

## *The South Village in Transition*

In the period following World War I, the South Village Italian community was significantly restructured. The social frameworks and forms of solidarity that were the basis of immigrant group life outside the family eroded or were submerged. The community assumed a shape that reflected the sociocultural position of the second generation who had moved beyond immigrant institutions but were still outside the mainstream. Their communal adaptation combined specifically urban institutions like district politics with traditional ethnic social and cultural forms such as Italian familism (although it was more properly an interaction between the two). The sublimation of paesani distinctions meant that communal solidarity was informed by a new and expanded sense of ethnicity that itself was a product of the second generation's acculturation and the social structure of the city. Thus, rather than simply wither away, the South Village Italian community absorbed social and cultural changes beyond the immigrant generation. The result was the emergence of a new communal form *vis-à-vis* the immigrant colony, although there were major social and cultural continuities. The family group was still the centerpiece of local life. However, with the eclipse of immigrant frameworks, it articulated with a different set of communal institutions (e.g., the Italian neighborhood instead of the paesani group, district political clubs instead of mutual benefit societies).

A neighborhood-based community was the measure of the second generation's adaptation to the city after World War I. However, by the 1960s ongoing population decline began to have a telling effect on communal patterns. At the same time, the groups replacing the Italians in the South Village began imposing their own communal characteristics on the area and its institutions. The expansion of the SoHo to artists' community in the adjacent factory district after 1971 had far-reaching implications (Simpson, 1981).

### ***Dwindling Numbers***

Although the Italian population in the Village began to decline after World War I, enough families remained to comprise the core of a restructured ethnic community. Grafted onto this element was the trickle of immigrants from the old towns (now that quotas and other factors had largely rerouted Italian immigration). By 1960, however, the cumulative impact of dwindling numbers was becoming evident. One of the local parishes expressed concern at the time that the loss of parishioners would undermine its viability.

Although the loss of population had been steady, there was an accelerated decline after 1950. Whereas the total population of the South Village remained virtually constant between 1940 and 1950, it declined 12.5 percent between 1950 and 1960. There was a further decline of 17 percent over the next 10 years, representing a loss of 3,510 persons. During the span, the population of the district that was Italian born or native born of Italian parentage declined by 3,239—a sharp drop from the 1950 total of 8,283.

The driving force behind this post-war demographic trend was the mobility aspirations of young Italian Americans. With family formation and mobility plans interrupted by World War II, they began opting, with determination, for more mainstream life-styles in the suburbs and outlying boroughs. Looking back on this time, a woman who moved to the suburbs in 1956 recalled that most young couples at least talked about moving away. Even Mafiosi were taking their families to pleasant residential sections in Brooklyn, Queens and the suburbs.

Actually the neighborhood experienced something of a renaissance immediately following the war. Returning G.I's channeled their energies and capital into local business ventures. They breathed new life into the community when they married and started families. Parish records show a significant increase in marriages and baptisms from the end of the war

through the middle fifties. Apartments were in demand, resulting in a local housing shortage. There was also a swelling of enrollments at the parish elementary schools. In the early fifties, one school stopped accepting students for the first grade class, while another had to combine grades to accommodate the influx of children.

The upswing, however, was rather short-lived. The young couples were not as much planting roots as getting their feet on the ground. Low rents made it possible to start a nest egg; in 1950, the median rent in two South Village census tracts were \$23.83 and \$23.00. Whereas their parents had been constrained by the Depression and the war, the post-war period held out the promise of significant socioeconomic advancement. With more education, second and third generation Italians were better prepared to benefit from the upturn in the national economy; educational opportunities and job upgrading were available through the G.I. Bill, although the second generation remained largely blue-collar (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963:206). The federal government's housing policy made it quite easy for working class Italian Americans to own homes outside the central city. G.I. mortgages and FHA insurance made it possible to finance a house at four and a half percent interest over thirty years with a minimal down payment (often less than 10%). A three bedroom ranch house set in a neatly arranged tract development within twenty miles of the city could be bought for less than \$13,000 in the mid-fifties. The time was ripe to abandon the three-room flat on the airshaft with the bathtub in the kitchen, and many families did just that. The mailing list for a neighborhood reunion held in 1975 was full of former residents who live in post-war suburbs like Rochelle Park, New Jersey and Hicksville, Long Island.

