

VOICE

BY ANN FARMER

FROM ARTISTS' MURALS TO CLEVER COME-ONS

Soho's Disturbing Signs



Conspicuous ads like these at Broadway and Houston may be subject to landmark review.

It's becoming Times Square, everywhere," says Steve Stollman, a Houston Street business owner, peering out the window of his storefront. Stollman is right—especially about the intersection of Broadway and Houston Street, otherwise known as the gateway to Soho. Stand on that corner and look up and you'll see a Statue of Liberty looming out of four giant-sized letters, DKNY. Look to the left and you'll see a rock climber, wearing fashionable Fila USA outerwear, scaling the side of a building painted to look like a mountain scene.

Turn around, and you have a choice between a four-story bottle of Solgar vitamins or a sassier-looking bottle of Russian vodka. These immense advertisements are covering just about every blank building in sight.

Stollman describes the ads as "a conspicuous example of the corporate takeover of public life. You're forced to look at them." Larry Grasso, a 47-year-old building superintendent who's lived in the neighborhood his whole life, says the ads are "a bombardment of the senses that is absolutely not necessary. I just feel that it's not healthy. I like the urban cityscape as it is."

Conspicuous, oversize ads are commonplace in Times Square, of course, but the encroachment on Soho's borders is fairly recent. Some of the ads on tenement and factory buildings measure up to six stories high.

Some are cleverly executed. Fila's three-dimensional mountain climber seems, at first glance, to be a real person dangling from a rope. But the ads are overbearing, and probably semi-permanent. How many painted wall signs linger for years, long after the product they advertise has disappeared from the market?

It's not surprising that this is happening. Advertisers advertise where shoppers shop. The corner of Houston and Mercer streets is poignantly emblematic of Soho's metamorphosis into a popular retail district. Artist Dorothy Gillespie's fading mural decorated the side of a loft building for more than 20 years. But recently the pastel-colored abstract piece has been partly covered to make way for one of four immense Fila ads in five blocks.

Gillespie says artists who live in the building called her after they received a lucrative commercial offer and asked if she'd object to her mural being painted over. "I couldn't say no to them. I would never keep an artist from making money," Gillespie says.

The mural, like others in Soho, was originally commissioned by The Public Art Fund, a nonprofit group. Susan Freedman, the president, acknowledges that many of the artist installations were intended to be temporary, but says the murals defined the area. Soho, though, isn't supposed to change *that* much. It's a designated historic district, and while no building permit is required for an owner to paint a wall sign on a building's exterior, that's not the case with landmark structures. The Landmarks Preservation Commission must approve signs on those buildings.

Many of the Houston Street buildings with wall signs are landmark structures, and the Soho community board has expressed concern about the signs. Valerie Campbell, the landmarks commission's legal counsel, said the board typically considers size, color, shape, and the appropriateness of signage in the area, but does not regulate the content of painted wall signs.

The commission, though, has just implemented a change in the application procedure. "We are insisting that applicants have a zoning review with the Buildings Department first," Campbell says, adding that "the commission is also requesting that signs be smaller and more discreet."

The co-op owners of the building on the southwest corner of Houston and Broadway will have a December public hearing with the commission. The building has one of the artist murals in the Soho area—a wall painted blue and punctuated with rows of neatly aligned, aqua-colored I beams. This comparatively low-key installation by artist Forrest Myers has beckoned people into Soho since 1972, but now the building co-op wants portions or all of it removed. It will be up to the landmarks commission to decide whether Myers's work will stay or go. If it goes, it will be open season on that prime location.