



A Look Back at SoHo's Broadway: Shall We Dance?

By Yuki Ohta – The SoHo Memory Project
Spring 2016

Who would ever know that the unassuming yet grand buildings at 537 and 541 Broadway, unified by a homogenous façade design, were once the epicenter of modern dance in SoHo?



537-541 Broadway today

The buildings, now home to Guess and Lacoste, were purchased and cooped in 1974 by George Maciunas, who is often called the “father of SoHo” for the many artists cooperatives he started. 537 and 541 Broadway are unusual in their broad width and the absence of any interior pillars within the buildings, which gave dancers open, unobstructed dance studio space, as well as the ability to live and work in the same space.

One of 537-541 Broadway's early members was critically acclaimed choreographer Trisha Brown, known for her works such as *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970), where her then husband, Joseph Schilcter, walked down the side of a building on Wooster Street. In her *Roof Piece* (1971), dancers performed on several SoHo rooftops while others

watched from nearby rooftops.

Dance is still alive and well in these buildings today. In April, I attended a performance of Cathy Weis' multi-room installation *Time Travel with Madame Xenogamy* in her studio at 537 Broadway. The audience moved from room to room, looking at dance in different



Cathy Weis in *Time Travel with Madame Xenogamy*
Photo by Davidson Gigliotti



spaces. We spied Douglas Dunn + Dancers across the internal courtyard in 541 Broadway, and a fortuneteller gazed into a crystal ball at dances from the past. It was truly thrilling to know that pieces such as this are still being performed in SoHo, where I grew up and attended many similar performances throughout my 1970's childhood.



Barnum's New American Museum, 539-541 Broadway, between Spring and Prince Streets, 1866

In past lives, 537-541 Broadway was the location of the Chinese Museum and P.T Barnum's second American Museum which burned down in 1868. In the early 20th century, the building housed many factories including M.M. Bernstein & Co., manufacturers of corset covers, Sol Edman & Sons who made shirts, and rubber stamp producer S. Buck Manufacturing Company.

In the early 1980's, when most of the factories had moved out and the dancers had moved in, there was a bargain shoe store on the ground floor.

What a rich history these buildings have! 537-541 Broadway is another example of the vibrant mixed use community found along the SoHo Broadway corridor.



537-541 Broadway when it was a manufacturing building