SUMMER 2010

DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC SPACE

CFDA COUNCIL OF FASHION DESIGNERS OF AMERICA CFDA.COM

photo by Chris Kannen, Design Trust for Public Space

MADE IN MID-TOWN?

NEW YORK CITY IS PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE OF THE GARMENT DISTRICT, THE HEART OF AMERICAN FASHION.

THIS COULD TRANSFORM THE FASHION INDUSTRY AND MIDTOWN MANHATTAN.

MADE IN MIDTOWN STUDIES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDUSTRY AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD, AND ASKS: SHOULD CREATIVE INDUSTRIES MATTER TO NEW YORK?

learn more at madeinmidtown.org

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maps by Sarah Williams, Columbia University Spatial Information Design Lab, photos by Interboro and Chris Kannen, Design Trust for Public Space

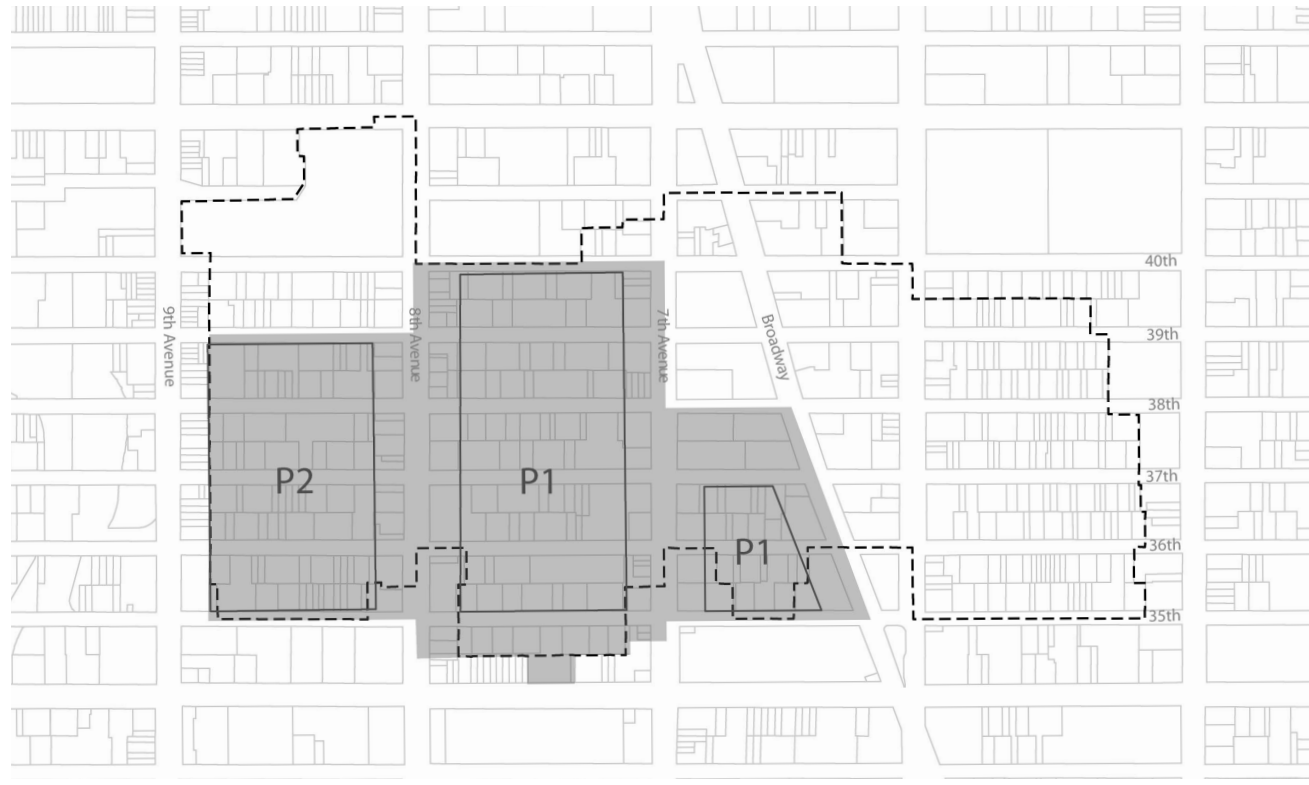
THIS STORY IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN FASHION.

