

NEW YORK'S GARMENT CENTER



Fashion remains the backbone of the area, but many other industries are joining the neighborhood.

Evolutionary Road

Changes in business have led to diversification along Seventh Avenue. By Marc Karimzadeh

MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY ago, Manhattan's Garment District was the bustling center of the American apparel industry.

In its earlier years, it was dominated by mass production, with factories focusing on particular classifications of merchandise — such as outerwear, shirting, hats, innerwear or dresses.

Fast forward 50 years, and the nature of the historic district has changed quite significantly. Today, most of those factories churning out mass market clothes have disappeared as production moved to Asia. Workers rolling racks of clothing through the streets — once the hallmark of the district — are few and far between, and fewer delivery trucks clog sidewalks or side streets.

That said, designer ateliers, sample rooms and manufacturing facilities with the know-how to cater to more upscale designers continue to mark the neighborhood — even as other business categories, from architects and graphic designers to advertising agencies, tech firms and nonprofit agencies have moved in. More significantly, a 2005 rezoning of the Far West Side for the Hudson Yards development resulted in 22 new hotels on the western edge of the district.

All this has given the neighborhood a distinct new and, some would say, altogether more pleasant flavor — one that has landlords hopeful that they can raise rents for new types of businesses, and designers fearful that more factories could be forced to leave the area. It has inspired various initiatives to stem the tide and raise public awareness to find ways to preserve the Garment Center.

Today, many high-profile designers continue to produce the lion's share of their collections in New York, among them Nanette Lepore, Yeohlee Teng, Jason Wu, Prabal Gurung and Maria Cornejo.

Lepore, for instance, makes 85 percent of her collection in New York, producing 20,000 to 25,000 units each month in about 10 factories and 10 more on rotation. The designer and her husband, Bob Savage, have been vocal about their desire to keep production in the district and avoid the fate of the Meatpacking District, where the industry that gave it its name has all but disappeared in recent years.

"You get the sense that there is an understanding with the city now," said Lepore, sitting in her West 35th Street showroom. "If you are a young designer,

you have to be able to go to the factories, which are often supported by the bigger designers, find that empty sewing machine, and bring in a lady to make your clothes. I know they have landlords breathing down their necks, but they have a choice. They will lose small creative designers [without the Garment District], which in turn will affect New York fashion."

Savage agreed that the district remains particularly crucial to an emerging crop of designers, both home-grown and from abroad. "It's not only jobs, it's preserving New York fashion," Savage said. "If there is no factory to make samples to show buyers, and you can't make them in China where factories often have 10,000-piece minimums, who will make them?"

Most designers and manufacturers lauded the City of New York and Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration for grasping the importance of the fashion industry to New York's economy, and understanding its need to remain in the Garment District.

In 2010, the Design Trust for Public Space conducted an independent "Made in Midtown" study on the Garment Center, in partnership with the Council of Fashion Designers of America, which gave a major

boost to the District by stressing its continued importance to the local fashion industry.

"We will never go back to the kind of model where New York City produces millions of hats or undergarments," said Jerome Chou, director of programs at the Design Trust. "Instead, the Garment Center is a research and development hub for fashion designers, and that function is part of what makes New York City a fashion capital. There are very concrete reasons it makes sense to do business here. For designers, it's faster to work here, and you have that proximity to visit factories, be face-to-face with the manufacturer and secure quality control."

The first phase of the two-part survey established that almost 80 percent of emerging talent and 70 percent of the city's established designers consider the Garment District as a key element to the strength of their businesses. "People had this idea that the Garment Center is this dying, industrial relic," Chou said. "I hope now the conversation shifted to the Garment Center's strengths, the value that it's providing not only to the fashion industry but also New York as a whole."

"It's also a really important source for economic diversity," he added. "The recession has proven to everyone that New York City needs a diverse economic base. We need to be able to provide jobs, and the Garment Center is still an important part of that economic diversity."

The second phase of the study is currently in the works, seeking to deliver recommendations to city officials and others to sustain District factories while addressing the needs of the changing neighborhood. It is expected to be complete early next year.

"It looks much more hopeful now than it did in the past because there are so many people that are getting involved on so many different levels," said Anna Sui, who also makes most of her clothes in New York, citing the Design Trust study as a major boost to a cause she is very passionate about.

Sui said that while factories have disappeared from the Garment District over the years, she is still able to work well out of the area. "It's the only way I know," she said. "I need to have all the resources here. I need to be able to say, 'Oh, I need a pewter button, the silver doesn't look good,' or, 'The zipper needs to be cut to the length because I decided to shorten the jacket.'"

