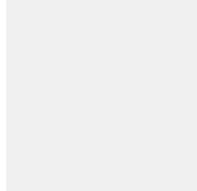


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Wednesday, March 19, 2008

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### Streetscapes/Staple Street in TriBeCa; A Brief Walk Through Manhattan Old and New

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Published: February 18, 2001

STAPLE STREET? Where's Staple Street? Its two tiny blocks -- west of Hudson Street, from Duane to Jay to Harrison Streets -- are barely an eyelash on the face of Manhattan. But they're in the heart of TriBeCa, and a walk through them captures not only some of the oldest architecture in the district but some of the youngest.

What is now called TriBeCa -- the Triangle Below Canal Street -- was first built up with brick row houses and stores beginning in the 1790's. In 1803 Henry Verveelen, a schoolmaster, built a brick house at 171 Duane Street, at the northwest corner of Staple and Duane.

There is no agreement on how Staple Street came to be established, and there are several competing versions of how it got its name. Oliver Allen, who writes a column on history in *The Tribeca Trib* newspaper, said he believed it was most likely named for John J. Staples, who owned property in the area.

The earliest clear depictions of the area were made of commercial buildings built after 1850; a lithograph of the old American Express warehouse on Jay from Hudson to Staple Streets around 1860 shows it erupting from a sea of Federal-style brick houses, each two or three stories with dormers. Commercial construction quickly took over the neighborhood.

The last resident of the 171 Duane row house was Ephraim Treadwell, a ships'-cracker maker; he left in the late 1850's. The house was rebuilt as a commercial building and extended upward with a cast-iron facade, although the Federal-style lintels of the windows facing Staple Street were left in place. After the reconstruction, a grocer and several perfumers occupied the building.

An 1851 street directory lists only four buildings facing Staple Street, including a wooden building at No. 4 occupied by George K. Taylor, who was described as "assistant keeper, City Hall"; his duties would have involved raising and lowering the flag and bringing refreshments to the city's Board of Aldermen, a predecessor to the City Council.

An 1869 city directory lists 25 residents of Staple Street, with occupations like porter, seaman, laborer and tailor. In 1870, the German-born William Brand, a laborer, lived at 4 Staple with his wife, Kate, and 10 boarders.

The big masonry structures that set TriBeCa apart from the cast iron of SoHo were built in the 1880's and 1890's, among them Leopold Schepp's 11-story 1881 building on Duane from Hudson to Staple. Schepp made a fortune importing coconut and in 1925 announced that he intended to give the money away; the next day crowds of supplicants grew so thick around the Schepp Building that he had to leave. (He gave his fortune away in other ways, including setting up a foundation with a gift of \$2.5 million, to assist boys who pledged "to abstain from bad habits." Ultimately, the foundation's philanthropy was expanded to include young women. )

Nine years after the Schepp building was put up, American Express built a new warehouse on the south side of Jay, between Hudson and Staple. Across the intersection, at the northwest corner of Jay and Staple, one of the last surviving row houses was by that time a saloon.

IN 1894, New York Hospital built the House of Relief, a downtown clinic, on Jay from Hudson to Staple, with an ambulance entrance facing Staple. In that year The New York Herald noted that the hospital was sending its ambulance out as often as seven times a day, sometimes on emergencies involving sunstroke, "which so often occurs in the lower part of the city," perhaps because of the large number of men working outdoors on the docks.

In 1907 the hospital built an annex across Staple Street (replacing the saloon/row house at Jay and Staple) as a stable and laundry, connecting it at the third-floor level using a pedestrian bridge. Although Staple Street was then just an industrial alley, the hospital had the architects Robertson & Potter design a handsome little building with a terra cotta plaque bearing the "NYH" monogram on the Staple Street side. The monogram is still there.

In 1900 a cold-storage company operating out of 7 Harrison Street put up a new brick building to its rear, at 4 Staple Street, with a curious high-stoop entrance and a broad span of casement windows across the first floor. These days, except for its industrial environment, the building -- now the only one facing Staple Street -- could be mistaken for a tea room in a seaside village in Scotland.

