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MAYOR ASKS AID TO 'SOHO' ARTISTS

By EDWARD C. BURKS SEPT. 24, 1970

Mayor Lindsay urged the City Planning Commission yesterday to legalize the quartering of artists in loft buildings in a 40-block area in lower Manhattan.

The area called by artists SoHo—for South of Houston Street—is zoned for light manufacturing. Therefore the 660 artists who live in loft studios there are in violation of the law and subject to eviction.

During a five-hour hearing of the planning commission at City Hall, more than 40 speakers — artists, politicians and gallery-owners — endorsed a plan for a zoning change that would allow almost all the artists to remain.

Most of the speakers went further and called on the commission to extend an informal moratorium on eviction that was agreed to by the city 18 months ago in the SoHo district to two adjacent light manufacturing districts with artists' lofts. The artists contend they need help from the planning commission because the SoHo area is the only one left in Manhattan where the loft space they need is available at reasonable rents.

The Mayor did not appear at yesterday's hearings but issued a statement in which he said that "creation of SoHo artists' district will insure New York's position as the art capital of the nation and one of the great creative centers of the world."

Decision Reserved

After hearing all the testimony, the planning commission reserved decision.

The zoning change before the agency is designed to strike a balance between the needs of the artists, who with their families number 2,000 illegal residents, and the area's light industries, which employ 20,000 predominantly low-income workers.

For many months the city has been working with the SoHo Artists Association on the plan. Gerhardt Liebmann, a member of the association and principal speaker

for the artists at yesterday's hearing, told the commission: "We want no boutiques, no Macdougall Street scene. We want an area where we can work in security and dignity."

Because so much of today's "New York School" art is electronic art, Mr. Liebmann said he saw a natural alliance between the industry in the area and the artists. He also envisioned a district where a collector would buy directly from the artist in his loft.

The area involved is bounded by Houston Street on the north, Canal Street on the south and roughly by Lafayette Street on the east and West Broadway on the west.

Victimization Charged

Artists began moving into SoHo lofts in great numbers in 1965 after lofts in other areas were razed. But as illegal residential squatters they have been victimized, Mr. Liebmann said.

Landlords would rent the lofts illegally, he said, until the artists had worked hard transforming the "filthy space" into a nice place to live and then "bounce them out" without recourse and rent the space to others at double the rent.

Artists objected to two provisions of the legalization plan. One would legalize the residential use of buildings occupied by them as of May 1, 1970, and many dislike that cutoff date. The other limits the floor space of these residential and studio lofts.

But it is estimated that 60 artists live in so-called oversized lofts in the SoHo area and would have to relocate. Mr. Liebmann urged the commission to allow the artists in the bigger lofts to remain and to consider stretching its rezoning to cover loft areas north of Houston Street and south of Canal Street.

He conceded it was virtually impossible to define an artist but said his association was going to be sure that anyone who occupied a loft under the plan was an artist.

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