

# **Cultural Aspects of Artist-led Gentrification in SoHo Between the 1950s and 1970s: A Field Analysis of the Agglomeration Processes of Art Venues**

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## **1. Introduction**

Although cultural urban redevelopment projects have been prevailing all over the world, the effects of such projects are quite controversial. According to scholars, on one hand, cultural facilities such as museums contribute to regenerating urban economies, which subsequently improve residents' everyday lives (Florida 2002). On the other hand, others argue that such culturally focused urban redevelopments only lead to urban spatial inequalities, rises in rent, and eviction of low income people (Harvey 1989). "Gentrification" is a rather elusive but useful word to identify this contradictory phenomenon created by cultural urban redevelopment.

This paper examines the mechanisms of culture-led, especially art-driven, gentrification. Gentrification caused by the agglomeration of artists has been experienced in European and North American, as well as in Western Asian countries. Existing sociological and geographical studies generally focus on the economic aspects of gentrification. To put it simply, such theories analyze gentrification mainly from an economic perspective, from the standpoint of production and consumption of commodities. These theories are useful for examining gentrification in relation to housing issues, but are insufficient for the analysis of culture related gentrification. The present paper argues for the need for a new framework to deal with the issue of culture and gentrification.

To achieve this purpose, I have been conducting qualitative research on a case study of SoHo in New York City, between the 1950s and 1970s. SoHo is the most typical case of artist-led gentrification with reference to its scale and process of spatial transformation. I utilized qualitative data based on archival materials.

Key factors causing gentrification in SoHo were low rent and physical advantages, such as good location and spacious buildings. However, through my research, I discovered another critically important factor, the cultural and symbolic conflict between the upscale and commercial art world of "uptown" and the grass roots and avant-garde art world of "downtown" Manhattan. During the symbolic struggles of post-war Manhattan, young avant-garde artists established their territory in SoHo, and then commercial galleries and other enterprises moved in to exploit such avant-garde images. In my paper, using theoretical frameworks such as "cultural fields" (Pierre Bourdieu), I examine the causal mechanisms of SoHo's artist-led gentrification.

## **2. Literature Review**

*Economic and cultural explanation of artist-led gentrification*

Currently, most studies regard artist communities in urban areas as one of the main reasons of gentrification (Deutsche & Ryan 1984; Ley 2003; Lloyd 2004; Pratt 2009; Shkuda 2013). Why did artist communities lead to gentrification? Most existing studies explain it from the standpoint of post-industrialization. Post-industrialization, there were changes in the industrial structure and land use pattern in inner city areas. Consequently, vacant industrial buildings increased and the building rents decreased. Increasing service industries created new demands of working and living spaces for white collar workers. These low rent areas drew artists as well as retail stores because they could make a profit in low rent spaces. Furthermore, vacant buildings renovated by artists created images of a new lifestyle in the inner city areas. Middle class people pursued such life styles and then move into artist districts. Thus, these post-industrialization theories can be summarized as ones focusing mainly on the relationships between artists and economic issues, such as production and consumption of commodities.

These explanations are correct in a sense. However, they solely focus on the economic factors. Therefore, we cannot fully understand artist-led gentrification. The economic factor explains only one aspect of the phenomenon. If we examine the gentrification mechanism more closely, we have to focus on a different factor, i.e., the cultural issues.

Sharon Zukin, to focus on the economic as well as cultural aspects, proposed an integrated theoretical framework called the “Artistic Mode of Production” (Zukin 1982). Zukin’s approach was quite insightful, but the perspective is so structure-oriented that it is not useful to analyze a particular urban district. To examine the neighborhood-level mechanisms from the standpoint of culture, we have to choose different sociological frameworks.

