SoHo Stories: A Manhattan Idyll

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An essay on his creative process, influences and journey as an artist.

In 1974 George Green, with his wife and daughter, moved into SoHo, which was soon to become the art center of the world. Following is his daughter Amber's first hand account.

You can't always see how special an era is when you are living it, but even at the time SoHo in the summer of 1974 felt magical. All those beautiful, now famous gleaming cast iron facades were still gritty with the industry and purpose they were built for. A few artists, drawn as much by the character of the neighborhood as by the light and raw square footage, had moved into empty industrial spaces, and some galleries and cooperatives opened in storefronts. It was a diverse, harmonious community. Everyone, workers from the neighborhood's industries, artists, dealers, went to Millie's–Millie called everyone "doll"–for coffee and eggs. Fanelli's, now a landmark, was then just a place for the delivery truck drivers to get a beer after work. There were no visitors yet–no one from the outside. SoHo was a community, not a destination, and it was above all a working community, made up of truck drivers and painters, bakers and sculptors, electricians and gallery owners, performance artists, and the few people serving them all a beer after work. Everyone was contributing to the culture. There was no one just hanging around, going to wine bars and such–that was still years away.

My dad had secured a summer at Artists' Space. It turned out to be just for work, so we slept there on the sly on some foam cushions. We got up with the delivery trucks from the commercial bakery in the morning, and made instant coffee from the tap in the bathroom. There was an electric fan to move the thick New York heat around a little. The door downstairs was locked at night since no one lived in the building, so if we wanted anything, my dad would climb down the fire escape. It sounds spare, but it really was sumptuous–the streets were filled with the scent of rolls baking in the commercial ovens, and down by Broome St. your throat would tingle with the warmth of black pepper from the spice factory. It was like Frank Lloyd Wright said–the luxuries of life without the necessities–and we were having too much fun to miss those. The bartender at Fanelli's always made me a plate of sliced Italian bread with little pats of butter–there were very few children in the neighborhood, and we were always treated like something special. We ate cannoli from Bruno's, just above Houston (Houston like "house," not like the city in Texas) where it still is now, and carrot cake from Food–this cafeteria on Wooster and Prince that some artists had. Food was an art project as much as a canteen–I since heard there was performance art aspect to the place, but everyone talks about that carrot cake still.

This intersection of art and the neighborhood's indigenous commercial texture made for projects that captured the moment, like Stefan Eins' 3 Mercer Street–not so much a gallery as a store for art, in the approachable spirit of the bric-a-brac stores on nearby Canal St. The neighborhood swelled with energy and purpose. My mother, Cie Goulet, had come to paint also, but she ended up borrowing an 8mm camera from the Young Filmmakers Foundation on Rivington Street instead, interviewing people like Eins, Chuck Close, art dealer Ivan Karp and Millie from the diner–some of the people who were making SoHo what it was.

Popular culture has caked a layer of glamour onto SoHo. When the neighborhood took on its identity, glamour was irrelevant; this was a working neighborhood. There was plenty of ambition, but it was ambition for the work itself–the art. The success that could come with that was still years away, and then it was always just a by-product, not the goal. The neighborhood had a purity–there was no one inauthentic in SoHo. In fact, after dark there was almost no one at all. It was just us–the people who were invested in the community–artists and performers–and some people of vision to perceive the revolutionary. Art dealers–like my dad's dealer Louis Meisel–one of SoHo's first–made spaces for ideas to thrive. Galleries were communities. Susan Meisel put on grand and boisterous artists' brunches–simultaneously the social event of the year, and an intimate family gathering. It was partly her warm, dynamic way, but it was also just the truth of things.

Although this was big city life by any measure, it's hard to imagine how provincial we were–literally. In the outer boroughs, Manhattan may be called "the city," but the implied worldliness is generous and unearned. The borders of our own little province were a few blocks below Canal–to White St., where the Mudd club was, up to the Grand Union supermarket on Bleecker–not even to Washington Square Park really. On the other side of West Broadway was the South Village–the Italian–American neighborhood around Thomson and Sullivan streets. Joe's Dairy with the fresh mozzarella and Vesuvio Bakery were here. To the east, the neighborhood stopped at Broadway or at the very most to pre-modeling agency Lafayette St., which was really dicey back then with lots of kind of aggressive homeless guys anachronistically called "panhandlers." Chinatown and Little Italy were near, and very occasionally people would travel as far north as Union Square to go to Max's Kansas City, all the way up by 17th St. I had a $2 coke there when I was six–the minimum at a table. That was a lot then. I felt very cosmopolitan.

Early SoHo's frontier conditions required some flexibility–there were things you learned to do without, like legality. Some buildings had AIR (artist in residence) signs, indicating a legalized conversion and to let the firefighters know someone might be inside after hours. We had some quaint practices that have been lost to time, like how to visit our neighbors-we rang the doorbell, or just yelled, then took a couple of steps back and looked up to see a block of foam or a tiny parachute pitching its way back and forth through the air, keys attached. The enormous elevators–ideal for huge paintings–were designed for freight, and you needed keys for them too.

