

Local
Leaders

Cities as
a Lab:
Designing
the Innovation
Economy



Made in Midtown: The Future of Manhattan's Garment District

Sometimes, a thriving innovation district can hide in plain sight. The basic principles of co-location and collaboration apply not only to high-tech industries, but to any industry where both producers and customers have a passion for continually improving products. The *Made in Midtown?*¹ and *Making Midtown*² reports from the Design Trust for Public Space and the Council of Fashion Designers of America demonstrated to New York City's decision-makers that clothing factories weren't a relic of the city's past, but the foundation of a \$10 billion creative industry.

“The garment district is not necessarily a problem that we have to solve, but a series of strengths.”

Sarah Crean, former executive director, New York Industrial Retention Network³

The fashion industry in some respects offers a preview of the future for many other American industries. America's first mass-production industry has already survived many of the broad trends that many other industries now face: simultaneous globalization and localization, fragmentation into dense networks of suppliers, shorter and continually improved product cycles possible through rapid prototyping, collaboration between designers and manufacturers and end-users, and the disruption of traditional distribution. As “fast fashion” has reached middle-class consumers via chains like H&M and Forever 21, innovation cycles have tightened even further.⁴



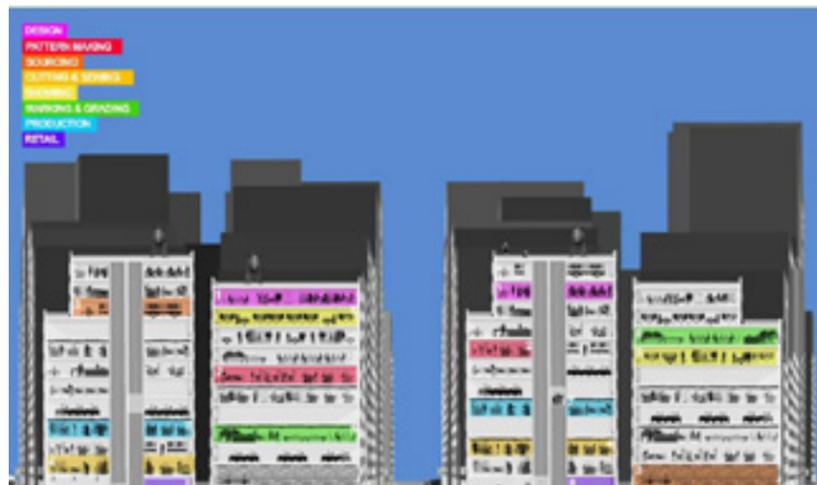
The Garment District arose in the 1920s on the west side of Midtown Manhattan, between the wharves and Broadway's department stores. Mass production for the middle market went offshore in the postwar wave of deindustrialization, but a segment of the industry was able to reinvent itself for a new era, catering to the ever-changing styles of high fashion, where concepts have a shelf life of weeks rather than months. This demands an R&D infrastructure that maintains adaptability through close proximity, which facilitates repeated meetings and constant changes: "Having your workrooms right here, you're able to make a selection and try it and see what works," says designer Anna Sui.

"Proximity absolutely increases creativity."

fashion designer Nanette Lepore, who manufactures 85 percent of her collection in New York City.

Fashion's relentless demand for innovation can only be fed through networks of small, nimble firms that continuously recombine to develop new products. "The Garment District functions, in essence, as an incubator: providing ideas and infrastructure to start-ups, helping them learn and grow," writes Tom Vanderbilt, co-author of *Made in Midtown*. Fashion designers concur. "New names happen because here in the

Garment District are the people who can help a startup," says designer Yeohlee Teng, likening the district to an interdependent ecosystem. Local designers have great confidence in their suppliers, since nearly half of them produce samples in Garment District factories.



Yet the area available to fashion businesses, especially manufacturers, has steadily eroded. Industrial tenants typically expect to pay half the rent that office tenants do, and thus even the few spaces protected by zoning for manufacturers have disappeared amid a recent influx of high-rise hotels and offices. Facing an uncertain future, building and factory owners alike have deferred investment.

Making Midtown urges the city to help this innovative industry cluster thrive through policy changes, promotion, and public spaces.



Revising zoning and tax policies could create incentives to preserve manufacturing space and build commercial uses elsewhere. Public space improvements along streets like Broadway have built awareness and improved traffic flow for pedestrians and trucks alike, helping to better use sidewalks and loading docks during evening hours. A broader *Made in NYC* promotional campaign has attracted attention from trend-conscious New Yorkers and lent new cachet to local manufacturers and designers.