### *Field approach to artist-led gentrification*

Previous studies utilized the idea of Pierre Bourdieu’s theories to deal with cultural issues in artist-led gentrification. Sharon Zukin and Andy Pratt mentioned the role of habitus (Pratt 2009; Zukin 1982). Similarly, David Ley utilized Bourdieu’s field theory to deal with cultural issues (Ley 2003). In fact, though Zukin and Pratt did not greatly extend the frameworks of Bourdieu, Ley utilized the field theory and tried to analyze the mechanisms of artist-led gentrification. When we deal with cultural issues of artist-led gentrification, Ley’s approach is quite insightful.

In Ley’s paper, he tries to explore the factors that allure a particular type of residents, particularly the middle class people, into artist neighborhoods. As Bourdieu explained, aesthetic disposition means high cultural and symbolic values in cultural fields, and people utilize the aesthetic disposition to make a clear distinction among respective characteristics of social class. Due to the symbolic values of the distinction, people place high priority on getting art works, getting to know artists, and acquiring artistic tastes. Ley argues that, due to the cultural field, and the disposition of art and artists in the field, middle

class people are attracted to artist districts in order to get high symbolic values, which are, according to him, cultural or symbolic capitals.

Ley's approach seems to be useful, but his argument is rather theoretical and abstract. Therefore, his analysis has problems. Firstly, he could not sufficiently explain the cultural. In order to describe the cultural field empirically, in contrast to what Ley did, it is necessary to describe the conflictual processes in which different people from different classes, or people who have different tastes, compete to get symbolic capital in the field. Secondly, Ley did not clarify the relationships between gentrifiers and the cultural field. In his paper, it is unclear if gentrifiers are really affected by the cultural field, which leads them to move into artist neighborhoods. In order to solve these problems, we should focus on the gentrifiers' motives behind moving into artist neighborhoods, and clarify if the motives surely come from the process or conflict in the cultural field.

### **3. Research Questions and Methods**

This paper analyzes the mechanisms of artist-led gentrification from the standpoint of culture, specifically with reference to the cultural field. Therefore, I conducted a case study of SoHo in New York City, as it were between the 1950s and 1970s. SoHo is the most typical case of artist-led gentrification with reference to its scale and process of spatial transformation. In order to provide a detailed analysis, I collected archival materials, such as newspapers, correspondence, minutes of artist groups, and the archives at the Archive of American Art in Washington D.C. and at the Museum of modern Art Library in New York City.

In this paper, using theoretical framework of "cultural fields" (Pierre Bourdieu), I examine the causal mechanisms of SoHo's gentrification and purport a field analysis of artist-led gentrification. Therefore, I focus on the motives of pioneers who held art venues in SoHo, in the early periods of SoHo's gentrification processes. Subsequently, I examine the relationships between the owners of art venues and art worlds in New York City, which comprised the cultural field around SoHo.

### **4. Gentrification processes in SoHo**

Based on previous studies, we can break down the artist-led gentrification process in SoHo into four periods (Hudson 1984; Molotch and Treskon 2009; Shukuda 2013; Simpson 1981; Zukin 1982): (1) dis-industrialization in the mid-50s; (2) the emergence of artist colonies from the early 60s to early 70s; (3) the flourish of arts and consumer and real estate industries such as commercial galleries, sophisticated restaurants, and apartments for middle class people, from the late 60s to the late 1970s;

and (4) the decline of commercial galleries and emergence of global fashion chain stores since the mid-90s.

Until the 1950s, lower Manhattan was one of the most intensive agglomerations of textile industries. The gentrification in SoHo began after a decline of the industries during the period of dis-industrialization of Lower Manhattan in the mid-50s (Zukin 1982). Around the early 60s, artists started to live in vacant loft buildings, which were former industrial plants, because of their cheap rent and large spaces. The neighborhood was designated as an industrial district in a zoning law by the city government. Therefore, artists' loft livings were illegal at the time (Bernstein and Shapiro 2010). In 1971, New York City changed the law and made it possible for artists to live there legally. This amendment consequently acted as an institutional base for the gentrification that followed. Subsequently, the number of non-artist residents, commercial galleries, and consumer industries suddenly increased (Hudson 1984; Zukin 1982) (Table 1).