"Quite honestly, it's harder and harder because the resources are consolidating, and there aren't as many people making fabrics, trims and buttons, but we are still able to find things," she added. "Where there were 50 companies, there are now five for buttons, and that goes all the way down the line. I don't know how much further it can deplete. I think something will happen and someone will be innovative and clever and hopefully we can even develop some more things in this country again."

Last October, Teng opened a boutique on West 38th Street last October, hoping "to encourage something like a Lincoln Road on 38th Street" — referring to the successful reinvention of the once-dilapidated South Beach enclave. "What is palpable in the neighborhood is the creative edge that has insinuated itself," Teng said. "The district has, as demonstrated by the Made in Midtown study, evolved from a manufacturing [zone] to an incubation and innovation hub. Fashion is cohabitating with other design disciplines making it possible that the area will evolve into an urban design center. It is that leap of faith that convinced me to open my first retail store on 38th Street."

"I think it's really more about reimagining the potential," Teng added. "You can never go back, but you need to think about what the future can potentially hold,

using technology to drive sustainability. Besides generating creativity, there is also proximity and time here. It's speed to market and very sustainable. You don't have to fly your product halfway around the world."

Many echoed this sentiment, particularly at a time when locally made resources are gaining in popularity again in other industries, like food.

"The general public is beginning to understand, from an economic perspective, that their neighbors are out of work because, in the larger picture, they didn't purchase something made here," said designer Anthony Lilore, who founded Restore Clothing with

to rent low-cost studios in the heart of the Garment Center, as well as offering a mentor program over a two-year period. The second installment will kick off in May, when designers such as Antonio Azzuolo; Arielle Shapiro of Art Dein; Christian Cota, and Timo Weiland and Alan Eckstein of Timo Weiland move into the Fashion Incubator studios at 209 West 38th Street.

CFDA chief executive officer Steven Kolb said the incubator "brought designers into the neighborhood who otherwise wouldn't have had that opportunity, more directly connecting them with area resources like suppliers and factories."

"This is something we are committed to and something the neighborhood is about, which is young talent," Kolb said. "When you're new and young, you don't have resources to make clothes in Asia, or to have a production manager overseas."

Echoing that sentiment was Joe Ferrara, who owns Ferrara Manufacturing, and who is also a director of the Garment Center Supplier Association and on the advisory board for the CFDA Fashion Incubator.

"We do not have any large, mass-producing organizations left in the Garment Center, but what we do have is an incredible incubator, where most of the resources are diversified," Ferrara said. "They are like speed ships. Anything that a young or mid-sized designer or a major label needs to have made can be made here. Any burst of creative energy from a design team or a designer can be translated."

Ferrara noted that such a model is sustainable, even with continued real estate pressure on high-density factories, particularly once the economy recovers.

"The uses that have come in are everything from creative services, nonprofits, arts and business-to-business services, and, at this point, of the 91,000 employees in the fashion district, only 22.4 percent are actually fashion industry employees," said Barbara Randall, executive director of the Fashion Center Business Improvement District. "Probably over 46 percent of space is still used by the fashion industry, it uses much more space."

With the influx of hotels and other creative services, the feel of the neighborhood is beginning to change, and becoming more viable to companies outside of fashion. "These are positive developments, but there is a huge challenge in this neighborhood," she said. "Production has been leaving for 60 years. This has been a steady trend, as designers have taken their businesses overseas. When those uses left, there were vacancies here. Owners let in other [categories], because if they didn't, the buildings would have been empty."

"In just a few years, it could feel very different here," Randall added. "Fashion is still by far the largest category we have and we really hope it stays that way because these are uses we want here. One of the interesting things is that we have a lot of nonprofits going into the buildings on Eighth Avenue. We have 150 arts uses. Those businesses have a nice synergy with fashion because they're creatively driven."

Ferrara added that the challenges are ultimately twofold.

"From purely a garment center standpoint and preserving its character, there are two challenges: Number one, that demand for manufacturing and assembly survives, and, number two, that zoning or some sort of city planning solution will keep manufacturing activity here," he said. "If we are passive on both of those, there will be no demand for manufacturing and there will be no commercial housing for manufacturing. Passive is not an option."

Lepore, for her part, has a very specific vision of how the district should look in the future: "I would hope to see more guys pushing racks of clothes on the street again."



The Fashion Center Business Improvement District's information kiosk.

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— JEROME CHOU, DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC SPACE

his wife, Celeste, and is an advocate for the Garment Center: "The truth is, you have a brand here and that is New York City as a fashion capital. It's internationally recognized. Once you kill the roots, everything else will follow. It happened in the flower district and it happened in the Meatpacking District."

Lilore, who manufacturers the bulk of his collection in New York, pointed to the CFDA Fashion Incubator as a positive development to help bolster the area. It allows a group of 12 selected designers

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