

SoHo Tour

Introduction

Hi! I'm Katherine with Free Tours by Foot, here to guide you on a tour of SoHo. This tour starts at the corner of Spring Street and 6th Avenue. To get there you can take the C or E train to the Spring Street Station. When you exit the subway, go to the starting point at the Northeast corner of Spring Street and 6th Avenue. This will be in front of the Gods Love We Deliver Michael Kors Building.

While you tour the area, you will see many of the street signs are brown, not green like standard street signs. Brown street signs indicate that those streets and area are a designated historic district. SoHo was landmarked in 1973, which is one of the reasons so much of its old architecture remains intact.

A Brief History

Directions: Great to listen to as you travel to the starting point.

SoHo stands for South of Houston Street. The acronym grew out of the 1962 report by the City Planning Commissioner entitled "The South Houston Industrial Area". The report officially designated the boundaries of SoHo as Houston Street on the north and Canal Street on the south; 6th Avenue on the west and Crosby Street on the east.

The land encompassing modern-day SoHo was forest and marsh land inhabited by Native Americans. In the 1640s, the Netherlands colonized what was called by the natives *Manahatta* which became Manhattan. When the British took control from the Dutch in the 1660s, wealthy colonists built large stately homes here.

After the American Revolution, the population of New York City grew rapidly. In 1811 city planners created a street grid that made it easier for people and commerce to move farther north in Manhattan. The wealthy New Yorkers from this area moved away and middle-class families moved in and built brick Federal-style row houses. We will see two of these on this tour.

By the 1850s, SoHo was an upscale shopping district with stores like the original Tiffany's and Brooks Brothers. Along Broadway, there were posh hotels, theaters, and casinos. On the smaller side streets, fancy brothels catered to well-to-do gentleman, making SoHo the city's first red-light district.

In the 1870s, the neighborhood dramatically changed as the residents, shops, and theaters moved uptown. Textile and dry-goods factories were built here and it was this era that saw the rise of the Cast Iron buildings that give SoHo its distinct appearance.

By the 1930s, the upscale manufacturers moved elsewhere and cheap, wholesale textile companies occupied these beautiful buildings. They were known for forcing their workers to

keep long hours in horrendous and unsafe conditions for very little pay. Known as ‘sweatshops’, these buildings were dangerous and often caught fire and the area became known as “Hell’s Hundred Acres.”

Meanwhile, mid-20th century advances in shipping, such as the use of large freight containers, made it difficult for trucks to navigate the narrow streets of SoHo. Eventually, industry moved out of the area and SoHo became a wasteland.

By the late 1960s owners of the unoccupied former factory buildings were desperate for renters. This was perfect for artists just starting their careers as they could afford these cheap, lofty spaces, flooded with natural light through their large windows. The tall ceilings were perfect for artists who worked on massive canvases.

Artists like Claes Oldenburg and Carl Andre set up shop here and were followed by others over the years. The previously urban wasteland became a hip, avant-garde destination. We will discuss this in more detail at one of the stops on the tour.

This artistic phase was short-lived and by the late 1970s, real estate developers bought entire buildings and transformed them into pricey lofts. Rents skyrocketed and artists were priced out of the neighborhood. They headed for areas like Williamsburg and DUMBO in Brooklyn.

By the mid-1980s, designer boutiques, chic restaurants, and expensive art galleries opened and SoHo became a fashion and art capital of the world.

Today, the city’s art scene is in Chelsea, but the expensive real estate, trendy boutiques and best of all, the stunning architecture of SoHo, remain.

Richmond Hill

As you stand on this corner and look around, it is hard to imagine that this was once forest, marshland, and meadows. There was also a freshwater spring that still exists today. This is how Spring Street got its name. SoHo’s first occupants were Native Americans, the Dutch colonists and later British colonists. In 1760, during the British colonial era, a wealthy British major, Abraham Mortimer, bought 26 acres, built himself a mansion and named it Richmond Hill. At the start of the Revolutionary War in July 1776, General George Washington briefly took over the mansion to use as his headquarters. When the war was over, John Adams, the first Vice-President of the United States, lived in the mansion from 1789 to 1790. He went on to become the 2nd president of the United States.

