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, shirtlinings, hats, undergarment, or dresses.

Fast forward 50 years, and the nature of the historic district has changed 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 line’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 39th Street showroom. “If you are a young designer, you have to be able to go to the factories, which are often supported by 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 homegrown 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...
The recession has proven to everyone that New York City needs a diverse economic base...and the Garment Center is still an important part of that economic diversity.

-JEROME CHOU, DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC SPACE

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 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 acknowledged. Once you kill the roots, everything else will follow. It happened in the flower district and it happened in the Meatpacking District.

"The Fashion Business Center Improvement District's information kiosk.

"Likewise, the Garment Center is still an important hub for fashion. It's a place where people come to get their clothes made. It's a place where designers and manufacturers can work together. It's a place where creativity and innovation can flourish. "We must protect and nurture this hub," said Lilore. "It's too important to the city's economy and identity."

CFDA chief executive officer Steven Kolb said the incubator "brought designers into the neighborhood who otherwise would never have had the 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 you don't have the resources to make clothes in Asia, or to have a production manager overseas."

CFDA president and CEO Steven Kolb noted that the Garment Center is still an important part of that economic diversity. The phase two 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 by 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 clothing in New York. Sui is citing the Design Trust study as a major boost to a cause she is very passionate about.

Sui said that factories have disappeared from the Garment District over 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 70 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 something will be invented. I think cleverly and hopefully we can even develop some more things in this country again.

Last October, Teng opened a boutique on West 38th Street in October, hoping "to encourage something like a Lincoln Road on 38th Street," referring to the successful reinvention of the once-dying South Beach enclave. "What is palatable in the neighborhood is the creative edge that has insinuated itself," Teng said. "The district has, or some sort of city planning solution will keep manufacturing activity here," he said. "If we are passive on both of those issues, there will be manufacturing and there will be no commercial housing for manufacturing. Passive is not an option."