

Issue 52, 27 October, 2017

## “The Beginning of the End”. *The Lofts of SoHo* and the Role of Artists in the Early Days of Gentrification in New York City

Nico Völker

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Contact: Nico.Voelker@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

### Abstract:

Aaron Shkuda's *The Lofts of SoHo* recounts how between 1950 and 1980 the New York City neighborhood of SoHo turned from an inner-city industrial district into an artist's enclave, thereby laying the groundwork for the gentrified space that SoHo represents today. Shkuda's account focuses on the role that artists played in transforming the neighborhood and analyzes how artists entangled with other political and economic actors were crucial in the redevelopment of the neighborhood after and during its deindustrialization. By analyzing the 20th-century redevelopment and eventual gentrification of SoHo in extraordinary detail and structural clarity, the book makes a very valuable contribution to the study of gentrification in New York City and US-American cities that – although historical in scope – is of pressing interest for students of today's city as well.

### How to cite:

Völker, Nico: “The Beginning of the End’: *The Lofts of SoHo* and the Role of Artists in the Early Days of Gentrification in New York City [Review on: Shkuda, Aaron: *The Lofts of SoHo. Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950-1980*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.]”. In: KULT\_online 52 (2017).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2017.166>



## “The Beginning of the End”. *The Lofts of SoHo* and the Role of Artists in the Early Days of Gentrification in New York City

Nico Völker

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Shkuda, Aaron: *The Lofts of SoHo. Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950-1980*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 320 pages, 45 USD. ISBN: 9780226334189.

### Abstract:

Aaron Shkuda's *The Lofts of SoHo* recounts how between 1950 and 1980 the New York City neighborhood of SoHo turned from an inner-city industrial district into an artist's enclave, thereby laying the groundwork for the gentrified space that SoHo represents today. Shkuda's account focuses on the role that artists played in transforming the neighborhood and analyzes how artists entangled with other political and economic actors were crucial in the redevelopment of the neighborhood after and during its deindustrialization. By analyzing the 20th-century redevelopment and eventual gentrification of SoHo in extraordinary detail and structural clarity, the book makes a very valuable contribution to the study of gentrification in New York City and US-American cities that – although historical in scope – is of pressing interest for students of today's city as well.

*The Lofts of SoHo: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950-1980* by Aaron Shkuda gives a historical account of urban redevelopment and the early days of gentrification in mid-twentieth century New York City. Specifically, this detailed and convincingly argued monograph illuminates the crucial role that artists, entangled in a web of other local actors and political and economic interests, played in redeveloping the Manhattan neighborhood of SoHo in the years between 1950 and 1980. It tells the story of the transformation of the neighborhood from an old industrial district into an artist's enclave filled with desirable “loft-living” spaces that in turn eventually gave way to the upscale arts, commerce, and entertainment (read: gentrified) district the neighborhood is today.

The New York City neighborhood of SoHo, situated in the downtown area of its borough Manhattan

south of Houston Street, has had a volatile history throughout its existence, initially changing from farmland to “an enclave for the wealthy” and then eventually an industrial area in the mid-nineteenth century, which it remained until after World War II (p. 13). Shkuda begins his study by outlining how SoHo was a place for smaller industrial businesses that in the postwar years ran into difficulties, eventually leading to industrial decline and a large number of vacant buildings. Beginning in the 1960s, a number of “pioneering artists” saw the potential of those large-scale lofts as combined living/working spaces and began renting them, even though, according to New York City zoning laws and buildings codes, those structures did not allow for residential use. Many landlords regardless rented lofts out to artists, who happened to be valuable tenants for their buildings in a time of industrial decline.

However, artists interested in remaking those industrial spaces had to contend with other efforts to transform declining inner-city districts such as SoHo. Robert Moses, New York City’s infamous city planner in the mid-twentieth century, used SoHo for many of his efforts of urban renewal, among them the “Lower Manhattan Expressway” project which proposed an elevated highway through the center of SoHo. An alliance of artists who already had started converting many of the factory spaces of SoHo into homes and had defeated various envisaged urban renewal projects for the neighborhood also managed to defeat the Lower Manhattan Expressway project, without which, Shkuda contends, “there is little chance the neighborhood would have developed in the manner it did” (p. 73). Shkuda further delineates in great detail how successful efforts at preventing Moses’ urban renewal projects made SoHo’s eventual gentrification possible in the first place and thus saved it “for loft residents, gallery owners, and entrepreneurs to build a new residential neighborhood in the area” (p. 85).