From 1791 to 1804, the mansion was home to Aaron Burr, America’s third vice-president. Burr is best known for the infamous duel in 1804 against his political foe, Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was fatally wounded and died two days later. He is buried in the graveyard of Trinity Church, included in our Lower Manhattan Tour. Burr sold Richmond Hill mansion and fled New York.

While the duel is well known, not many people know about Burr’s role in the formation of the now massive banking institution, Chase Bank. In 1798, New York City suffered deadly yellow fever outbreaks, killing thousands of people. It was believed that the illness spread through dirty water. Burr established a waterworks company and named it the Manhattan Company, with the supposed aim of bringing clean water to the city from upstate. In fact, Burr’s real intent was to establish an enterprise with a charter that made it legally possible for

him to create a second bank for the city to compete with Alexander Hamilton's Bank of New York.

Burr's waterworks enterprise was a failure, having constructed a cheap and ultimately ineffective system of wooden water mains. But Burr did get his bank and named it the Bank of the Manhattan. In 1955, it merged with Chase National Bank to become Chase Manhattan Bank, now just Chase Bank. The modern Chase Bank logo is an artistic representation of the wooden water mains.

From the subway station, walk east about 200 feet along Spring Street. East is the same direction the traffic is flowing in. Stop when you come to the Dominique Ansel Bakery at 189 Spring Street (1-min walk).

The Birthplace of the Cronut

Directions: From the subway station, walk east about 200 feet along Spring Street. East is the same direction the traffic is flowing in. Stop when you come to the Dominique Ansel Bakery at 189 Spring Street. (1 min walk)

This is the birthplace of the world-famous Cronut, a croissant-doughnut hybrid. Created in in 2013, this unique pastry innovation is trademarked by its creator, Dominique Ansel and pastry fans around the world have made it the most virally talked about dessert item in history. If you want to try one, you'll have to get there early, since they sell out fast! They are open from Mondays to Saturdays from 8 am to 7 pm and Sunday from 9 am to 7 pm.

Now turn away from the bakery and look directly across Spring Street where you will see two short red brick row houses at 188 and 190 Spring Street.

Federal Style Homes

Directions: Now turn away from the bakery and look directly across Spring Street where you will see two short red brick row houses at 188 and 190 Spring Street.

These single-family homes were built in 1899 and though much of both houses have been altered, they retain some of their original 19th-century features. For example, they are three and a half stories, have the original gable roofs, as well as a small amount of Flemish bond brickwork. These two well-preserved houses are typical of the style of house you could find in Lower Manhattan in that era.

Continue walking east on Spring Street about 100 feet till you get Thompson Street. Cross Thompson Street to Ben's Pizzeria (1-min walk).

Ben's Pizza

Directions: Continue walking east on Spring Street about 100 feet till you get Thompson Street. Cross Thompson Street to Famous Ben's Pizzeria. (1 min walk)

This pizzeria opened in 1977 and is known for its good pizza and its great zeppole (sweet fried dough balls with powdered sugar). Ben's Pizza is also known as for appearing in scenes from the movie Men in Black 2 and in an episode of Sex in the City. Ben's is just one of the many SoHo locations where movies and TV shows have been filmed. SoHo is a popular movie locale because of its unique character, its attractive architecture and its stylish shops and restaurants. Here is just a handful of movies with scenes filmed here:

In 1985 film director Martin Scorsese made the dark comedy After Hours. Much of it takes place in the narrow streets of SoHo as a businessman finds himself on a wild goose chase in the middle of the night that takes him deep into the dark artsy world of SoHo of the 1980s. This movie provides a glimpse into what SoHo looked like before it was completely transformed into the posh, expensive neighborhood it is today.

