

THOUGHT FOR FOOD

NO ONE WENT TO FOOD FOR THE FOOD. One evening the menu might consist of hard-boiled eggs stuffed with live shrimp. Another night it might be necklaces of boiled meat bones. The cuisine, in other words, was often conceptual. But the sense of community was Four Star.

It was a Romulus and Remus thing, the city as substitute mother for orphans who would create a new city of their own. The founders and patrons of Food—the restaurant at Prince and Wooster opened in September 1971 by Gordon Matta-Clark, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris, and Rachel Lew—were orphans of America and its paranoid political climate of the late '60s and early '70s. Hardhats. Enemies lists. Nattering nabobs of negativism. "Terror bombing" in Cambodia, Kent State. Above all, perhaps, an overwhelming sense of divisiveness, orchestrated from the White House. A society writer from *The Washington Post* banned from covering Tricia Nixon's wedding because she once described the president's daughter as a vanilla ice cream cone. Those who ventured south of Houston Street sought to escape a poisonous, politically polluted public realm.

SoHo then was a strange civic hybrid, at once landmark district and dispensable slum. It was at one time called Hell's Hundred Acres because of the frequency of fires in the area's sweatshop-like factories. In the late '40s, Lewis Mumford even proposed tearing down the entire district and turning it into the site of the new UN Headquarters. In the '60s, thanks to the crusade mounted by the Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture, the place achieved recognition as the nation's finest collection of nineteenth-century industrial buildings. In 1973, it received landmark designation as the Cast Iron District. But it still felt like the cast-off district, too. The facades were lovely, but the real ornament of the place was the dirt. The rust. The creaky stairs. It was an attic of a place, dusty and forgotten.

GORDON MATTA-CLARK'S LEGACY is inseparable from the transformation that swiftly overtook that neighborhood in the late '60s and early '70s. He was the dancing star that brought a mythical dimension to the place before it even had a name. Any number of Matta-Clark's gestures contributed to the aura; he fried photographs in a skillet and sent them out as

Christmas cards, danced wildly, and arranged events, but the main thing he did was to create a climate of promise, a climate of hope. For this, and for the fact that he died in 1978, well before that climate curdled, Matta-Clark has properly become a legend.

Matta-Clark (whose drawings and films, as well as a reinstalled "cutting," can be seen through June in a retrospective at P.S. 1) was one of a group of architects trained in the late '60s who came to feel that the best way anyone could practice architecture was to ask why anyone should still be practicing architecture at all. If elegance,

as Diana Vreeland said, is refusal, then Matta-Clark was an innately elegant kind of guy.

Jane Jacobs had pioneered the critique of modern architecture with her groundbreaking 1960 study, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Robert Goodman's *After the Planners* (1971) took Jacobs' arguments against Corbusian-style master planning in a more extreme, countercultural direction. My first book, *File Under Architecture* (1974), pushed the Conceptual art line that a book could do more than a building to change the cityscape because the former could alter perception. "A Space: A Thousand Words," a show curated



