INTRODUCTION

Today, the SoHo neighborhood in Lower Manhattan is one of New York City’s most coveted residential and commercial districts. But the area has not always enjoyed this enviable status. Over the past half-century, Soho morphed from an underutilized industrial area into an international brand and a locus of economic and cultural activity. However, underneath what might appear to be a smooth and orderly transition lies a history of informal residency.

Prior to the 1960s, SoHo was largely industrial, left vacant following the end of World War II and the exit of the textile industry. Beginning in the 1960s, artists began illegally living in abandoned industrial spaces, perpetuating dangerous living conditions unregulated by safety codes. In response to the public’s overwhelming demand for residential use, the City legalized these instances of informal living. Soho is a case study in “formalizing the informal,” a history in which residents’ actions against the legal became leading precursors to a government’s decision to standardize informality.

1.1 KEY INTERVENTIONS

Beginning in the 1970s, lawmakers enacted zoning regulations to address the first wave of illegal living in Soho. In 1978, the City enacted the Joint Living Work Quarter for Artists section in the NYC code, legislating the conversions under the condition that there be at least one “certified artist” living in the converted building to obtain certification through the Department of Cultural Affairs. Buildings were limited to two converted units, and residents were required to meet existing safety codes. However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, new artists and residents, attracted by the creative community and the area’s rising creative appeal, began occupying the spaces without artist certification, leading to unregulated and unsafe living conditions. Without regulations, the area’s existing residential use was now regulated under the Loft Board. To qualify, these buildings had to meet certain safety and code standards; living conditions were now regulated under the Loft Board.

In 1982, in response to the growing demand for residential use, and the proliferation of corrupt tenant-landlord policies and dangerous living conditions, the New York State Legislature established the New York City Loft Board under the Loft Law to regulate the conversion of commercial buildings into residential use. Under this law, residents inhabiting buildings from 1980-1981 could file with the Loft Board to legalize the use of space as residential occupancy in their buildings. To qualify, these buildings had to meet certain safety and code standards; living conditions were now regulated under the Loft Board.

1.2 INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS STORIES

SoHo residents have continued to fight to retain their unique character and use of space, while ensuring fair regulations that don’t stifle the informal. The case of SoHo artists demonstrates the active interplay between government and residents in which market demand shapes government action. As shown by the series of legislative reforms that have taken place beginning in the 1970s, and continue today, instances of informality are followed by actions by the government to regulate and formalize them. As the laws and regulations have changed, so have the living conditions in the area, with efforts by the government to formalize informality and residents’ responses.

1.3 GOVERNANCE

The case of Soho’s governance demonstrates the active interplay between government and residents in which market demand shapes government action. As shown by the series of legislative reforms that have taken place beginning in the 1970s, and continue today, instances of informality are followed by actions by the government to regulate and formalize them. As the laws and regulations have changed, so have the living conditions in the area, with efforts by the government to formalize informality and residents’ responses.

CONCLUSION

While the ultimate conclusion to SoHo’s story remains to be seen, SoHo illustrates the overwhelming power that concentrated instances of informal activity can have over a government’s regulatory framework. The City’s continued revisions to legislation to accommodate newfound illegal uses in SoHo demonstrate the possibility of law to be formed by the demands of the populace—a lesson that may prove instrumental in guiding policy decisions regarding housing in other areas with similar issues of informal residency.

CREDITS AND LINKS


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Transformation of a neighborhood, in fits and starts.