The exodus of Italians to the suburbs was more than the result of favorable material conditions. There was an eagerness to leave the small world of the neighborhood and enter the mainstream of American life which they had been exposed to by the media, the school and the army. Social horizons were also broadened by occupational opportunities that were more varied than those faced by their parents. In the second generation, for example, women worked in offices and department stores instead of factories; in one census tract, 100 out of 353 women who worked in 1950 were salespersons. Italian Americans also faced less prejudice after the war; although one couple who moved to the suburbs in the fifties received a cold reception from Protestant neighbors, the majority of the families on the block were non-Protestants who had likewise left the city. Detaching oneself from the ethnic community was a precondition for acculturation and upward mobility, given the fact that the experience of Italians in the United States had been as a low status minority with a traditional peasant culture. Italians heartily embraced suburbia as the symbol of American life. A New York Times survey (November 14, 1978) found that Italians were the largest ethnic group in New York City suburbs, some 19 percent of those surveyed. More recently, Staten Island has been the Promised Land for Italian Americans who want to live in the suburbs.

In 1970, 4,160 people in the South Village claimed Italian ancestry and another 697 identified themselves as having Italian and some "other" ancestry (the 1980 census allowed respondents to identify with a particular ethnicity rather than make a determination of nationality background based on birth status). The 1970 census had counted 4,944 persons who were either Italian born or had Italian parents; since in all likelihood there was a greater decline in the Italian population over that 10 year span, it appears that the census affords a rather conservative demographic picture of the Italian South Village in 1970.

Since census data at the tract level are not given along ethnic lines, the characteristics of the Italian population must be roughly gauged. In two census tracts that were the "stronghold" of the Italian South Village, mean family income in 1980 was \$21,345 and \$24,900 respectively (\$10,012 and \$9,340 in 1970). Nineteen percent of persons 16 and over were employed in manufacturing, a decline from 31 percent in 1970. Twelve percent were employed in the retail

trade where 20 percent worked in 1970. Thirty-one percent of the local labor force was employed in "professional and related services" in 1980. This group is probably almost entirely composed of non-Italian newcomers. Moreover, these occupations have a higher salary structure.

Notwithstanding its informality, a 1975 parish survey provides greater focus on the occupational characteristics of the Italian population. It showed that the men were most frequently employed in trucking, construction, factory work and maintenance. Women most often worked in a clerical capacity (e.g., secretary, switchboard operator) or were in retail sales (the younger women preferred office work or department store sales positions).

South Village Italians sustained a modest working-class lifestyle. Most would describe themselves as "comfortable" or at least "not in want of anything" deemed a necessity. Low housing costs made a greater portion of their income available for discretionary purposes. In 1970 median rents in the census tracts considered earlier were \$54.00 and \$57.00 respectively most rents ranged between \$40.00 and \$79.00. Even though median rents had risen to \$215 and \$277 respectively in 1980, Italians were paying about half as much in their rent controlled apartments. Therefore, Italians were able to afford the better cuts of meat at a private butcher, color televisions, air conditioners, vacations and automobiles. Of course, it must be remembered that tenement flats were without amenities that the majority of Americans consider standard (e.g., full baths, privacy, spaciousness).

Some people could be described as "quite comfortable", although their life-styles were not qualitatively different from anyone else's; living in "the old neighborhood" tended to be a common denominator. Poverty was primarily a problem for the elderly; in 1970, 38.5 percent of family heads over 65, in one census tract, were living below the poverty level. This problem was compounded by poor health, so that some were shut-ins needing outside attention. However, inured to "doing without", the elderly knew how to survive with dignity with the help of social security and Medicaid benefits. As younger people continued to move away, the elderly became a more conspicuous segment of the Italian community.

### *Newcomers in the Neighborhood*

Not all of the changes in the South Village were the direct result of Italian mobility. The arrival of new groups occupying places left by Italians also had implications for the Italian neighborhood.