In 2009, the Design Trust for Public Space, a nonprofit devoted to improving New York City's public realm, partnered with the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) to create *Made in Midtown,* a study of the fashion industry, how the Garment District works today, and why it's an integral part of New York City's economy, identity, and sense of place.

Ultimately, this story is about much more than fashion. It's about one of the last neighborhoods in Manhattan that has not yet been remade by recent waves of new development. It's about jobs and immigrant workers. It's about the decisions New York City officials make to support certain kinds of businesses and land-use development, whether it's baseball stadiums, high-rise condominiums, or factories. *Made in Midtown* is about what kind of city we want New York to be.

In the project's next phase, the Design Trust for Public Space will facilitate public forums around the role of creative industries in New York City. Building on these discussions, and the findings of Phase I, we will work with all stakeholders to generate strategies for zoning and land-use, to build city support for the fashion industry, and to develop programming or urban design initiatives that increase the industry's presence in the public realm.

ENORMOUS REAL ESTATE PRESSURE SURROUNDS THE GARMENT DISTRICT.



In adjacent neighborhoods, many new residences, hotels, and offices have been developed in recent years. Future development in the Garment District will be guided by the City of New York, which must balance potential benefits (including increased revenue) with the strength of specific economic sectors, including the fashion industry.

Governments use zoning to set rules about what activities and building types are allowed in a given area. New York City created the Special Garment Center District zoning in 1987 to preserve manufacturing space. Three specific Preservation Areas (shown above as "P1" and "P2") were established to discourage conversions of factories to other uses. Although never enforced, it did result in relatively low rents and a continued manufacturing presence in the Garment District.

- Fashion Center Business Improvement District (BID)
- Special Garment Center District
- Protected Manufacturing Areas (P1, P2)

learn more at madeinmidtown.org

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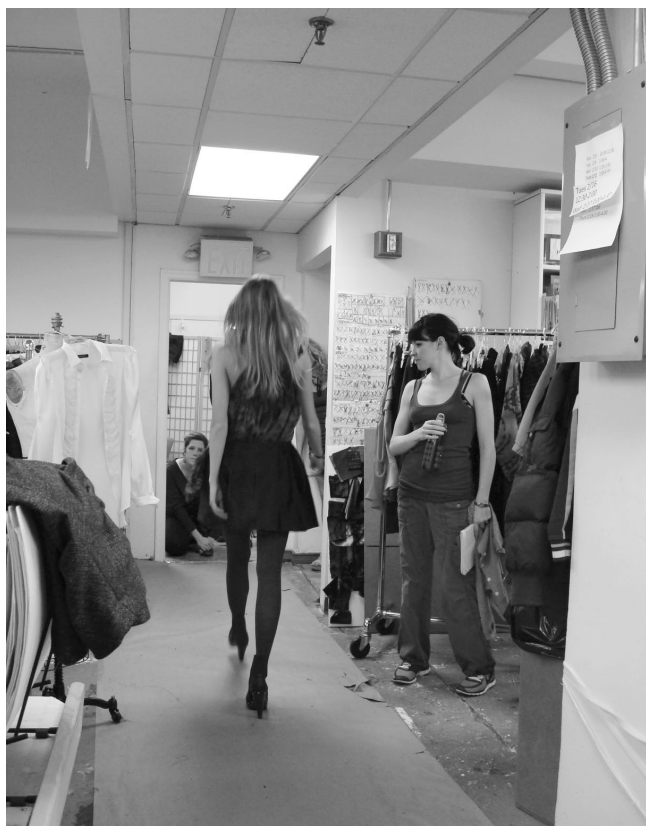
THE GARMENT DISTRICT IS NOW A FASHION RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT HUB.



In the early 20th Century, about 95% of garments sold in the U.S. were made in the Garment District. That scale of industry will never return, but the core of factories, suppliers, and skilled workers that gave rise to American fashion in the 1970s has emerged as a center for design innovation.

Project Runway portrays designers working in isolation, but in the real world, fashion is a team effort. Producing a garment from idea to completion requires many highly skilled specialists – all present in the Garment District. These specialists form a dense, interdependent network that enables entrepreneurs to start fashion companies without the enormous investment required to hire staff, buy specialized equipment, or rent space – making New York a fashion startup capital.