Nevertheless, Shkuda also makes it clear that even though artists and other local actors might have played a crucial role in creating a gentrified cityscape, they were also being used by more powerful state and city actors who quickly realized that letting artists create a new identity for a neighborhood could work as a specific and comparatively cost-efficient urban “renewal” strategy. Further, since SoHo and the loft-living lifestyle the local artists had established became popular and many eventually had to make way and were displaced by more affluent real estate developers and ever-rising rents, Shkuda regards SoHo artists as “both victims and agents of gentrification” (p. 9).

Concerning the roots and causes of gentrification, Shkuda seems to follow similar arguments made by Suleiman Osman in *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (2011) and Brian Goldstein’s *The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem* (2017), attributing major responsibility for the eventual gentrification of New York City not to “top-down” city hall projects or real estate developers, but to “bottom-up” initiatives

of singular groups and individuals trying to carve out a space for themselves in Postwar New York City. However, Shkuda refrains from aligning himself with one of the major schools of thought on how and why gentrification emerges (he does remark that the “geography of loft conversions” in SoHo “gives some support to the rent-gap theory of gentrification posited by Neil Smith,” although “with some caveats” (p. 229)).

Instead, Shkuda illuminates the complexities of the conflicts surrounding SoHo’s redevelopment from an industrial into a residential space by pointing out numerous details that work as “a counterpoint to the usual narrative of gentrification process” (p. 207). He argues that real estate developers played an important role in the redevelopment of SoHo, but only after artists had already started the process. Even then artists continued to influence policy decisions on redevelopment, thus making it difficult to see them “simply as hapless victims” of gentrification (p. 228). Evidently, instead of giving an ideological explanation, Shkuda opts for a nuanced reading of the history and processes of SoHo redevelopment and gentrification and its “victims and agents” (p. 9).

*The Lofts of SoHo* serves as a reminder that this strategy, with its roots in the “lofts of SoHo,” has been taken up and reapplied in modern cities around the globe (one only has to think of Richard Florida’s concept of the “creative class”), creating a blueprint for the redevelopment of post-industrial cities, more often than not also leading to the gentrification of these spaces. The history of SoHo might serve as a cautionary tale to similar post-industrial cities of today about the dangers of unregulated rental markets and urban development. Or, as one local artist remarked in the mid-1970s, commenting on the quickly-rising popularity of a redeveloped SoHo with city politicians, non-artists and tourists: “Oh God, this is the beginning of the end! And, it was, fact” (p. 157).

The achievement and strength of Shkuda’s book lies in its very detailed account of the history of artist-led urban redevelopment and eventual gentrification in SoHo. Even though the book could have benefitted from some more elaborate remarks on the history and the concept of gentrification, which are relegated mainly to a couple of pages in the introduction, and thus *The Lofts of SoHo* might not change the conversation on New York City gentrification, it certainly infuses and deepens the conversation about it with an impressive amount of historical detail and argumentative clarity.

**German Abstract:**

**„Der Anfang vom Ende“. *The Lofts of SoHo* und die Rolle der Künstler\_innen in der Frühzeit der Gentrifizierung in New York**

Aaron Shkudas *The Lofts of SoHo* erzählt vom Wandel des New Yorker Stadtteils SoHo in den Jahren zwischen 1950 und 1980 vom angeschlagenen innerstädtischen Industrieviertel zur florierenden Künstlerhochburg. Dieser Wandel bildete die Vorstufe zum durch und durch gentrifizierten Raum, den SoHo heute darstellt. Shkuda's Monographie fokussiert dabei vor allem die Rolle, die Künstler\_innen in der Wandlung des Stadtteils spielten und analysiert wie diese, gemeinsam mit und gegen andere politische und wirtschaftliche Interessen, zu großen Teilen für SoHos Entwicklung während und nach dessen Deindustrialisierung verantwortlich zeichneten. Indem es die Umwandlung und die sich anschließende Gentrifizierung SoHos in großer Detailfülle und struktureller Klarheit nachzeichnet, leistet *The Lofts of SoHo* trotz seines historischen Fokus einen substantiellen Beitrag zur aktuellen US-Amerikanischen Stadt- und Gentrifizierungsforschung.

---

Nico Völker

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Contact: [Nico.Voelker@gcsc.uni-giessen.de](mailto:Nico.Voelker@gcsc.uni-giessen.de)

**How to cite:**

Völker, Nico: "‘The Beginning of the End’: *The Lofts of SoHo* and the Role of Artists in the Early Days of Gentrification in New York City [Review on: Shkuda, Aaron: *The Lofts of SoHo. Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950-1980*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.]" In: KULT\_online 52 (2017).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2017.166>