

# DOWNTOWN ON | SOHO



## Iron ANTIQUITY

Walking through SoHo, with its buildings' majestic cast-iron façades, it's hard to believe that this iconic neighborhood once narrowly escaped the fate of demolition. In 1962, the proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway, conceived by urban planner Robert Moses, would have connected the Williamsburg and Manhattan bridges to the Holland Tunnel via a 10-lane, east-west expressway running along Broome Street. Lucky for New York, community activists, including the infamous Jane Jacobs, successfully persuaded city officials to vote unanimously against the plan, and, in 1973, SoHo was officially designated a historic district by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission.

What Jane Jacobs so courageously fought to preserve 50 years ago was more than a community of underutilized industrial lofts once heavily populated by the wholesale textile industry. SoHo contains the greatest collection of cast-iron architecture in the world. Designed mainly in the style of Renaissance Revival/Italianate, the cast-iron façades are rare because they were produced only for a short period of time.

During the mid to late 19th century, cast iron was

an American architectural innovation. Prefabricated in foundries, the highly malleable and relatively inexpensive material could produce intricate designs modeled on antiquity. The façades were often painted in neutral tints, such as beige, to simulate stone. The strong yet lightweight cast iron allowed for high ceilings framed by palatial windows with slender support columns that flood light through the expansive and functional interiors. Other unique attributes of SoHo's cast-iron district include the patterns of clear glass roundels covering the street-level vault panels, staircase risers and treads. The roundels functionally allow natural light into the basement spaces of the buildings. However, before World War I, clear glass contained manganese, an element that turns violet after consistent exposure to sunlight. While many of the glass roundels have been replaced over the years, originals still can be spotted by their translucent purple surface.

Although cast iron was initially replaced by the more durable and structurally sound wrought iron, which was quickly succeeded by steel, its beauty still remains in the building façades of SoHo, many of which have been restored to their original splendor.

### ● THE E.V. HAUGHWOUT BUILDING

Designed by architect John Gaynor in 1857, the E.V. Haughwout Building stands at 488 Broadway. The building's cast-iron façade, which faces both Broadway and Broome Street, displays a four-story arcade system with two orders of columns obtained from the Sansovino Library in Venice. The building also featured the world's first Otis passenger elevator, a prototype that eventually made the construction of skyscrapers possible.

### ● 109 PRINCE STREET

Designed in 1882 by architect Jarvis Morgan Slade, this five-story Renaissance Revival building extends 10 bays along Greene Street and five bays along Prince Street. Each level is marked by a pronounced cornice emphasizing the expansive width of the structure. In addition, a plaque on the Greene Street façade bears the name Architectural Iron Works, Cheyney and Hewlett, New York; Cheyney and Hewlett being the successor to D.D. Badger's historic 1847 foundry, one of the earliest to erect cast-iron buildings in the United States.

Photographed by Sarah Rossi. Map by Jane Gardner.



## VISIT SOHO

If you want to explore an interesting venue, the Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art at 594 Broadway will hit the spot. The museum is dedicated to the preservation, study, education and display of comic and cartoon art, including animation, comic books and strips, illustration, political illustration, graphic novels, sports cartoons and more.

[moccany.org](http://moccany.org)

## WATCH SOHO

From the quaint side streets to bustling Broadway, SoHo's made it in the film biz.

- *After Hours* (1985)
- *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985)
- *Ghost* (1990)
- *The Prince of Tides* (1991)
- *The First Wives Club* (1996)
- *The Devil's Advocate* (1997)
- *Men in Black* trilogy (1997, 2002, 2012)
- *Center Stage* (2000)
- *Spider-Man* (2002)
- *Unfaithful* (2002)
- *Hitch* (2005)
- *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009)

## KNOW SOHO

- SoHo was New York City's first acronym, standing for South of Houston.
- The boundaries for the neighborhood include Houston Street on the north, Lafayette and Centre streets on the east, Canal Street on the south and West Broadway on the west.
- For city planners, SoHo is seen as the main example of inner-city regeneration and gentrification.
- The SoHo Cast-Iron Historic District was designated such by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as well as declared a National Historic Landmark in 1978.
- The SoHo Cast-Iron Historic District consists of about 500 buildings over a 36-block radius.
- SoHo's side streets are known for being paved with Belgian blocks, which are often confused with cobblestone.

—MARISSA BIENSTOCK

*Bienstock is a freelance writer.*

### ● THE GUNTHER BUILDING

In 1871, architect Griffith Thomas built 469 Broome Street as a warehouse for fur dealer William H. Gunther. The Gunther name still stands on the pediment over the skillfully designed curved entrance bay. The building's Second Empire façade is characterized by diminishing

floors that emphasize verticality, while tiers of double-height windows are framed by regularly spaced Corinthian columns, cornices, balustrades and brackets. Over the years, the occupants of the building, including an art gallery, artists' studios and retail stores, have mirrored the transformation of the SoHo community itself.

### ● 112 PRINCE STREET

Architect Richard Berger designed this six-story, Greek Revival building in 1889. The building's slender colonnettes contain stylized capitals that stand on pedestals and support impost blocks topped by rosettes. By the 1970s, the building's upper floors housed living/working lofts for artists, including Maya Lin, the noted architect of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. During this time, fellow artist Richard Haas proposed a trompe l'oeil mural on the building's east-facing wall that would mimic the design of the cast-iron façade. This unique mural was completed in 1975 and still remains today.

—STACY SEILER