Physical proximity can also mean savings. At certain retail prices and quantities, designers choose to produce in the Garment District and elsewhere in New York City. If shipping and energy costs rise, this trend will increase.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO NEW YORKERS?

The fashion industry is an economic engine for New York City, contributing $10 billion annually to the local economy. Apparel manufacturing alone provides roughly 24,000 working- and middle-class jobs. Beyond jobs and revenue, the industry's presence is inseparable from New York City's cultural identity, and exerts a powerful influence on tourism, print and Web media, education, film and television.

WHAT'S NEXT? THAT'S UP TO THE CITY OF NEW YORK AND IT'S UP TO YOU.

In the coming months, the Design Trust will hold public forums, gather municipal input, and recommend land-use and zoning strategies for building on existing industry and neighborhood strengths. A city is the expression of its citizens' values, needs, and visions for the future. So, the question is: What kind of city do you want to live in?

learn more at madeinmidtown.org

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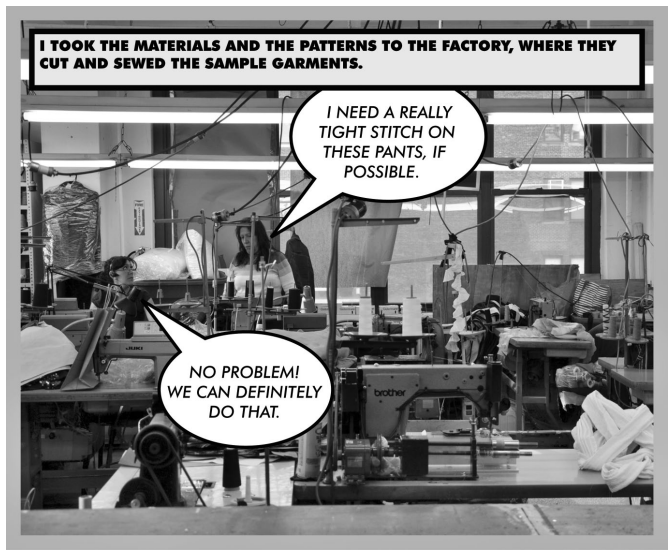
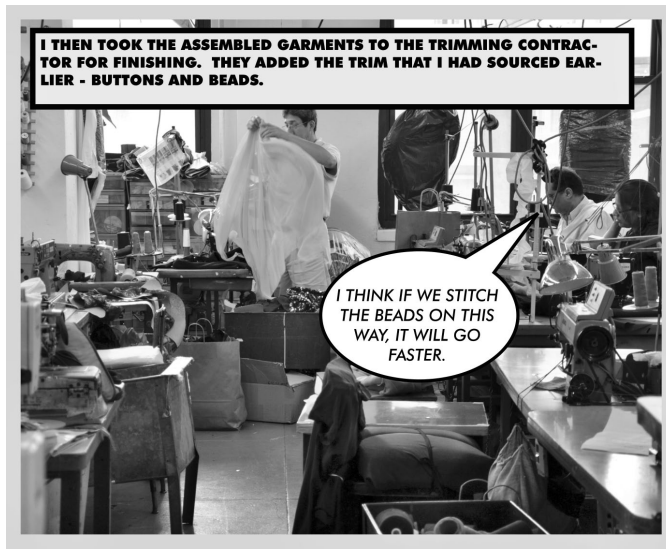
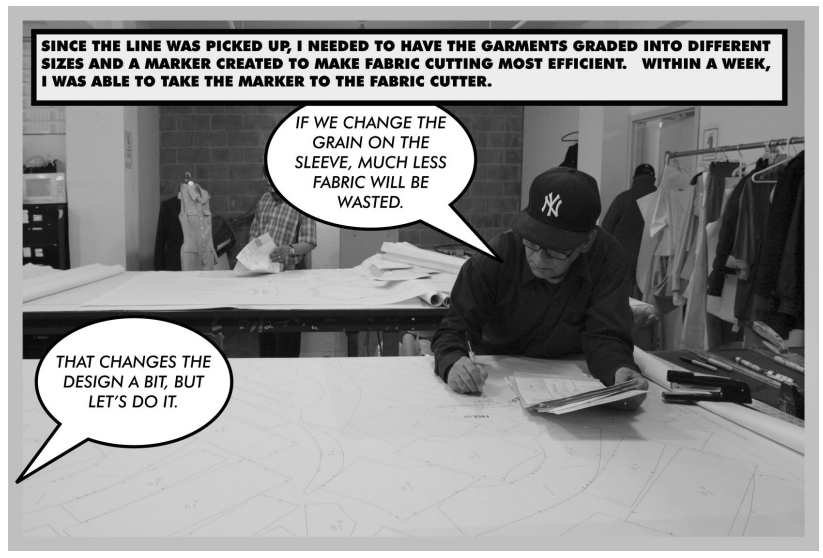
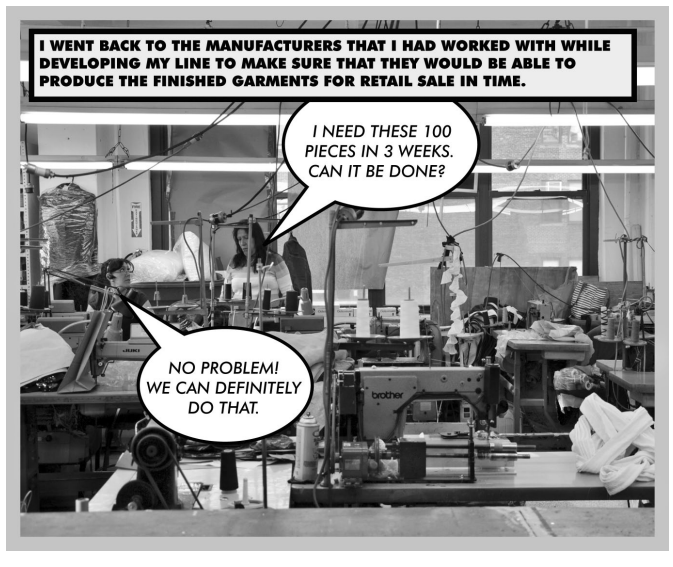
comics by Interboro









