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Littler Italy

George De Stefano (March 27, 2015)

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Museum in Little Italy Seeks to Evict a Living Link to the Past

By MIREYA NAVARRO MARCH 25, 2015

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Adele Sarno's father, a longshoreman, emigrated from Naples, and she grew up in Manhattan's Little Italy. As a child, she served as princess for the annual Feast of San Gennaro, she said, and one year was even crowned the queen.

Ms. Sarno eventually owned a candy shop and, later, an Italian products store below her family's apartment on Grand Street until Sept. 11, when business dried up.

The number of people of Italian ancestry who live in Little Italy is shrinking by the year, and may soon drop by one more: Ms. Sarno, 85, is being evicted from her apartment after losing a fight to keep her



Adele Sarno, 85, in her Manhattan apartment, where she has lived since the 1960s. Her landlord, the Italian American Museum, wants to evict her. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

New York Times article about Adele Sarno

An Italian American organization moves to evict an 85-year-old woman who is one of the neighborhood's few remaining residents of Italian origins.

Talk about bad press.

Joseph Scelsa, director of the Italian American Museum in Little Italy, evidently thought he could kick out an elderly woman from the apartment she has occupied for more than fifty years without anyone noticing or objecting. But the media, traditional and digital, did notice. This week, the story of Scelsa's attempts to evict 85-year-old Adele Sarno from her apartment in a building owned by the museum has blown up on news sites like [DNAinfo](#), [Gothamist](#), on Facebook, on local TV news, and in the "paper of record," the [New York Times](#). And why not? This sad and infuriating saga touches on a number of issues that are top concerns for New Yorkers: housing costs; real estate speculation and landlord greed; the vulnerability of the poor elderly in a hypercharged housing market where "affordable" is an empty buzzword; and ethnicity. Sarno has deep roots in Little Italy. Her father, according to the New York Times, immigrated to New York from Naples, and she grew up in the neighborhood. When she was a child, she was the princess of the San Gennaro feast; in 1945, she was its queen. She owned a

candy shop and then an Italian products store below her parents' apartment in the building at Mulberry and Grand Streets. (The building that houses the Italian American Museum and six apartments, including Sarno's, actually comprises three adjoining structures that have been combined.) She has lived her entire life in Little Italy, and most of it in the apartment that the Times called "a mini-museum itself furnished with lamps, marble tables and ceramics from the old country."

As media accounts have pointed out, Sarno is one of the few residents of Italian origins remaining in what was once a thriving immigrant/ethnic neighborhood. (According to the 2010 census, there are no Italian-born residents of Little Italy.) And if Scelsa gets his way, there'll be one less Italian American living there.

Sarno pays \$820 in rent for her two-bedroom apartment; her only income comes from Social Security and relatives; she also receives food stamps. The Italian American Museum sent her a letter about five years ago telling her the rent would be raised to \$3,500, an impossible sum for an elderly person on a fixed income. (Some of her neighbors pay \$4,500 a month to live in the kind of building that Italian Americans fled when they could afford to.) Believing that the apartment where she had lived since 1962 was rent-controlled, she, with assistance from a community organization, Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, sought a ruling from state housing officials about whether rent-regulation laws covered her apartment. The New York State Department of Housing and Community Renewal ruled that Sarno's apartment was not protected. She appealed the ruling, but last November, a New York City Civil Court judge allowed the museum to proceed with the eviction. This month she received a notice to vacate by April 6. She intends to be back in court, with new – and hopefully better – representation, on April 2.

If she is not allowed to remain in her apartment, Sarno evidently has no other option but to move to Wisconsin to live with her daughter, her only child. Imagine being 85 years old (Sarno turns 86 in August) and being forced to leave your home of fifty-plus years and the only neighborhood you've known, for an unfamiliar place far away in another part of the country. But that doesn't mean anything to Scelsa and his cronies. As one of his flacks told the Times, "So the museum should be running a charity or providing residences at discount rates? That doesn't match the mission." The museum, according to its website, is "dedicated to the struggles of Italian-Americans and their achievements and contributions to American culture and society." Just as long as the Italian Americans are not struggling old women living on Social Security and food stamps.

New York City on FIRE

New York City, as the late radical journalist Bob Fitch observed, is ruled by the three-headed entity he called FIRE – finance, insurance, and real estate. No matter who is the mayor, whether an unabashed plutocrat like Mike Bloomberg or a "progressive" like Bill de Blasio, these industries really run the city and determine what sort of "development" occurs. As Fitch detailed in his 1996 book, *The Assassination of New York*, bankers, developers, and their hired hands in politics consciously and deliberately de-industrialized the city, transforming it into a post-

industrial outpost of globalization (and magnet for global capital). As another radical social critic, Doug Henwood, observed in [The Nation](#), FIRE's chieftains "used all the instruments of state power – subsidies, zoning laws, eminent domain – to get their way."