**Table.1 Length of Residence in Loft Units of SoHo**

<u>Year</u> <u>Residence</u> <u>Established</u>	<u>Years in</u> <u>Residence</u>	<u>Artists</u> <u>Percent</u>	<u>Others</u> <u>Percent</u>	<u>Total</u> <u>Percent</u>
1983	1 or less	5	16	9
1982	2	13	11	12
1981	3	14	20	16
1980	4	8	7	8
1979	5	10	8	9
1978-74	6-10	26	20	25
1973-69	11-15	20	14	28
1968-63	16-20	2	-	1
Pre-1963	over 21	2	4	2
TOTAL		100	100	100
Sample:		129	73	202
Responses:		124	62	186
Estimated				
Loft Units		2,370	1,330	3,700

Source: New York City Planning Commission, 1983, LOFTS: Balancing The Equities: 37

This paper focuses on the third period of SoHo's gentrification. Although this period was the initial phase of its development, and was a rather short period as compared to the others, it is quite important to focus on, because artists there assumed indispensable roles in establishing an aesthetic base for the later development. The spatial transformations would have had different trajectories without artists' activities.

## 5. From Artist Colonies to an Art Gallery District

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, artist districts in SoHo faded out gradually after the invasion of commercial galleries, and later, increase in housing. In this section, I focus on the motives of a few pioneers who held art venues in the early period, to move into SoHo. On examining archival materials and secondary sources, we can identify the distribution of art venues in SoHo from 1965 to 1971 (Table 2). Around 1970, the gentrification had not developed greatly, and it was the early phase. According to Table 2, there were only 25 for-profit art galleries and not-for profit art venues during this period.

**Table 2. Art galleries in SoHo from 1965 to 1971**

No.	Name	Open Year	Type	No.	Name	Open Year	Type
1	Richard Feigen Gallery	1965	Profit	13	Hundred Acres Gallery	1970	Profit
2	Park Place Gallery	1965	Non-Profit	14	112 Greene Street	1970	Non-Profit
3	Filmmakers Cinematheque	1967	Non-Profit	15	Leo Castelli Gallery	1971	Profit
4	Paula Cooper Gallery	1968	Profit	16	Sonnabend Gallery	1971	Profit
5	10 Down Town	1968	Non-Profit	17	John Weber Gallery	1971	Profit
6	O.K.Harris Gallery	1969	Profit	18	FOOD	1971	Non-Profit
7	Max Hutchinson Gallery	1969	Profit	19	In Circle	***	***
8	98 Green Street	1969	Non-Profit	20	Poster Originals LTD	***	***
9	Reese Palley Gallery	1970	Profit	21	Spectrum	***	***
10	Sontraed Galley	1970	***	22	Ward Nasse	***	***
11	Flatsfixed Gallery	1970	***	23	55 Mercer Street	***	***
12	Prince Street Gallery	1970	Profit	24	Paley & Lowe Inc.	***	***

Why did these art venues move into SoHo? In a New York Times article in 1969, an artist, who then held a not-for-profit art venue in SoHo, said, “I’m tired of getting the icebox treatment from uptown galleries...I want show my work now, without regard to what Madison Avenue thinks is in or out” (“Madison Avenue” means the street where most of the luxurious commercial galleries were located in New York City).<sup>1</sup> In addition, in another article, another pioneer in SoHo said, “I want the gallery to be temporally responsive...and it will be artist- rather than client-oriented.”<sup>2</sup> Looking at these statements, we can see that the owners of these galleries regarded SoHo’s neighborhood precisely as a place for artists and art production.