Little happened on Staple Street over the next century, until the restoration of the House of Relief stable at Jay Street by the fashion designer Zoran about 1995. At night the building now softly glows through frosted glass windows.

Two more projects are nearly finished at either end of the street. At the southern end, at 171 Duane Street, which is now a co-op, the side wall on Staple Street -- with the 1803 lintels -- is failing. The co-op has hired Bone Levine Architects. Joseph Levine, a partner in the firm, says that although he had anticipated only a moderate repair, he now believes the entire wall will have to come down, in what may be a \$700,000 project that the seven-unit co-op is considering.

Mr. Levine said he will reuse the lintels and as much of the brick as possible -- all of Staple Street is included in the TriBeCa West Historic District, and the project would require approval by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

At the northern end, a group of developers is finishing a new six-story apartment building at 5 Harrison Street, on the site of what had been a parking lot fronting on Harrison and Staple. Thomas Currier, a principal of the group, said he had hired the architects Wids DeLaCour and Richard Ferrara because he admired the deft way they altered and reduced in size an illegally installed rooftop addition in TriBeCa to conform to landmarks commission requirements.

DeLaCour & Ferrara's new building has some allusions to the 1880's industrial buildings of TriBeCa. But it also acknowledges the new, more upscale look of the area: there is a stainless steel canopy and a silvery metal-clad penthouse.

The top full floor has different brickwork and window design from the rest of the building. The goal, Mr. DeLaCour said, was to provide a sense of termination. But the structure also echoes buildings in the neighborhood that have had additional floors built atop them.

Now only three people live directly on Staple Street: Camilla and Carl Sorenson and their daughter, Isabel, 1 1/2. Mr. Sorenson owns a firm that manufactures hardware for residential doors; Mrs. Sorenson is vice president of merchandising at Tiffany & Company.

MR. SORENSON said he bought the building at 4 Staple Street in 1991, when "it was essentially abandoned." He did a gut renovation, removing ceilings and walls, and installed pull-up shades on the lower part of the broad stretch of casement windows. They have a big room in the basement for entertaining, a dining

room/sitting room/kitchen on the ground floor and bedrooms and a study on the top floor.

"Ten years ago the street was really scary," Mr. Sorenson said. "It was common to find women's purses turned inside out by muggers on the doorstep." But these days, he said, children play soccer and baseball on the street. The couple had cocktails on Staple Street after their wedding in 1997.

Although Mrs. Sorenson likes the solitude of the block and their unusual building, she said that she is not completely sold on Staple Street and that she has been looking at floor plans on Park Avenue.

Across from the Sorensens, Mr. Currier, the developer, said that the buyers of the units at 5 Harrison appreciate the quiet character of Staple Street. But, he said, he and his partners chose Harrison for the address instead of Staple.

"We didn't need to give it much thought," he said. "People don't know where Staple Street is."

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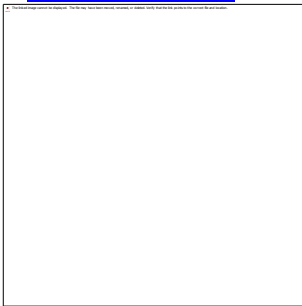
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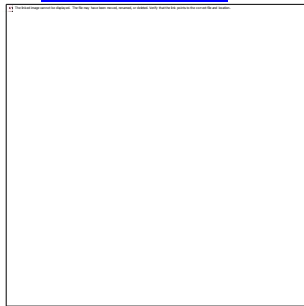
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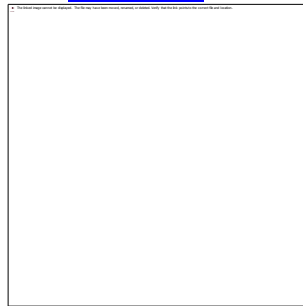
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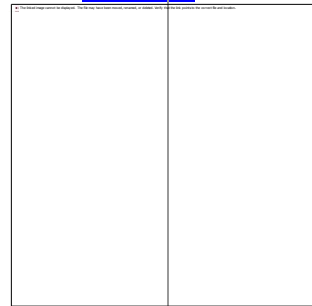
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