

Moss, Jeremiah. "The End of Moe's Meat Market," The New York Times, 10 October 2017.

## The New York Times



Robert Kobayashi and his daughter, Misa, center, circa 1990 outside his gallery on Elizabeth Street.  
Kate Keller

Moe's Meat Market, in Little Italy, hasn't been a meat market for 40 years. But the floor is still tiled in black and white, the walls covered in porcelain-enameled tin sheets. When the artist Robert Kobayashi, known as Kobi, bought Moe's and the rest of its building in 1977, he moved in with his wife, the photographer Kate Keller, and installed his studio in the storefront, leaving the walls intact. As a sculptor who worked with tin, maybe he felt an affinity for the sheet metal. Maybe he just appreciated the history.



Robert Kobayashi in his gallery in 2009. Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Over time Moe's became a fixture in the local art scene, part studio, part gallery, part social space. But now Moe's is shutting down, one more loss in a city that can't seem to hold on to its most captivating idiosyncrasies.

In its time, that tenement at 237 Elizabeth Street was alive with history, and Kobi and Kate quickly became part of it.

Upstairs lived Mary Albanese, the matriarch of the building and mother of another Moe the butcher, in his 90s today and still cutting meat at a shop across the street. ("Moe's just a nickname in the family," he explained. For what? "Gandolfo." Go figure.) Down in the basement sat a Prohibition-era wine press and a heavy safe, once guarded by a bulldog named Reggio, who got drunk on the vino and left paw prints in the wet cement floor. (They're still there, too, the press and the prints, though not the dog.) From the tenement's open windows, elderly women dressed in black kept eyes on the street while the next generation did the same from sidewalk lounge chairs, their hair in pink curlers.

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Mary Albanese standing in front of her butcher shop around 1970.

Bohemian life among the Sicilians of Elizabeth Street was good. Kate and Kobi were embraced like family. Their daughter, Misa, became one of the gang of Italian, Chinese and Puerto Rican kids on the block, and Kobi built go-carts for them to race. The artists who started moving into the neighborhood's cheap apartments in the 1960s gathered at Moe's, pulled in by Kobi's magnetism. The storefront and its back room became a kind of third space, linking the old and new worlds together.



Misa Kobayashi and neighborhood kids playing on Elizabeth Street in the early 1990s. Kate Keller

On a recent night, a crowd came to say goodbye to Moe's and toast the memory of Kobi. Since his death in 2015, Kate has struggled to keep up with the building. Saying she felt lost on her own, she sold it to a man she calls an "angel" for his willingness to let her and the other tenants (artist and Italian) stay put. The gallery, however, will have to go.

At the farewell party, friends and family gathered in the dining room behind the gallery. There was the Dutch performance artist Marja Samsom in a black-and-white checkerboard hat and Susanna Cuyler, a writer who collects the names of people who have died during the year to read aloud on the winter solstice.

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People gathered at Moe's Meat Market on Saturday to tell stories and say goodbye. Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

Talk around the table drifted to memory. The actress Penny Lynn White recounted the dangerous thrills of old Elizabeth Street. "It was drug city," she said. "You'd go in the deli and there'd be a dead guy on the floor. Then they made 'The Godfather' and the street had cachet. That's when the shops started moving in." But John Gotti still walked the walk. Of her single memorable brush with the don, Penny recalled, "He said just one word to me as I passed: 'Nice.' "



Kate Keller with Moe Albanese who at 94 still runs the butcher shop across the street from Moe's. Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

Another former neighbor, David Marshall, recalled how he'd go with Kobi to Mulberry Street on the last night of the Feast of San Gennaro, when the vendors were breaking down their stalls, so they could "harvest all that lovely wood for sculptures." Kobi scavenged his metal from Bazzini peanut cans, beer cans and the pressed tin that decorated tenement ceilings. Increasingly, those ceilings ended up in Dumpsters as the neighborhood gentrified and

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buildings were gutted. Many at the goodbye party had already moved away or were just hanging on.



The San Geronimo parade on a decidedly less prosperous Elizabeth Street, circa 1980. Kate Keller

By the 2000s, the northern end of Elizabeth Street was lined with upscale shops and restaurants with names like Peasant and Trust Fund Baby. It was no longer Little Italy but NoLiTa, rebranded by the real-estate industry. The block is unrecognizable. No more mingling families, no more open fire hydrants or trash can barbecues or dominoes on the sidewalk. "Now it's all transient trust-fund kids," Misa Kobayashi said.

Some at the party shrugged and said, "New York is always changing." But one neighbor, Beth Joy Papaleo, put it bluntly: "We took it for granted that New York would always be New York. Then money destroyed it."

Kobi and Kate purposely never profited from the building, and it's clear that Kate is pained by the decision to sell. Still, she's comforted by the thought that the spirit of the place will live on in Kobi's work, in the colorful sculptures built from the stuff of the old street.



Kate Keller on the last evening at Moe's Meat Market. Her daughter, Misa, is reflected in the mirror.  
Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

"New York is like a big mystery tour," Kate said, looking out from the open door of Moe's. "When we moved here, it was a storybook. I'm from the Midwest. We didn't have stories."

As for becoming a part of those stories and bringing together the people who hold the history, she said, "None of it would have happened without Kobi."