Also, Ivan Karp, who was the owner of a commercial gallery “O.K. Harris Gallery” established in SoHo in 1968, said, “I’m very happy to be in fresh territory, where the artists themselves work,” and “the street is marvelously serene and neighborly. Artists pass and say hello to me.”<sup>3</sup> Paula Cooper,

<sup>1</sup> The New York Times, April 19, 1968

<sup>2</sup> The New York Times, March 16, 1970

<sup>3</sup> The New York Times, October 5, 1969

who was one of the most famous gallery owners in SoHo at the time, said, "I came here [SoHo] for the space and also because it's where the artists are." Cooper added, "Uptown seems dead and sterile. It's a different kind of space here."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, another commercial gallery owner, Richard Fagen, expressed his recognition of SoHo as the "adventurous" arts' place, and said, "Downtown we have the space to show them and logistically it's easier for artists to bring their work to a gallery in their neighborhood. Besides, uptown collectors have an adventurous feeling when they go below 14th. They think they may discover something."<sup>5</sup>

These are interesting points. The people who held art venues in SoHo said that they came to SoHo to avoid "uptown" and that they were attracted to "downtown," where artists lived. So what were "uptown" and "downtown"? Why did these places affect the action of the pioneers in SoHo?

## **6. Uptown and Downtown: The Cultural Field in New York City Affecting Artist-led Gentrification in SoHo**

Uptown and downtown do not only mean geographical locations in Manhattan, but also signify art worlds in New York City at the time. Specifically, on one hand, "uptown" meant the art world of the high culture, while "downtown" signified its sub-cultural counterpart. When we analyze the artist-led gentrification mechanisms in SoHo from the standpoint of the two art worlds that then existed in New York City, it is quite important to focus on the early gentrifiers' motives to move into the artist neighborhood.

In New York City, the art museums and commercial galleries formed an alliance and created strong authoritative and commercial art world in uptown, between the mid 1950s and mid 1960s (Zukin 1982: 90). Historically, art museums and commercial galleries had different roles in the art world. While art museums collect classic masterpieces, commercial galleries sell art works of the same period. In the case of New York City after the World War II, it was difficult to retain this division of labor in the art world. Further, an expansion of art market of living American artists such as the Abstract Expressionism, threatened the position of modern art museums such as Museum of Modern Arts, which pursued to collect contemporary arts.

However, the systematic problem of the art world in uptown was evaded by ensuring each of these entities a separate position. Thus, commercial galleries came to show the latest trends in contemporary arts, while art museums acted like critics. Due to this new division of labor, the art world in uptown

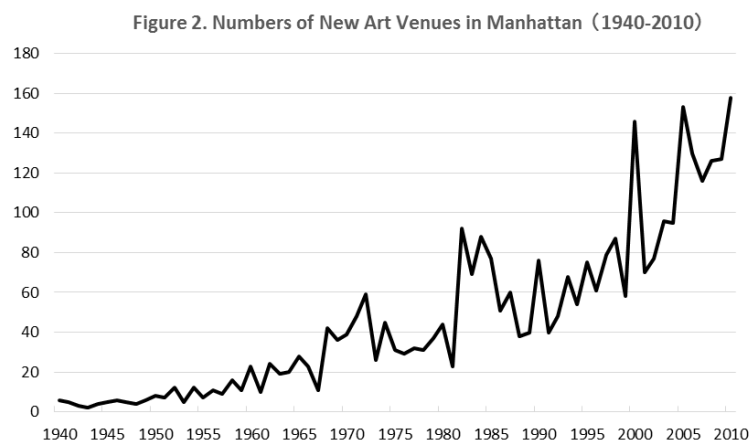
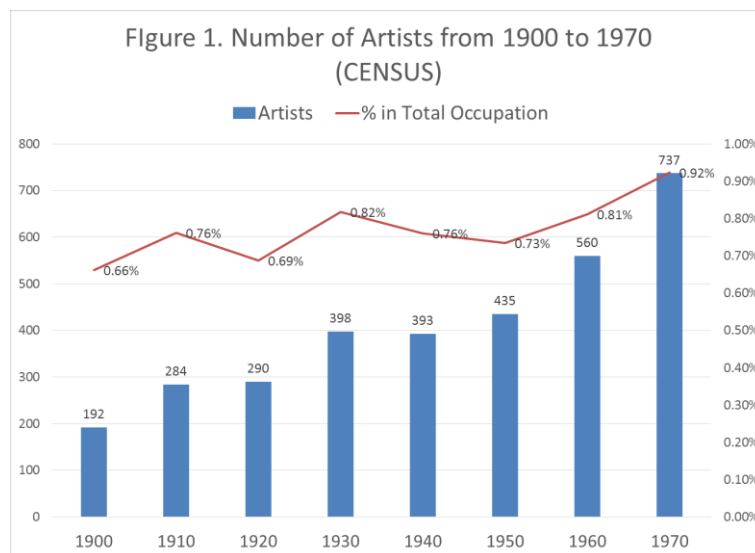
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<sup>4</sup> The New York Times, October 5, 1969