The roughness of these live/work spaces has come to define a contemporary urban aesthetic–that raw brick, those industrial sized windows are now part of an essential vocabulary of style. But in the beginning, it was not an aesthetic at all–it just was. These were factories for making art, chosen for the light those big sweatshop windows let in, the high ceilings and unobstructed space. Amenity free, they were also affordable; that meant more time for making art, and more money for art supplies. The hotplates and mattresses were a necessary afterthought; the cliché of the industrial cable spool as chic table was then just a solution, more homestead than dream house.

Interesting things were, for lack of means, often happening in the very rawest of spaces. Spareness came to be equated with legitimacy–there was no surer sign of a dilettante than, say, a sofa. This quickly gave rise to a puritanical anti-aesthetic-most hilariously embraced by the secretly wealthy, whose lofts were often nearly unlivable by even the most meager standards. The faux aesthetics of hardship flourished as an art form in themselves. A favorite ostentation was the sheet rock wall that was left naked but for tape–paint, at least, being usually plentiful. But you've got to hand it to them–they may have been pretending to be poor, but they weren't pretending to be tough–those places were really cold in the winter.

It was 1979 when we moved to the city permanently. We were the last to move into 45 Lispenard Street, and the first to live in our space. TriBeCa was an inhospitable wilderness–cabs didn't circulate; the subway at Canal was rough after dark; there was no place to buy a newspaper or milk, and rust ran from the taps. This weeded out the riff-raff, and the rewards were high–besides having neighbors of substance, there were raw open spaces, and the wrought iron staircases and tiny hexagon tiles of the sweatshops and tenements of old New York.

There was nothing faux about the roughing it in our case–we had little, and when we finally managed to get a loft of our own it was as nice as we could afford to make it–which is to say, not really very nice by most standards, but it had a way about it. True, at first, our electricity was pirated in by an extension cord from the hall, but the place was gorgeous, with an undulating ceiling covering the beams in broad swells. It had been a textile workshop until right before we moved in–there were sewing needles, thousands of them, impossible to pick up. My dad rented a sander and did the floor, the glint of the remaining needles sanded into the wood adding sparkle. It took little to make it beautiful. But the industrial elegance-high ceilings, outsized windows–had its price. These were never meant to be lived in–it was like we were squatting, and the mice, at least, knew it and boldly held their ground. The heating system was whimsical, and the metal-framed windowpanes iced over from the inside in winter. A water heater was not yet within our reach. Until then, to bathe, we would take the chill off by heating a pot of water–not on a stove, but on an electric hot plate, and not our own hot plate either, but a borrowed one. Those first hot baths, finally possible in the bite of winter, were wonderful.

There were other luxuries too–it was a beautiful bathtub, claw-footed cast iron, set by tall windows looking out onto the silhouettes of water towers. My dad had traded a painting with Gil Shapiro of Urban Archaeology for the bathtub, plus some beautiful Belle Epoque doors for our small (but painted) sheet rock bedrooms, and the Corinthian capital of a column from a demolished bank–that was our table. A wooden icebox served as a liquor cabinet. There was no sofa–just canvas director's chairs in the studio spaces–we spent our evenings there, looking at paintings, much like people will watch tv.

Like the SoHo of the previous decade, 1980's TriBeCa was pioneer territory–not just in that we were the first to settle the region; the individuals were pioneers themselves, in their work. Our building was richly varied-there were several painters, fashion designer Willi Smith, Lynn and Robert Bianchi–photographers both, Kim Hastreiter of fabulous Paper–still a fold-out then, Ingo Maurer the lighting designer, and some very low-key European royalty–artists too. There was a deep camaraderie among everyone at 45 Lispenard. There was also high tolerance for the behavioral excesses that sometimes accompany a creative life–many of these exceeding the boldest imaginings. That gentle, indulgent attitude sweetened the whole of SoHo and TriBeCa.

Community was everything. New York City was a lawless place in the early '80's. All kids carried mug money. The Guardian Angels kept us safe-ish on the subway, and keeping us safe at home was, well, dad–dad and our neighbor, the artist Brooke Larsen–the largest guys in the building. There was no police presence in the neighborhood; I don't think they even knew anyone lived there. Most of the buildings on our street were not occupied after dark. When we had blackouts–that happened more often back then–the city became even more menacing. Dad and Brooke would hook up a single light bulb to a gasoline generator, and sit all night in the open doorway, each with a baseball bat, surveying the street, guarding the homestead.

In the meantime though, SoHo had started to change. There were a lot more galleries, and more people coming down to see them and buy art. Businesses catering to this new crowd opened up. The first Dean and Deluca–that one in the Woody Allen movie Manhattan with the skylights at the back–embodied the rough luxury that the neighborhood invented. It was an idyllic period–collectors came, careers advanced, and many of us still managed to keep the original romance–but with hot water, and there were new restaurants and cafes. Only working artists could live in the neighborhood–city zoning recognized SoHo's identity.

TriBeCa, geographically only 100 yards away, was a decade from the kind of smartening up that was going on north of the border (that being Canal–TriBeCa is the Triangle Below Canal). The border itself had an apocalyptic marker–the church of St. Alphonsus Liguori, on West Broadway just north of Canal, was sinking into an underground marsh. It was slowly being demolished, along with it the quaint way of life that pre-gentrification SoHo made possible. But we would still have it in TriBeCa, and later Dumbo, then Williamsburg, then Berlin, or Portland–anywhere people could still afford to live a creative life.

– *Amber Charmei* *2017*

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