Other movies filmed in SoHo include the controversial erotica movie from 1986 9 1/2 Weeks, with Kim Basinger and Mickey Rourke. In 1997, Matthew Broderick and Meg Ryan starred in the comedy Addicted to Love and play neighbors on Wooster Street. In 2000, Sandra Bullock played a recovering alcoholic who lived in SoHo in the film 28 Days. In real life, Sandra Bullock lived in SoHo for a few years at 114 Sullivan Street.

No list of SoHo movie locations would be complete without mentioning Ghost, the 1990 romance with Demi Moore, Patrick Swayze, and Whoopi Goldberg. We will be passing by the Ghost building later on in this tour.

Now walk north on Thompson Street, against the flow of traffic, for one block until Prince Street.

As you walk, take note of Vesuvio playground on the other side of the street. It was named in honor of Anthony Dapolitano, the owner of the now-closed Vesuvio Bakery. Dapolitano was very active on the Local Community Board and dedicated his time to make sure that the playground received city funding to keep it in good condition and get upgrades when needed. When you reach Prince Street, make a right turn and walk to 160 Prince Street (2-minute walk).

Vesuvio Bakery

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When you reach Prince Street, make a right turn and walk to 160 Prince Street. (2-minute walk)

Here you will find the Birdbath Bakery, though you might not believe that since the entire storefront and awning indicate that this is still Vesuvio Bakery. In 1920, Dapolitano's parents opened Vesuvio to cater to the large Italian-American population. In the late 1800s, Italian immigrants came to New York by the tens of thousands and those who did not move into the already packed Little Italy, settled among these streets, crammed into the short tenement buildings. What is now northern SoHo was called the South Village, an extension of Greenwich Village which was also heavily populated with Italian immigrants.

When Dapolitano passed away, Vesuvio closed after more than 80 years. When the owners of Birdbath moved into the space, they understood the sentimental significance and charm of the original storefront and decided to keep the VESUVIO name painted in green on the glass windows. Their own name is small and stashed at the lower left corner of the left window. Stop in and grab a treat if you like.

Now continue on Prince Street to the corner. Cross Prince Street toward the Coach shop. Walk east on Prince Street, against the traffic flow and stop at 141 Prince Street (1-minute walk).

Louis K. Meisel Gallery

Directions: Now continue on Prince Street to the corner. Cross Prince Street toward the Coach shop. Walk east on Prince Street, against the traffic flow and stop at 141 Prince Street (1-minute walk).

This is the Louis K. Meisel Gallery. This highly esteemed art gallery is known for its collection of original pin-up art. It is open Tuesday through Saturday 10 am to 6 pm but closed on Sundays and Mondays. There is no fee to walk into this art gallery or, in fact, any art gallery in SoHo unless they are having a private event.

For fans of the HBO show, *Sex in the City*, this is the art gallery where Charlotte worked. For die-hard SATC fans, check out our posts "Sex and the City self-guided tour" and "Where is Carrie Bradshaw's apartment." Links are included.

[Sex and the City self-guided tour](#) and [Visit Carrie Bradshaw's apartment](#).

Walk on Prince Street to the corner and make a left turn onto Wooster Street. Stop when you reach 141 Wooster Street, just past the North Face store. You will immediately notice the charm of this narrow street paved with what most people call 'cobblestone'. Cobblestone simply refers to uneven stones of varying shapes and sizes. Cobblestone was used to pave the streets in very early New York. But over time those streets eroded and were replaced with smoother, more evenly shaped "Belgian blocks." As those streets wore down, they were paved over with asphalt. SoHo is one district that has a number of streets with Belgian blocks. You can also find them in neighborhoods like DUMBO, Greenwich Village, and Tribeca (2-minute walk).

