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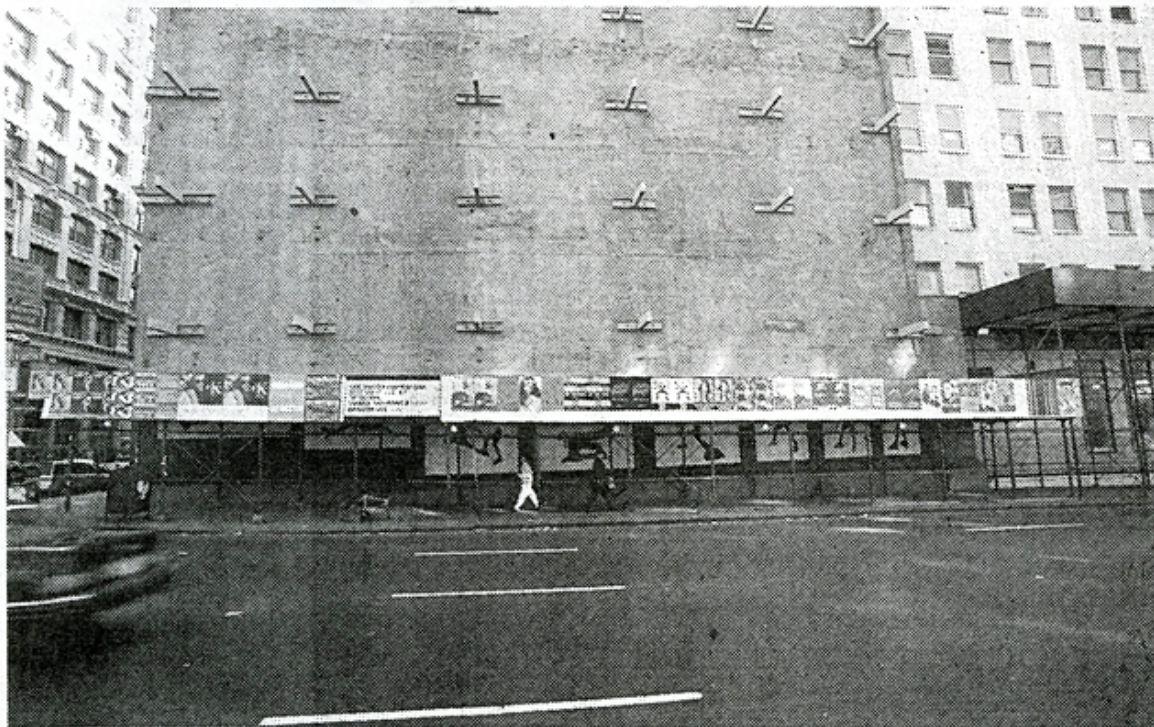
Up Against the Wall: Life and Art Threaten a Sculptured Facade

For 24 years, the wall with the metal beams jutting out, on the Houston Street face of 599 Broadway, has served as an informal gateway to SoHo. As the neighborhood changed from an industrial area to a community of artists, the colors of both the wall and the beams changed — from blue and gray to lavender and turquoise. Recently, the wall's fans and its creator, Forrest Myers, became alarmed when one of the 42 evenly spaced beams was removed and scaffolding erected.

Councilwoman Kathryn E. Freed wrote to the building's managing agent, Gary Cannata of River to River Properties, demanding that he "stop defacing this wall and this work of art immediately." She said that because 599 Broadway is part of the landmarked Cast Iron District, permission from the City Landmarks Commission is required to alter its facade.

Mr. Cannata said that he was aware of the landmark status of the building's exterior and that he would get the proper permits. The beam was removed to repair a leak, he said, and to determine if the wall has structural problems. The artwork makes it "harder to seal the surface of the wall," he said, adding, "We'll decide what to do when the final engineer's report comes down."

The work was commissioned in 1972 by Doris C. Freedman, the founder of the Public Art Fund, a nonprofit group that commissions public art around the city, as part of its City Walls series. Mr. Myers said that in the early 80's, an art dealer who bought the building tried to use the wall to advertise artists he repre-



Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

Scaffolding, running along the building's Houston Street side, has been put up to allow repairs.

sented. In 1987, he said, a managing agent wanted to remove the beam sculpture to make it easier to resurface the building, but Community Board 2 and local groups forged an agreement with the owner that the work would remain. "We are adamant that it be left as is," Board 2's district manager, Arthur Strickler, said. "It's a landmark in a landmark district. You can't just change it because you don't like it or because it's

causing you headaches."

Mr. Myers and his wife, Debra, said they distrust Mr. Cannata, who became the building's managing agent in 1990, because he commissioned other artists to paint their works on the lower part of the wall. Mr. Cannata said this was to discourage painting of graffiti. But Ms. Myers said: "Not only was this sanctioned graffiti defacing the artwork, but it was in direct violation of the

1990 Visual Artists Rights Act." The Federal law bars the intentional destruction or mutilation of recognized artwork.

Susan Freedman, who succeeded her mother, Doris, as president of the Public Art Fund, said that most City Walls murals were designed to be temporary and that denying building owners the right to remove art might make them reluctant to commission such works. JANET ALLON