

Garment Center Study Looks to the Future

by [ROSEMARY FEITELBERG](#)

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The union supports preserving New York's Garment District.

Photo By Courtesy Photo

In a surprising finding, an independent study of the Garment District found the neighborhood is far from dying and has a future as a productive incubator of ideas — with the right support.

That was the takeaway from the much-anticipated “Made in Midtown” survey that will be released today by the nonprofit Design Trust for Public Space after six months of in-depth research and man-on-the-street conversations with a battery of sources.

But what was even more surprising to the group's executive director, Deborah Marton — and perhaps more inspirational to the scores of designers who have yet to make names for themselves — is the vibrancy that exists for start-up businesses and emerging designers.

The fact the area is an incubator of ideas — or more of “a research and development hub” as opposed to an industrial production community — was a bit of a surprise, she said. The degree to which companies of various sizes use the district in that way, especially in terms of plucking fresh talent, was another eye-opener.

“Made in Midtown” determined that 846 fashion companies are headquartered in the Garment District, which is more than those based in Paris, Milan and London combined.

“We certainly are the fashion capital of the world,” said Marton, adding fresh-faced designers would not be able to get their businesses up and running in Paris and Milan, due chiefly to the lack of manufacturing just beyond their doorsteps. “If you're a young person in Paris or Milan, you

start out with a fashion house. You don't have the opportunity like Jason Wu where you can just create something and work on your own. There is a huge advantage to being in New York. There is just no other place where young people can start a company on their own.”

Kicked off last year, “Made in Midtown” was a partnership between the Design Trust and the Council of Fashion Designers of America. The idea was to explore the neighborhood's dynamics and why it is an integral part of New York's economy, identity and sense of place. Lofty as that might sound, the report took into account the nitty gritty of the apparel industry: the proximity of designers to manufacturers; the fallout from offshore production; how the industry helps fuel the city's economic engine; the web of pleaters, patternmakers and other specialized craftsmen, and the vibrant network of start-up companies and emerging designers. The Garment Center has 24,000 people who work in apparel manufacturing, accounting for 28 percent of the city's manufacturing jobs, although that was dramatically down from its peak of 400,000 production jobs in 1973.

“The fashion industry still serves a huge purpose in keeping our ability to innovate alive. It's about creating ideas and being leading innovators in fashion because we have the fashion ecosystem to do so,” Marton said.

“Made in Midtown” shows ways New York can develop a new model for how creative industries are woven into a city visibly, Marton said. The next phase of the survey, which is expected to be a six- to nine-month undertaking, will examine “how creative industries that have a very low impact on their environments can be remade, not with a Disney-fied view, but with real working neighbors. It's not just about fashion — it's about jobs and immigrant workers. The Garment Center is one of the last neighborhoods that hasn't been remade by a real wave of development,” she said.

The second phase will also take into account tax incentives for designers and manufacturers, ideas about industrial

nonprofits, a closer inspection of quality of life in the neighborhood and other factors that could potentially enable all stakeholders to work better and improve the neighborhood's vision.

By and large, the area's stakeholders — whether they be designers, factory workers, the Fashion Center's Business Improvement District officials and other interested parties — agreed that the diversity of retail and quality of life on the street is not up to snuff, Marton said. While the Design Trust is not making any recommendations, the next phase of the study will link the urban landscape and planning in a more well-designed way. Speaking hypothetically, she mentioned how the need for wider sidewalks or guidelines for freight entrances are the types of issues that might be explored. For example, having a well-known architect like Philippe Starck design the racks that are often seen on the neighborhood sidewalks is the type of idea that would potentially help to make the industry more of an asset to the community as opposed to an eyesore, Marton said.

Rezoning the neighborhood has caused strife among tenants, union leaders and city officials in recent years, so much so that all the interested parties have yet to come up with a viable solution. As many Seventh Avenuers know far too well, offshore production has whittled away jobs in the neighborhood. Marton noted, "Well into the 20th century, 90 to 95 percent of the garments sold in the U.S. were made here, too."

Patrick Murphy, director of the fashion-retail team in the center for economic transformation at New York City's Economic Development Corporation, said, "We're looking forward to working with the Design Trust and are hopeful that this data will be useful in preserving and growing this critical industry in New York City."

The development corporation plans to release its Fashion NYC 2020 study, a separate in-depth look at the industry, sometime this summer.

Rather than examine the area strictly in terms of average rents per square foot or the number of jobs as other agencies have, the Design Trust zeroed in on "what's actually happening with the fashion industry, what's here now and how to design for the future with an opportunity to grow," Marton said.

The CFDA's general secretary Yeohlee Teng, who, along with architect Joerg Schwartz, championed the need for "Made in Midtown," said, "I feel very strongly that this was a necessary step for the industry to take where an impartial entity was collecting the data and doing the analysis to have a fresh take about how we view the industry and how we move forward from here."

For Teng, who moved into the neighborhood in the early Nineties, the fact the survey reinforces "the vibrancy that still exists is a bonus. When you talk to a lot of people, they are generally more negative than positive. The fact that there is still so much vibrancy, new business and entrepreneurship is a real plus."

Surprisingly, "Made in Midtown" proved to be somewhat optimistic about the future of domestic manufacturing. Depending on shipping costs, which are reliant on energy prices and very well could escalate, it "definitely" could begin to make more sense for more companies to manufacture domestically, Marton said, though industry observers are not banking on a resurgence that would rival the Garment Center's heyday.

In some cases, it is more cost effective to produce goods here than overseas, Marton said. Researchers found that designers who are making less than 100 units of "very expensive" items that require a great deal of embroidery or handwork are often inclined to work domestically to try to maintain quality control, she said. In addition, small companies producing 5,000 units or less of a garment that retails between \$100 and \$300 often opt to manufacture their goods in the city to offset shipping costs, she said.

Results of "Made in Midtown" will be posted at madeinmidtown.org today. In addition to charts, graphs and findings, there will be a dozen videos with such key people as Saks Inc.'s Ron Frasca and R&C Apparel Corp.'s Ramdat Harihar. "In the end, it's really about what kind of city we want to live in," Marton said.