



Rust and paint in SoHo Cast Iron Historic District

THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

Cast Irony - A New York City Architecture That Looks Forward and Back

Scott Francisco — June 25, 2014

Earlier this spring I had the opportunity to lead a walking tour of SoHo's cast iron buildings in honor of the late, great Jane Jacobs. The occasion was a "Jane's Walk", a Municipal Art Society event commemorating Jacobs' birthday with a series of neighborhood walks all over the city promoting dialogue and community participation -- right up our alley at Pilot Projects.

Jane Jacobs was the writer, social critic and urban activist most known for her ground-breaking book, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and for her role in protecting some of New York's most beloved neighborhoods as "rationalist planning" encroached. The event was special for me not only because of her influence on my work, but also because of our common bridge between two great cities: New York and Toronto. Like many New Yorkers, I'm a transplant, from Toronto, and Jacobs, after living in New York, moved to Toronto in 1968, where she continued her urban activism until she died in 2006. I was a benefactor not only of her theory, but also of her practice that distinctly shaped my home-town neighborhoods.

So it was that 25 New Yorkers and I spent a beautiful blustery spring afternoon weaving through the historic blocks that Jane Jacobs helped save from a Robert Moses wrecking ball between Prince and Canal streets. We began our walk with a few questions: What is it that makes this neighborhood feel so distinct? How can we tell which buildings are made of cast iron? Amidst curious locals and tourists we touched, tapped and groped our way through SoHo. Looking upwards as we walked, we talked history and industry, used magnets to test the metal, and even attempted a sand-casting (using wax instead of iron) on a windy Brooms Street sidewalk.

Cast iron architecture was a marvel in its time -- a game-changing innovation in how buildings could be built. The introduction of cast iron as a building technique converged in New York City with a building boom, economic growth, and the northward expansion of the city's limits. Emerging in the mid-1800's, the method of creating columns and beams by pouring molten iron into sand molds allowed for incredible ornamentation and detail. At the same time the strength of the material allowed the structure of buildings to become much more open -- with bigger windows and slender, rectilinear grid. It was fast, it was cheap, and it was easy to reproduce. Foundries -- many of which were right in Manhattan -- cranked out pre fabricated columns that could be ordered through catalogs, and delivered right to the building site. The beautiful irony is a collection of buildings that are more ornamental, even faux historic, and more modern at the same time.

Walking through SoHo today is a bizarre time warp. Wild-west facades meet industrial revolution tech, set off with the latest global fashion trends. Expansive storefront windows are working as well today as they were when innovative nineteenth century shopkeepers competed for visibility. (Where heavy brick or stone pillars obscured the merch, strong and slender iron columns opened up the view.) In fact early cast iron was only used at the street level for bigger shop windows, often supporting six stories of heavyweight masonry above it. Check it out. Now picture yourself here in 1870 while proud Native Americans hunted buffalo on the great plains.



Our route through the historic district

By the turn of the century, the invention of the elevator and the introduction of steel in construction led to the decline of cast iron architecture. As did concerns about cast iron's strength in a building fire. SoHo plunged into a period of neglect as industry and commerce moved north into Midtown's newly built skyscrapers. Once grand buildings were abandoned or used as unheated storehouses for scrap paper and the neighborhood became known as "Hell's Hundred Acres" due constant fires. In the 1950s and '60s artists seeking low rent and light-filled open spaces for large art pieces helped save SoHo's cast iron buildings from being razed, while Jane Jacobs staved off Robert Moses' 10 lane freeway. In 1973 the "Soho Cast Iron Historic District" was designated by the Landmarks Commission for protection in perpetuity.

Today SoHo has the highest concentration of cast iron buildings anywhere in the world. For better or for worse, throughout this neighborhood's up and down seasons, the look and feel of cast iron architecture remains unique. Grab a magnet and come check it out.



Standing in front of the Judd Foundation Building on Spring St.

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