The Earth Room

This is the Earth Room, an art gallery on the 2nd floor whose only exhibit is a 3,600-square-foot gallery space containing a 22-inch-deep layer of dirt, weighing approximately 280,000 pounds. The gallery is open to the public for free. If you would like to see the Earth Room, ring buzzer number 2 to enter. Though you cannot touch the display or walk on it, it will provide you with a peaceful, natural sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of the street below. The Earth Room is open Wednesday–Sunday, 12–6 pm (closed from 3–3:30 pm).

Turn back around and walk toward Prince Street. When you reach the corner make a left turn and walk one block to Greene Street. Cross Greene Street and stop on the corner at the Apple Store. The Apple Store where you are standing is a great place to use their restrooms, free wifi or to recharge any devices you may have. Once you are on the corner, turn around 360 degrees and look at the side of the building on the corner above the Camper store (2-minute walk).

The Cast Iron Mural

Directions: Turn back around and walk toward Prince Street. When you reach the corner make a left turn and walk one block to Greene Street. Cross Greene Street and stop on the corner at the Apple Store. The Apple Store where you are standing is a great place to use their restrooms, free wifi or to recharge any devices you may have. Once you are on the corner, turn around 360 degrees and look at the side of the building on the corner above the Camper store (2-minute walk).

Here is a playful mural by artist Richard Haas. In 1975, Haas painted the side of this building as a *trompe l'oeil* (French for “trick the eye”) to mimic the cast-iron facade of the front of the building. The building, 112 Prince Street, housed the SoHo Center for Visual Arts from 1973 to 1985. The Center was created for the benefit of the hundreds of artists settling in SoHo in the 1970s. One such artist was Maya Lin, the noted sculptor of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. She lived and worked on one of the upper floors for a number of years.

When you are ready continue this tour and cross Prince Street and walk left a few buildings into 102 Prince Street (1-minute walk).

The Building from Ghost (the movie)

Directions: When you are ready continue this tour and cross Prince Street and walk left a few buildings to 102 Prince Street (1-minute walk).

This building was one of the locations used in the 1990 movie *Ghost* starring Demi Moore, Patrick Swayze, and Whoopi Goldberg. It was the building where Molly and Sam live. Several scenes were filmed inside the loft apartment, most famously the clay making scene, which is currently worth \$10 million dollars.

Now continue on Prince Street to the corner of Mercer Street where you will find Fanelli's Cafe (1-min walk).

The Fanelli Café

Directions: Now continue on Prince Street to the corner of Mercer Street where you will find Fanelli's Cafe (1-min walk).

94 Prince Street is said to be the city's second-oldest locale that continuously served alcohol. It was operated under different names and different owners dating back to 1847.

The first building on this site was a grocery where customers could drink liquor and beer. From that point onward, whatever business operated at this locale, be it a grocery or a cafe, alcohol was always served. Even during Prohibition, when the making and selling of alcohol were illegal, you could find a drink at 94 Prince Street.

In 1922, Michael Fanelli purchased the existing cafe at 94 Prince Street and renamed it for his family adding on the word "cafe" to give the impression that it was a food establishment. In fact, Fanelli was running a speakeasy, which was a secret bar, since this was during the Prohibition era. The Fanelli family owned the bar for 60 years, until 1982, when they sold it to a new owner, who has kept the name Fanelli's.

The Fanelli Cafe is a stop on our, [self-guided historic bars of NYC tour](#).

Backtrack along Prince Street one block till you reach Greene Street. Turn left onto Greene Street and walk approximately 100 feet until you come to 110 Greene Street. You will see two abstract sculptures by the entrance of the building (2-min walk).

Subway Map Floating on a New York Sidewalk

Directions: Backtrack along Prince Street one block till you reach Greene Street. Turn left onto Greene Street and walk approximately 100 feet until you come to 110 Greene Street. You will see two abstract sculptures by the entrance of the building (2-min walk).