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GARMENT DISTRICT STORIES

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profiles by Tom Vanderbilt, photo by Siriano Designs, Inc., profile images by Jordan Alport

JASON WU, DESIGNER JASON WU

Jason Wu, slim, casually dressed, and inexplicably alert after returning to New York on a red-eye from Uruguay, is describing his recent visit to the Smithsonian to watch his one-shouldered, intricately embroidered dress be inducted into the museum's collection of dresses worn by the nation's First Ladies — and to meet the current White House occupant who wore it. "It was an out-of-body experience," he says. "To think that at age 27 I'd have a dress that would outlive me, that would be studied and looked at." At the ceremony, First Lady Michelle Obama observed that Wu, a Taiwanese emigrant who came to the U.S. after a peripatetic spin around the globe, was "living the American dream."

In that respect, Wu is spiritually at home in New York City's Garment District, a place where countless immigrants have risen from floor-sweepers to factory owners, and where generations of young designers have come for inspiration — and to test their mettle. It was also the place, as Wu recalls, that one cold November he and his seamstresses worked round-the-clock to "make something really beautiful happen" — i.e., the inaugural gown — "in a matter of weeks." Wu, whose first exposure to the Garment District came as a young Parsons student on a sourcing assignment, notes "it's really rare to find a place where you could do everything from find trim to get a coat or an evening dress made, to finding buttons, snaps, and zippers — everything from A to Z in making fashion happen."

Which is why, he says, when it came time to find a new studio, this ascendant designer — a household name virtually overnight who has been touted, among other things, as the "next" Oscar de la Renta — moved, as he put it, "deeper into the Garment Center," where he now resides in a 9,000-square-foot studio and workshop.

Sitting in a room whose walls are papered with the peach-colored pages of *The New York Observer,* Wu says, "I can't think of anywhere where I could go two blocks away and find a hand sewer who can drape a dress miraculously in less than 48 hours." And though already prominent enough to have a camera bearing his name, Wu is young enough to recall his days of working out of his apartment, as well as his informal education in commercial production in the Garment District. "When I first started, I needed to find out how to grade a garment, from size 0 to size 12," he says, "and I remember finding a grader who walked me through the process. Coming out of school, I really just knew how to make one garment."