In contrast to other ethnic areas, the South Village did not attract low status newcomers to the city. In 1950, for example, there were only 40 blacks out of 4,116 persons enumerated in three South Village census tracts; altogether, there were 68 nonwhite persons. In 1960 there were only 138 blacks living in this area. In two South Village census tracts the black population declined by 10 percent between 1970 and 1980 (from 122 to 110). The number of persons of Puerto Rican birth or parentage actually declined in two South Village census tracts between 1960 and 1980, from 32,7 to 114. A reason for this was the remoteness of the South Village from black or Hispanic settlements (even though blacks and Hispanics were employed locally). Moreover Italians discouraged minorities from moving into the neighborhood. Perhaps more importantly, the core of the Village remained middle class all along ("the American Ward") and, after World War I, began to absorb contracting ethnic areas, the Irish section among the first to go. At the same time, the blocks to the west and south remained industrial.

Although the South Village was not threatened by waves of new immigrants, it was targeted by one or another plan to re-develop the district at the expense of its Italian population. One such plan was advanced in a WPA community study (1937). The researchers discovered "crowded slum-like conditions" in the Italian section of Greenwich Village that were "certain to be disturbing" and "a menace to health"; especially the 4 and 5 story walk-up tenements with "a

shop, restaurant, or some other use" on the lower floor. The study also maintained that the adjacent factory district (now SoHo) was an "industrial slum" since much of the light industry, especially the garment shops, had moved out. It recommended that tenement and loft structures be leveled and "workers' housing" be constructed in their place. It avoided the issue of what was to become of the Italian population, nor did it show any appreciation for the cast-iron loft buildings that were designated historical landmarks by the city thirty-four years later.

The WPA plan did not materialize. A pattern continued whereby, as land values increased, houses and apartment buildings were renovated for middle class occupancy. The area below Washington Square Park, however, resisted easy rehabilitation for middle class use. In 1954, New York University, a major property owner in the Village area, turned its attention to the tenements and loft buildings below the Square. The university suggested that the South Village be subjected to government funded slum clearance, for which it was eligible in light of its sub standard housing.

The proposal for slum clearance was tendered as part of a study conducted by N.Y.U. School of Education (1954) to improve the quality of the schools in Greenwich Village. The study concluded that the latter was directly related to the district's ability to "hold a middle class population". This, in turn, depended on the availability of the requisite housing and other amenities. A plan was endorsed for three major development projects in the lower Village area which necessitated the removal of the Italian population. This was justified on the grounds that tenement life was insupportable, and that Italians were themselves discontented with the neighborhood. As evidence, it produced a survey which reported that "a larger percentage of the lower Village population expects to move than does that of the Upper Village". It did not address the status of Italians who did not have plans to leave. Nevertheless, the displacement of Italians was a precondition for the upgrading of Village schools.

One of these development projects was built in an industrial area southeast of Washington Square. By 1967, 1,826 dwelling units had been completed; altogether, there were four high-rise buildings on the site. A number of Italian families, some of whom were displaced by the construction, took apartments. For the most part., however, the new residents were middle class professionals-the leading edge of the gentrification in the South Village.

The other two renewal projects were to provide "slum- clearance housing in an area bounded by the Avenue of the Americas, Broome St., West Broadway and West Houston St., with the exception of designated buildings" (the latter were presumably Federal Period landmark houses). This was the heart of the Italian South Village. However, these projects were not carried out. Notwithstanding the conclusions of the School of Education study, Italians were not prepared to cede the South Village which they never thought of as a "slum".

The South Village was also threatened by a plan to build a highway through downtown Manhattan at Canal Street (the Lower Manhattan Expressway) in the sixties. The highway called for the razing of buildings up to Broome Street; several buildings had actually been torn down on Hudson Street, near the Hudson River, in anticipation of the road. Italians living in the designated area were worried, and some were frightened into moving away. The plan, however, was scuttled by the end of the decade, partly due to local political action.

Although urban renewal and highway construction were held in abeyance, the South Village remained a "zone of transition". Landlords were hesitant to make capital improvements. Rent levels stayed low, although this was partly due to the city's rent control law. As a result, students and other young, single persons found the neighborhood attractive. The area above Bleecker Street had been transformed into a bohemian quarter in the late fifties. The withering away of the hippie counter-culture left a seedy residue of bars, head shops, record stores and the infamous welfare hotels, including the imposing Greenwich Hotel on Bleecker and Thompson

Streets. Many Italians in this section fled. The Italian neighborhood below Houston Street was largely untouched by these developments, although young people were filtering into the area in increasing numbers.