When you arrive, look at the sidewalk in front of the building. Embedded in the sidewalk you will see what looks like brass tracks ending in round LED lights. This is a piece of art created in 1986 by Belgian artist Françoise Schein. It is entitled "Subway Map Floating on a New York Sidewalk" an 87-foot (25 m) long work that is a more or less an accurate map of the subway as it was in 1986. This artwork is one of several sidewalk maps placed in other cities around the world, including Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Stockholm, and Lisbon. This piece of art is part of Schein's larger project regarding "human rights in the subways". The relationship between underground trains and the rights of man is explained on the INSCRIRE website which says that for the artist, "the subway appeared to be the most democratic place into which engrave philosophical concepts to address to the people."

Continue south on Greene Street. This will be the against the flow of traffic. When you get to Spring Street, cross it and then cross to the other side of Greene Street. Walk about 200 feet to building Number 71 Greene Street. Look for the shop signs for Ons and Burton.

When you reach building 71, turn around and look across the street. This building at 72-76 Greene Street is the King of Greene Street (2-min walk).

The King of Greene Street

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This cast iron beauty, built in 1873, is considered the finest example in SoHo of French Renaissance design, which earned it the nickname the King of Greene Street. It was designed by Isaac F. Duckworth, a master of cast iron architecture whose other buildings can be seen in SoHo as well as nearby TriBeCa.

Cast iron became the building material of choice for factories with showrooms in the SoHo area in the 1870s. It was less expensive than stone or brick but was sturdy and pliable. This meant that building facades could be easily molded into ornate patterns that gave the buildings a prestigious appearance thus bringing in wealthier customers. Significantly, for the first time, window frames could be larger, letting more natural light into the interior of these buildings. This was ideal for factory owners because electricity had yet to be invented but the light was needed for work to be done. A century later many of these gorgeous buildings were unoccupied and SoHo underwent its biggest transformation yet. We will go into more detail about this at our next stop.

Now backtrack north on Greene Street to Spring Street and make a left onto Spring. Walk on Spring Street for one block. Then make a left turn onto Wooster Street and walk about 150 feet until 80 Wooster Street. The street-level shop in this building is The Real Real, a luxury consignment shop.

The First Artists' Loft

Directions: Now backtrack north on Greene Street to Spring Street and make a left onto Spring. Walk on Spring Street for one block. Then make a left turn onto Wooster Street and walk about 150 feet until 80 Wooster Street. The street-level shop in this building is The Real Real, a luxury consignment shop.

Many people say that the transformation of SoHo from a dying industrial district to an artsy neighborhood in the 1960s began here at 80 Wooster Street. In the 1950s, advances in shipping, such as the use of large freight containers on truck beds, made it difficult for trucks to navigate the narrow streets of SoHo. Eventually, the industry moved out of the area and SoHo became a wasteland. Building owners were desperate for people to rent these large, lofty spaces and charged very little rent. The conditions were perfect to attract artists just starting out as they could afford to live and work in these buildings with their large windows that let natural light flood in. But at the time SoHo was zoned only for commercial use, and it was illegal to live in these buildings. This didn't stop artists from moving in.

One such artist, George Maciunas bought 80 Wooster Street and founded the Fluxus Group with Yoko Ono and other artists. Maciunas had envisioned a SoHo filled with artists who would participate in the communal (or cooperative) purchase of buildings, with entire floors costing \$8,000 each. The building came to be called the Fluxhouse Cooperative II, where artists owned the building together. Hundreds of artists, filmmakers, writers and musicians, such as Allen Ginsberg, Philip Glass, John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, and Andy Warhol showed their work in and around the building. The communal spirit of the Fluxhouse eventually dissipated and the city rezoned the area for mixed commercial and residential use. Like so many buildings in SoHo, 80 Wooster Street was turned into co-op apartments. In 2013, the cost to buy a two-bedroom apartment in the formerly communal living space was just over \$2 million dollars. That's a 25,000% increase in just 46 years!