While other designers, from the emerging to the more established, have found success in other parts of New York City, Wu says his first choice was to stay in Midtown. "All my resources are here. It would only make sense for a designer who's very hands-on to be in the midst of where it all takes place," he says. "This is where the magic happens."

GARMENT DISTRICT STORIES

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profile images by Jordan Alport

TINA SCHENK, PATTERN MAKER WERKSTATT

Tina Schenk's story is a striking counter-narrative to tales of failing factories and downsizing designers. After opening her sample and pattern making shop on 38th Street nearly two years ago, last June she moved into a larger space on 36th Street. "We've been getting busier and busier," says Schenk, who studied tailoring in Germany before coming to New York City to run the ateliers of Helmut Lang and Karl Lagerfeld.

Pattern making and draping are fundamental elements of the design process — Schenk calls it "soft sculpture" — helping to transform the 2-D sketch of the designer into a three-dimensional object. This requires close consultation with the designer and careful consideration of a range of variables. "I'll get a sketch from a designer and we'll have a meeting," says Schenk, whose clients have ranged from Calvin Klein to Victoria's Secret to Alexander Wang. "I'll ask a lot of questions as to how they envision the garment should be constructed, the type of fabrics they want to use."

There is much that a sketch leaves out. "Really, clothing is about feeling," she says. "If you have a gown, some designers want it soft, not a lot of structure. Another designer might want a corset underneath. You don't necessarily see that in the sketch." Draping, says Schenk, is more art than science. "No two drapers produce the same garment," she says. "Draping is intuitive a lot of the time — a lot of the things you figure out as you're draping. You're always trying to let the fabric do what it wants to do, because even though it's a soft material, there is a strategy involved — you have to figure out where it wants to go."

While some garments are relatively simple, with patterns taking a few hours, Schenk once worked on a 200-pattern-piece dress that took nine days to sew. Curiously, however, the simple garments can sometimes be just as exacting. "A simple garment in some ways has to be more perfect than an involved garment," she says, gesturing to a pair of yoga stretch pants on a rack. "The stretch adds some difficulty to it, different fabrics react differently. There's a lot of shrinkage to take into account, and if the factories don't have their sewing machines properly adjusted, the seams stretch in sewing."

Schenk speculates that some of her uptick in business may be the result of other firms closing. But she says most of the increased demand has come from emerging designers. "It's really difficult for younger companies to get into these places, because they have set clientele they work with. I decided to start this business because every other designer I worked with previously had such a hard time finding these places." While she acknowledges that much development has gone overseas, she has also seen a number of firms returning some of their operations to New York. "Things didn't work out the way they thought," she says. "It takes a while to find the right people, who understand your aesthetic, who speak the same language, creatively, and the actual language as well — certain things you can't just convey on a piece of paper."

She wonders if overseas production offers a false sense of economy. "You let go of your atelier," she says, "but then you have to hire technical designers to send designs overseas — maybe you get your samples for free from the factory, but you have to hire extra support staff too." But the biggest cost, she believes, comes in losing creativity. "When you move into higher end design, there is so much spontaneous creativity happening that you don't want to wait a month to see your garments," she says. "One design is based on another. You want to keep the process going, to continuously look at the things you've been designing."

RAMDAT HARIHAR, PRESIDENT R&C APPAREL

Against one wall in Ramdat Harihar's bustling factory, just around the corner from the glitter-ing drawerful of gemstones, is a neatly shelved collection of sewing machines. Many of the machines, built well into the previous century, are technically antiques. But they are not obsolete. They are tools for innovation.

Harihar collects these machines, often buying them cheaply from defunct businesses, not simply because they are so effective in working with specialized stitches — many outside the easy ability of modern machines — but because, with a little tinkering, they can be used to create entirely new stitching effects for the garments his factory produces. "What we'll do is switch machines around," says Harihar, who studied electrical engineering in his native Guyana. "We'll take one part from one machine and solder it into a different machine, to create that different design." On one occasion he used a machine of a different sort — a microwave oven — to create a new pleat for Donna Karan.