The transitional South Village also emerged as a settlement for Portuguese immigrants. Their numbers were insignificant in the mid-sixties, since they received no mention in the parish literature of the period. However, the 1980 Census counted 982 Portuguese in the area. Like the students and other young people, the Portuguese were attracted by low rent tenement flats.

A relatively small number of brick and brownstone houses attracted middle class professionals to the Village in these years. Many of these structures, built in Federal Period/Greek Revival style for upper middle class families before the Civil War, were refurbished when Italian families moved away. The purchases were often very reasonable; Italians were not sensitive to the area's real estate values. Besides being a good buy, there was the convenience of an in town location and the amenities associated with the residence in an urban village (e.g., "community", good restaurants, and safety).

A development in the early 1970s signaled the transformation of the South Village into something other than an Italian neighborhood, namely, the legalization of loft residence in the adjacent factory district and the crystallization of an "artist's community". In contrast to renewal and the expressway, this was a development that would not be thwarted.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the district which ran along lower Broadway was known as the "Venice of Industry". However, many of the small manufacturing concerns had vacated by World War I. As a 1966 parish yearbook noted, the "low ceiling, narrow dark rooms with small windows only at the front and rear of the building" had been considered "impractical for conversion into residences". Into the sixties, however, these abandoned lofts were being occupied by painters, sculptors, musicians and film makers who demanded ample work space at low rents.

The artists entered a vacuum created by the uncertainty of development plans for lower Manhattan. Since the district was zoned for industry, they were forced to live in a clandestine manner. They had to conceal their illegal occupancy from building inspectors by keeping their windows dark after work hours; household garbage could not be left at the curb. Artists also had to put up with the inconvenience of truck deliveries, noisy machinery and freight elevators. However, the "space" (a central concept in the *Weltanschauung* of loft residents) was unquestionably worth the sacrifice.

In 1971, the status of the squatter settlement was decisively altered. A community organization representing artists in the area pressed the city to legitimize their residence in the loft district. They were supported by prominent financial and cultural interests, including the Rockefeller family. With this backing, a municipal zoning amendment was passed in 1971 legalizing loft residence in a designated area for working artists who were officially certified by a committee newly established by the city (the area was bounded by Houston and Center Streets, and Lafayette Street and West Broadway which was its boundary with the Italian neighborhood). The city also instituted a program of tax abatements and exemptions for converted industrial property. The entire area was accorded the status of an historical landmark, which imposed restrictions on subsequent development, because of a preponderance of cast-iron facade buildings erected after the Civil War; landmark status gave the artists' community further distinction. Its official identity was established as "SoHo" a name which derived from its location South of Houston Street, and was not to be confused with "SoHo" in London. The city was careful to emphasize that SoHo was not to jeopardize any further manufacturing jobs, which provided a livelihood for the city's minority groups (according to the local planning board, manufacturing jobs in the city declined by 3.4% between 1957 and 1955 while there was a 9.4% decline in

Greenwich Village). However, city officials were able to justify SoHo on economic grounds since "art is industry". There were also possibilities that SoHo would help restore the middle class to lower Manhattan.

While art was secured against the building inspectors, legalization had turned the loft district into what a local TV news program referred to as "the hottest thing in New York real estate". The demand for lofts burgeoned among non-artists who craved space and a now fashionable address. In no time, "businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and retired persons ... grabbed living lofts reserved for resident working artists" (The Village Voice May 15, 1974). Developers bought commercial properties to be converted, with the aid of generous tax breaks, into loft apartments, or merely to hold for speculation; as a result, SoHo had become "a landlord's market rather than an artist's market" (The Village Voice May 15, 1974). Wealthy artists profited too, becoming landlords and speculators. By 1977, 4,000 square feet of loft space that sold for between \$3,000 and \$7,000 in 1971 was selling between \$50,000 and \$100,000. Pioneer artists who had occupied illegal lofts before 1971 were forced into virgin industrial areas elsewhere in the city (No Ho, Tribeca, etc.).

