

SCHWARTZ, NEW YORK ARCHITECT BY MEL LEPPZIG ARCHIVE ON CANVAS, 36" X 32" COURTESY OF GALLERY HEROCHI



A Tale of Two Manhattans

You can still see ghosts from New York's days as a 19th- and 20th-century industrial powerhouse, particularly along the waterfront, highways, and rail yards where they stand – vast, time-worn, and often silent. But consider two survivors of Manhattan's manufacturing age, 180 Varick Street in SoHo, and 475 Tenth Avenue in Midtown South, humble workhorse buildings that are sheltering a sizable number of architects as tenants.

Why have architects gathered here? Do the buildings reflect their organizational culture? What kinds of social environments thrive in them? *Oculus* posed these and similar questions to firms at these addresses plus 315 Hudson Street in SoHo. What emerged from discussions with their principals is a common way of using space in old industrial buildings on the fringes of thriving neighborhoods.

An intriguing fact about practice in New York is the relatively low priority of neighborhood. If a building meets their needs, architects say, they'll learn to like or at least tolerate the surroundings. They identify the "good bones" of a structure and then aggressively move walls, columns, or even floors to make it work. As Steven Davis, FAIA, a principal of Davis Brody Bond Aedas, cheerfully recalls the transformation of 315 Hudson Street, "The first thing we did was to paint everything white. Then we decided how to develop the space."

180 Varick: From printers to designers

Once a center of the printing industry, 180 Varick is a massive, brick-clad monolith that is now home to many small businesses. The 20 or so architecture firms leasing here share a number of characteristics. They're relatively small, young, and adventurous, leasing one of their earliest – if not their first – formal offices.

"I believe I was the first architect to arrive," says Frederic

Schwartz, FAIA, a principal of Schwartz Architects. "Printing presses were still functioning in 1993, and the pounding caused the whole building to vibrate. What made me take the space was a view that included the World Trade Center, Woolworth Building, New York Harbor, the Chrysler Building, and the Empire State Building."

Schwartz declares that 180 Varick has been good to him. First, because he lives in SoHo he can walk to work in a neighborhood he "absolutely loves." Second, Schwartz, five associates, and an international staff of 22 keep capturing desirable commissions, most recently landing three airports in India and a Nike store in SoHo. Finally, his office places him in the middle of an open studio setting, where he can teach and nurture as well as manage – tasks he relishes. Still drawing with a pen, Schwartz sums up a good day as one that ends with "a lot of ink on my hands."

Thomas Phifer, AIA, a principal of Thomas Phifer and Partners, took a big step in moving to 180 Varick in 1997, a year after founding his firm in his Upper West Side living room. "I picked this building first because of its spatial qualities: big concrete frame, tall ceilings, wide steel windows and openness," he remembers. "Second, the landlord was willing to lease less than full floors. Many young practices like mine don't need much space."

He has crafted a unique workplace in 180 Varick. The largely open setting is dominated by a 82-foot-long table where Phifer sits with two partners and directs the office in a collaborative, conversational style. The partners are joined at the table by six associates and most of the staff of 25 in fulfilling commissions ranging from courthouses and private houses to furniture and lighting fixtures for New York City. Phifer is enthusiastic about his office. "I'm blessed with great clients and great staff," he proclaims. "So I prefer to think more about the quality of our work than the size of our office."