"The landscape of the city – the propinquity of skyscrapers and slums, of the very rich and the very poor – reflected the kind of hollowed-out society that a FIRE-dominated economy created. Neighborhoods that once housed factories and their workers were either emptied out or gentrified," Henwood noted.

The story of Adele Sarno is just one example of the human consequences of the decisions that New York's power elites have made and that elected officials, Republican and Democrat alike, have enabled and supported.

Joseph Scelsa, an academic of no particular distinction who also is the disgraced former director of the Calandra Italian American Institute (more on that later), is a very small fish in New York's shark-infested real estate market. But he would like to be *un pesce più grande*, and his museum is part of his plan. As he told the [New York Times](#) in 2013, he intends to sell the buildings that house the museum and the apartments to a developer, for \$12 million, as long as the developer allows the museum to remain in any new mixed-use building, rent-free. That's right. The same guy who won't budge an inch regarding Adele Sarno wants to pay no rent for his museum.

But alas, no buyer has come forward to make Scelsa's dream come true. So he's stuck with his little vanity project of a museum – a barely curated collection squeezed into a cramped space – and the six apartments above it, including Adele Sarno's.

And it turns out that Adele Sarno isn't the only tenant whom this self-proclaimed Italian American spokesman and community leader has moved to evict. This month the museum kicked out [Il Palazzo](#), a restaurant that had been located at 151 Mulberry Street for thirty years. The eviction notice came when the restaurant's owners, Annette Sabatino and her husband Perry Chrisciatelli, fell behind on one month's rent because of what they said was a difficult winter season, with few customers. When they tried to pay their rent, the museum refused it, serving the couple an eviction notice that required them to vacate the space in five days.

Some no doubt will say, well, restaurant owners are in a for-profit business, and if they can't pay the rent to stay in business, too bad. But commercial rents are becoming so exorbitant in New York that restaurants and other businesses that don't have the deep pockets of a major corporate chain, like Starbucks or Chipotle, keep going out of business. It's not only the residential character of the city that's changing, with a glut of "luxury" housing; it's also New York's commerce, as small, independently-owned and often lower-priced businesses keep closing, as the invaluable blog [Jeremiah's Vanishing New York](#) regularly, if depressingly, reports.

But it's the cruel irony of an Italian American institution making homeless a poor, elderly Italian American woman that has galvanized outrage. As Victor J. Papa, director of the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, remarked to a Times reporter, his organization is "fighting a museum that purports to exhibit Italian-American culture and then proceeds to evict a living artifact. That's absolute hypocrisy."

Social media commentators were quick to agree with Papa. On Facebook, one directed her outrage to Scelsa and his board of directors: "You're a bunch of heartless, money grubbing, gluttons who are more concerned with your two-bit vanity project than the lives of the people you claim to honor. Shame on you!" Another remarked, "The museum wants to find a developer to buy the buildings and hopes to stay rent free but they don't want to let an elderly woman stay in her apartment of over 50 years because her rent is low. At least she pays rent!"

Yet another wrote, "The Italian American Museum, under the direction of Joe Scelsa, needed money, because attendance being what it was, was not paying the bills. Ms. Sarno was little more than an inconvenience, and Good Ol' Joe needed to get a buyer for the prime real estate that housed the museum so he could ensure that museum could have a permanent home, rent free."

I earlier noted that Joseph Scelsa is the "disgraced" former director of the Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, City University of New York. I do not use that term lightly. In 2006, two former Calandra staff members, Emelise Aleandri and Gloria Salerno, settled a discrimination lawsuit against CUNY for more than \$1 million. They sued because Scelsa had made their work lives miserable after they tried to form a women's support group at Calandra. They decided to form the group to deal with the problems they had already experienced under Scelsa's autocratic administration. An [article in a CUNY faculty newspaper](#) reported the settlement and the events that led to it. It is a chronicle of Scelsa's petty, vindictive, and even illegal behavior, as a judge concluded there was significant evidence that he retaliated against the two women for filing a discrimination complaint, which is a violation of federal law.

I bring up this episode for two reasons: media covering the Adele Sarno story have failed to mention it, and because it tells you a lot about the character of the man trying to evict her.

But I'd like to propose a solution to the impasse between Scelsa and Adele Sarno. In exchange for letting her stay in his building, why not make her and her apartment an exhibit in the Italian American Museum? A living museum, one of those places that, as Wikipedia defines, "recreates historical settings to simulate past time periods, providing visitors with an experiential interpretation of history." Scelsa could hire a real curator to create helpful plaques and labels for the Italian American "artifacts" in Sarno's home and charge admission (whatever he wants!) to tourists to visit and watch her make tomato sauce.

At least until that longed-for developer arrives with his \$12 million.

There will be a demonstration to protest the eviction of Adele Sarno (and Il Palazzo restaurant) Saturday, March 28, 1:00 pm, at the Italian American Museum, 155 Mulberry Street, Manhattan.