Although the Italian neighborhood was not within the area designated by the City Planning Commission as SoHo, and had only a limited supply of commercial space, it nonetheless felt the full impact of the SoHo phenomenon. After 1971, there was a sudden surge of demand for apartments and storefronts in the South Village. Invariably, SoHo had an inflationary effect on local land values and the neighborhood rent structure, especially when the rent control law no longer extended to vacant apartments after 1972. To take full advantage of the prestige lent by SoHo, South Village landlords began listing apartments with a SoHo address and demanding SoHo rents. Italians watched all this behind the relative protection of the city's rent control law (allowing a maximum increase of 7½% a Year).

Since loft space was minimal, the South Village held little interest for artists and others for whom space was an obsession and who spoke in terms of thousands of square feet instead of rooms. Nevertheless, it did attract a related and specialized group who came to the South Village to live in SoHo, but who either could not afford a loft or were not a vital part of the art scene. They tended to be in their twenties or early thirties, and at some stage preparatory to a professional career perhaps in a field related to the arts. They also tended to live alone or with a roommate.

Between 1970 and 1980, there was a marked increase in the number of persons aged 25-34 in the two South Village census tracts adjacent to Sol lo. Whereas 22 percent of the total population was in this category in 1970, 31 percent were between the ages of 25 and 34 in 1980. This development was primarily responsible for reversing the population decline in the South Village. The census tracts mentioned above experienced a 28 percent increase in population between 1970 and 1980.

The young newcomers were drawn to the South Village for a number of reasons. In light of rents elsewhere in Manhattan, the apartments, which Italians had taken care of as their homes, were reasonable, although they were renting for two to three times what Italians were paying. Moreover, the neighborhood was interesting. A jazz musician felt "stimulated by the neighborhood". Similarly, an artist claimed to "feel the vitality" of the area, and valued the contacts it offered (via the bars, Laundromats, etc.) for advancing his career. Many newcomers appreciated the South Village for its ethnic ambiance, although it was clearly fading. There was also the "reverse chic" of a tenement flat with a bathtub in the middle of the kitchen and a toilet in the hall. With Italian Americans making the "outward journey", the South Village had become an incubator of professional careers; as an ethnic enclave, it had been an incubator of mainstream Americans.

After 1971, apartments in the South Village were in great demand. Italians were stunned at the eagerness with which young newcomers paid as much as four to five times what Italians were paying for three small rooms and the inevitable toilet in the hallway (landlords discovered they did not have to renovate). To accommodate the demand, new housing was put on the market by ambitious developers. An old warehouse was completely dismantled, down to its steel frame, and reborn as a "luxury apartment house" with private terraces and a health spa on the ground floor: next to a chicken market and across the street from a candy store, it epitomized the "uneven development." that the middle class replacement or gentrification, was producing in the South Village. Two welfare hotels that were the scourge of the neighborhood were converted into middle income apartment buildings. The ground floor of one structure, which occupied an entire block and had a stately courtyard, was rented to a dry cleaning store and a donut franchise. In 1975 a one bedroom apartment rented for over \$400 a month. In an interesting conversion, a corner luncheonette was renovated into four ground floor duplex apartments, each renting for \$440 a month in 1975.

Some tenement landlords sought to renovate and attract a middle income market for the upgraded units. In one building apartments were being renovated as Italians moved out. One landlord pressured Italians to leave by cutting back on building services. Another tenement was thoroughly renovated following a fire of suspicious origin. When it was ready for occupancy, neighborhood Italians, including Cornier tenants, were unable to afford the new rent structure and the building was rented almost exclusively to young newcomers (median rents asked for vacant apartments in the census tract in 1980 was \$325, six times the amount asked in 1970).

Private homes also warranted new attention. Two and three unit dwellings were refurbished for use by one family and, perhaps, an additional rental. One three-story house had a back porch overlooking a patio and flower garden; another was given a new look with freshly painted shutters and sycamores planted at the curb. A building that had been renovated into a townhouse possessed a private garage, fashioned out of an old storefront, with an electrically timed door that was the envy of everyone who jockeyed for scarce parking spaces on the street. In contrast to the renters, house owners belonged to a higher social stratum.