Walk south on Wooster Street until you reach Broome Street. Make a left and walk two blocks on Broome Street against the flow of traffic. Stop when you reach Mercer Street, where the Kate Spade Store is.

Broome Street Interval

Directions: Walk south on Wooster Street until you reach Broome Street. Make a left and walk two blocks on Broome Street against the flow of traffic. Stop when you reach Mercer Street, where the Kate Spade Store is.

This Street is named for John Broome, a New York politician of the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary era; his highest position was as lieutenant governor from 1804 until 1810. He was also a prominent merchant, credited with starting the importation of tea from China with an initial cargo of 2 million pounds.

As you are walking on Broome, keep an eye out for small circular glass dots embedded into the sidewalk in front of the cast iron buildings. These are called “vault lights” and like tiny windows, they let sunlight into the basements. They were both stylish and functional when this neighborhood was being built up.

When you have reached the Kate Spade store, look up diagonally across the street and you will see a long and skinny white building with beautiful decorative features. This is the Silk Exchange Building.

Haughwout Building

Directions: Cross Mercer Street and walk one block on Broome Street until you reach Broadway. Look across the street at the 5-story white cast iron building on the corner, 490 Broadway. You will see Armani Box in the street level shop. This is the Haughwout Building (1-Minute walk).

From your location on the corner, you can see the many of the building's beautiful features, such as the intricate detailing along the top of the building's columns and on the underside of the overhang. The Haughwout Building was erected in 1857 and modeled after a 16th-century library in Venice, Italy. It housed E.V. Haughwout & Company, a world famous

manufacturer and seller of fine china, exquisite porcelain, chandeliers and more. President Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, purchased custom-made plates for the White House here.

The building also has a place in the history of innovation as it was the first building in the world to feature a hydraulic passenger elevator. It was designed and installed by Elijah Armstrong Otis. Many structures around the world have elevators that were installed by the Otis Elevator Company including the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, and the first World Trade Center towers. Next time you are in an elevator look at the threshold, you may just see the name OTIS.

SoHo today is considered one of the premier shopping areas of New York City, much like it was in the era of Haughwauts. Prada, Armani Exchange, Stella McCartney, Hugo Boss, Ralph Lauren, Chanel, and Bloomingdales Soho are just a few of the high-end retailers found on SoHo's streets. The area is also home to numerous designer lighting and furnishings shops.

While stores are scattered throughout the neighborhood, Broadway, Prince Street, Spring Street, and West Broadway are the primary shopping thoroughfares. Their sidewalks are also lined with street vendors selling handmade jewelry, scarves, handbags, sunglasses, caps, and more.

Cross Broadway, take a closer look at the Haughwout Building and then cross Broome Street to the south side of the street. Walk along Broome Street for one and a half blocks until 421 Broome Street. The street-level shop is a boutique called Lafayette 148 (2-min walk).

Heath Ledger's Apartment

Directions: Cross Broadway, take a closer look at the Haughwout Building and then cross Broome Street to the south side of the street. Walk along Broome Street for one and a half blocks until 421 Broome Street. The street-level shop is a boutique called Lafayette 148 (2-min walk).

421 Broome Street was the former home of now deceased brilliant actor Heath Ledger. This star of many movies (most notably Brokeback Mountain and The Dark Knight) was found dead in a fourth-floor apartment in this building. Ledger, who was just 28 years old, died of an accidental prescription drug overdose. Within a few hours of the news of his death became public, media, mourners, and fans gathered outside the building leaving flowers.

*Continue on Broome Street for about 20 feet and when you reach the short, light brick building that says NYC Transit Station, look up and you will see a giant mural on the adjacent building's side wall. This mural is by artist D*Face entitled "Double-Crossed" and is part of the Lisa Project. Continue to the corner and make a right turn onto Lafayette. This corner building has some great street art (1-min walk).*

The End