs. Gayle feared the Commission may

reduce the boundaries of the proposed 26-block district bounded by W. Broadway, Canal, Houston and Crosby Sts. The final lines will not be known until the commission announces designation.

Commission Chairman Harmon H. Goldstone said he would like to see the district designated "as soon as possible." But when questioned on why he cannot set a definite date, he outlined a heavy workload. "We're working on it as fast as we can," he said.

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

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# SoHo Still Waiting

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building is done today.

It was then both economical and efficient for commercial buildings because the extra strength of iron allowed larger window and interior spaces. In the 19th century, Soho was New York's wholesale textile center, with display areas dominating ground floors and storage space above.

## Documented Area

In the summer of 1971, a Penn State University research team headed by Winston Wiseman, one of the foremost experts on cast iron architecture, and Regina Koberman, a former commission research expert, did wide documentation on the area with photographs. The work was financed by a National Science Foundation grant and turned over to the commission for writing the final report on designation.

Evelyn Haynes, a former Landmarks commissioner and strong preservationist, says: "If you have every building documented, dated and described in the Soho district, all you have left to do is sit down at a typewriter for three days and put it together. At the most it should take a few weeks."

But Goldstone contends there is considerable research left.

The real stumbling block in rapid designation, he adds, is the commission's lack of staff and money. But, he said, "we're expecting a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts."

A spokesman for the Council said that the 1972-73 appropriation of \$12,000 had already been granted the Landmarks Commission for more researchers and writers.

## Claim Enough Cash

The spokesman said the Commission had enough cash reserve to hire the needed people, even before the check actually came through. He also noted that the Council grant covered more Commission work than just the Soho designation.

Critics of the Landmarks Commission claim the commission uses its staff limitations as an excuse for non-designation. A New York Post series on landmarks last month showed that the Commission budget had been increased by \$95,000 last July, but no new staff people had yet been hired.

The Landmarks Commission held public hearings on the proposed Soho district in 1970. It will be the first historic district — there are 18 — in a primarily commercial area.

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 in 1969, the Commission held its 1970 hearing on the district's landmark proposal. Under the 1965 Landmarks Law, the commission could have designated Soho anytime since that 1970 hearing.

Many organizations have been pushing for designation — including the Municipal Arts Society, Fine Arts Federation, Society of Architectural Historians, Victoria Society of America, Soho Artists Assn. and Friends of Cast Iron.

Mrs. Gayle says Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, St. Louis, Baltimore and a whole host of other cities followed New York's lead and built cast iron buildings in the 19th century, but most of them outside of Soho have been destroyed.

"We are saying to the Mayor and to the Commission," Mrs. Gayle said, "Don't let that happen here."

Goldstone said, "I'd love to see everything move much faster but I don't think there's cause for hysteria. The district is not in imminent danger."

Mrs. Gayle and other Soho defenders think recent approval by the city Board of Standards and Appeals of a proposed privately developed sports center, is an omen of things to come if Soho is not designated a historic district soon.

## Fear Land Speculation

Soho's defenders fear that the \$11 million 21-story sports project, planned for what is now a parking lot on W. Broadway north of Canal St., will lead to land speculation and pressure for high density development.

Since January, 1970, when the city legalized the residential use by artists of lofts in commercial buildings, real estate values in Soho have risen, spurred by the influx of art galleries, boutiques, restaurants and a few artist-reproducers.

But Charles Leslie of the Soho Artists Assn. said Soho "is still the best buy per square foot anywhere in Manhattan." "The thing that makes it appealing to people in the arts," he said, "is the space. In addition, you share a life style with people whose head is where yours is. . . ."

The artists say they coexist well with the more than 26,000 people who work in the area in a variety of light manufacturing industries — although no one doubts that industry has been leaving the area.

Supporters of landmark designation believe that by preserving Soho's unique cast-iron buildings, the area may be stabilized and its equally unusual commercial-residential character maintained.

## Brazil Observer Optimistic About Mideast Prospects

BRASILIA (AP)—Brazil's Foreign Minister just back from a Middle East tour, says he found that Egypt and Israel "have more points they agree on than they can imagine."

Mario Gibson Barbosa told a news conference yesterday: "I returned convinced that peace is at hand, because this is difficult, but that there is a great desire for negotiation . . . and there is a great flexibility in positions. There is no desire for war."