<sup>5</sup> The New York Times, October 5, 1969

secured a stable identity. However, consequently, “artists simultaneously let themselves be wooed and tried to run away from it all”(Zukin 1982:92). Artists increasingly felt the need “to thwart the marketing system that the cozy arrangement between museums, galleries, and individual ‘patrons’ had established” (Zukin 1982: 92). The reorganization in the uptown art world prepared for the alternative downtown art scene.

It is evident from the census data, that there was a steady increase in artists in the U.S. since the 1950s (Figure 1) (Cahalan 1990). In addition to the increase in artists, art venues in New York City had also grown. Figure 2 shows the number of new art venues since 1940. According to this, we can see three periods that witnessed an increase in the number of galleries; around 1970, 1980, and 2000. As evident from Figure 2, the time of SoHo’s gentrification was exactly the first boom of art venues in New York City. Considering the increase in the number of artists and art venues around 1970, the art world in New York City expanded more than ever. During the time of expansion in the art world, both uptown and downtown experienced big changes.





Uptown consisted mainly of commercial dealers, museums, and patrician people who bought and sold arts. During the arts boom, there emerged movements to develop “American” arts in uptown. Since the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism had become the first valued “American” arts in history. After the success of Abstract Expressionism, new “American” arts, such as Pop-art and Neo-Dada, followed. Summing up the uptown trends, I can say that the uptown art world tried to fix and develop the fame of “American” art by institutionalizing, commercializing, and internationalizing it.

On the other hand, there were movements that rejected the museums and commercial galleries in uptown. These movements emerged in various forms, such as artists’ movements to boycott from showing their works in formal art venues. These feelings also emerged as the rejection of popularized art styles, such as Abstract Expressionism. As a reaction, objective arts, which meant non-abstract arts, and inter-media arts emerged. Importantly, alternative art production, distribution, and consumption networks were created by artists in downtown. Such networks were called as cooperative galleries or alternative spaces. Thus, cooperative galleries became important places for young and unsuccessful, and thus poor artists to show their art work.

## **7. Conclusion**

As evident from the first part of this paper, there were two types of art venues in the early period of SoHo’s gentrification, namely, commercial galleries and not-for-profit art venues. According to archival materials such as newspapers, not only did these owners of art venues move into SoHo for reasonable rent, but also because of its symbolic value as an artists’ neighborhood.

The actions of these two groups emerged from a symbolic conflict between uptown and downtown. Commercial gallery owners in SoHo pursued economic values, but not like those in uptown. Further, young artists, who were in the downtown art world, pursued cultural but not economical values, and thus created alternative arts networks to show their not necessarily lucrative arts. Therefore, despite the difference in their motives, both groups regarded SoHo as the right place to develop their artistic ideals, which was rejection of the uptown art world. Thus, the coexistence of two groups changed SoHo. I think, since then, SoHo was a spatial base drawing consumer industries.

Here, the dynamic nature of the cultural field is evident, in which the owners of art venues competed to get high symbolic values. In other words, the art worlds consisting of uptown and downtown New York City served as a cultural field, in the dynamics of which, the owners of art venues moved into SoHo, thus acting as a catalyst for the gentrification processes.

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