

**Illegal Living: 80 Wooster Street and the Evolution of SoHo**, by Roslyn Bernstein and Shael Shapiro. The Jonas Mekas Foundation, July 2011. 320 p. ill. ISBN 9786099517209 (pbk.), \$42.00.



In writing this book, Roslyn Bernstein, professor of journalism and creative writing at Baruch College teamed up with the architect and specialist in adaptive reuse of buildings, Shael Shapiro, who was one of the pioneers involved in the development of the Fluxhouse Coops. The result offers a compelling story rich with primary research on an influential period in the history of art, architecture, and urban development.

The authors intelligently assembled an extensive amount of history and documentation. Archival photos, legal documents, letters, and sketches are planted throughout the historical account while a well-designed timeline introduces the book. Interviews from those who participated in the radical and

challenging creation of the first artists' live/work community in New York City, lend to an almost filmic documentary-like telling.

To some extent, *Illegal Living* serves as a tribute to George Maciunas, a founder and visionary of Fluxus and the initiator behind the development of the South Houston lofts where artists could have "an exceptional environment" to live and create. Maciunas devoted his life to the reinvention of underutilized factory buildings into artist live/work community spaces. Bernstein and Shapiro recount Maciunas's history in a way that reveals the Fluxus mentality from which he tackled the challenging legal matters with the City Zoning Commission and the New York State Multiple Dwelling Law.

The book opens with two chapters on the historical background of the Wooster Street neighborhood, showing how it shifted in the mid-1800s from an agricultural to residential to commercial use. The authors then turn to George Maciunas, pointing to the year 1967 when he pursued the purchase of the 80 Wooster Street building. The focus then moves to Jonas Mekas, the founder of Cinematique, and essential collaborator to Maciunas. The book proceeds chronologically, introducing people, events, and the legal housing and development issues as they unfolded.

The story of the building and the creation of the artist loft community in SoHo is narrated by the authors in a way that shows how its evolution was intrinsically connected to the Fluxus movement, experimental theater and dance, happenings, and avant-garde film. *Illegal Living* deftly reveals how the experimental arts, parties, personalities, and legal issues, in all, served to generate and challenge the development of the SoHo art cooperatives.

The level of primary research that informed this endeavor is notable, and the secondary resources listed in the bibliography reference key works on avant-garde alternative art, urban development, and New York architectural history. The format of the book with page-sized illustrations opposite the text makes for a nicely combined textual and visual read. At times, the text is repetitive but forgivable because some of the stories are recounts by individuals who witnessed the same events.

This scholarly work is highly recommended for all academic libraries with art, art history, architecture, and historic preservation collections. Urban planners will also take interest.

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