Apart from real estate SoHo had other implications for the neighborhood economy. Traditionally, the heart of local economic life was the storefront shops selling groceries, meats, bakery products, fresh fruits and vegetables and other provisions to the ethnic population. There were also the bars and luncheonettes whose business was supplemented by the workers in nearby factories. However, local commerce declined as population dwindled and light industry moved away. Many of the small food shops were affected by the supermarket chains; the urban renewal project added a supermarket to the area in the sixties. By the early seventies, there were only one or two grocery stores to a block where there were as many as five or six before World War II. There were only two Italian bakeries below Houston Street; packaged white bread could be seen peeking out of shopping bags. Candy stores, an important focus of street corner life, were becoming virtually extinct.

Before 1971, landlords had difficulty finding new commercial tenants. Some storefronts were left vacant and boarded up, giving the neighborhood a shabby look. In other cases, they were made available to neighborhood Italians for noncommercial use at low rents. In particular, they became club rooms for young people or were utilized as storage facilities for bicycles, baby carriages and other belongings that only cluttered up apartments.

SoHo reversed this economic decline, reclaiming the storefronts for entrepreneurial purposes. However, the renaissance was not oriented to Italians. The drab storefronts were metamorphosed into pretty shops selling antiques, silver jewelry and gourmet foods. Grocery stores and tailor shops gave way to boutiques featuring expensive European fashions. A butcher

shop was transformed into a shop selling hand-crafted puppets and dolls. Another grocery store was rented to a potter; there were several craftspeople that lived and worked in storefront shops. One former "horse room" became an art supply store, while another became a cooperative sculpture gallery. A vacant metal shop became a quaint little restaurant specializing in Sunday brunch.

Some Italian-owned businesses closed because they were unable to absorb rent increases. One long-established candy store closed in 1982 when the landlord raised the monthly rent from \$450 to \$1200. Landlords reputedly offered both commercial and residential tenants payments if they agreed to break leases. The demand for commercial space also drove out the remaining social clubs.

Other Italian businesses, however, were rejuvenated by SoHo, although noteworthy changes were effected to accommodate a new clientele. A luncheonette that was about to close was reprieved since the young singles ate out often; this also helped the grocery stores and their sandwich trade. Another luncheonette that was resuscitated by SoHo was renamed by its proprietor to identify with the art scene; walls and windows were decorated with posters announcing art shows and recitals. A bar owned by an Italian family in the neighborhood since the 1870s became a SoHo landmark. A hardware store, where everybody in the neighborhood had bought their Venetian blinds, was similarly renovated when it catered to the renovation work going on in the area. SoHo gave new life to liquor stores, candy stores and many Italian food stores, which were transformed into specialty shops catering to the new middle class resident. The imported products carried by the shops were beyond the means of most Italians except on special occasions. Several shops changed their locale and modernized their facilities to better accommodate a middle class clientele.

### ***Conclusion***

A few years after legalization, the new SoHo community—a conception of city planners, real estate brokers and resident artists virtually absorbed a distinctive Italian neighborhood in the South Village. Although Italians preferred not to recognize it, there was mounting evidence that this had, in fact, occurred. Thus, some of the new shops advertised themselves as SoHo establishments. The media played an instrumental role in effecting a change in identity. Articles in *The New York Times* referred to local restaurants as having a SoHo address. The centerfold pullout in *The SoHo Weekly News* was a guide to SoHo galleries that identified the South Village as part of the artists' community. On the other hand, the media, in particular the print media, fostered an impression of the decline of the Italian community. An article in *The SoHo Weekly News* juxtaposed photographs of rejuvenated SoHo storefronts and forlorn looking elderly Italian women watching the neighborhood change; another photograph showed an elderly Italian woman passing in front of an art gallery. An article in *The New Yorker* (April, 26, 1976) magazine lamented the decline of "the South Village as a community". It portrayed the South Village as having "lost much of its Old Italian flavor" and as "slowly disappearing as a neighborhood".

Subsequent chapters will focus on specific community institutions in light of the contraction of the Italian population and related changes in the neighborhood, in particular the expansion of SoHo. While these developments portend the eventual demise of a distinct Italian neighborhood, for the moment they have elicited new institutional responses and adjustments.