Harihar's ability to provide this added value to his designer clients, who range from Anna Sui to Zac Posen, is central to his survival amidst the declining ranks of apparel manufacturing in New York. So too is flexibility, and an eye for opportunity. To counter the seasonal downturns in the cycle of fashion production, Harihar turns his workers to everything from table napkins to tartan-checked "doggy couture." In a warehouse in New Jersey he keeps surplus machines, in hopes that a fashion company might redirect even a small portion of its production to New York.

As with many manufacturers in the Garment District, his is a classic immigrant's story of hard work, family ties, and taking chances: freshly arrived in New York in the early 1970s, he began in the district by pushing hand trucks in the streets. He worked his way up, eventually running Ajax Pleating and Stitching, among other now-defunct manufacturers. In 1996, with his wife Chandra (the 'C' in 'R&C'), he launched his own business. A downturn in orders forced him from his previous location of many years into his current space on 39th Street— ironically, previously occupied by a sewing machine vendor — but he says remaining in the Garment District was key. "I thought about going to New Jersey," he says. "But what I notice in the fashion industry is that if you are not close to the designers, your business becomes more distant. You lose contact."

Ultimately, Harihar believes his success depends on this contact, particularly with the younger designers who he hopes will become the celebrated names of tomorrow. He helps turn their sketches into feasible blueprints and then finished garments on-budget—often on a few day's notice, helps them find fabric, extends them lines of credit, lets fashion students use machines to try out a design, and gives them samples. "I call him my godfather," says designer Francoise Olivas. "I try to take a risk with the younger designers," says Harihar. "We have to have the future Marc Jacobs, the future Ralph Lauren."

GARMENT DISTRICT STORIES

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profiles by Tom Vanderbilt, photo by Siriano Designs, Inc., profile images by Jordan Alport

RON FRASCH, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF MERCHANDISING OFFICER SAKS INC.

"The first thing a customer asks when they come into a store is 'what's new?'" says Ron Frasch, sitting amidst dozens of designer dresses on the third floor of Saks' flagship store on Fifth Avenue. "They don't want to know what was, they want to know what is." As the person who oversees the process of making sure the best of what's new makes it onto the floor (and out the door) of one of the world's largest and most influential luxury retailers, Frasch must keep an intent watch on the fashion world — from the up-and-coming designers to the established brands — and the evolving patterns of consumer desire. "Nothing's ever permanent," he says, "that's why it's fashion."

After more than 30 years in the business, Frasch knows fashion from "both sides," as he puts it. On the retail side, he's worked at stores ranging from Bonwit Teller to Nieman Marcus; on the design side, he's held executive positions with Escada and GFT, then the largest licensee of designer products (with Giorgio Armani and Valentino among the designers). During his tenure, he has seen the industry undergo sweeping changes. "It used to be an industry that was dominated by department stores," he says. "Now there's more specialty stores, and even the brands that we buy are retailers." Two fashion seasons have blossomed into six — or more. The runway shows, meanwhile, have morphed into a global media spectacle, even as their strict commercial importance has declined. "You went to the runway show and that was the buy," he says. Now, the "runway buy is probably the smallest percentage of what we buy. All the work is done prior to that."

And yet much has remained constant. "We will sell 60% of what we're going to sell in the first four weeks the goods are on the floor," he says. "That fact hasn't changed in my entire career." The industry too is still largely relationship driven, Frasch says. "Your handshake means a lot," he says. "There aren't a lot of contracts." Retailers still need to take risks on emerging designers. "I lecture our people all the time on their gut," he says. "They've got to know when to embrace a talent, and prepare to have a period where maybe they will not become successful — until they become successful."

Over the course of his career, Frasch has witnessed New York evolve into the world's fashion capital, which he attributes in part to its human capital. "New York is a network," he says. "Sometimes you see a ball of string, where everything's connected but separate. I sometimes think about our industry the same way. If you untangle it, it ruins the ball." This sentiment, in Frasch's view, extends as well to the Garment Center. "I think there's an energy that's created when the Garment Center is the Garment Center," he says. As some designers have decamped to open offices in other areas of the city, he wonders if "some of the spontaneity, energy, and creativity that comes with having it all together has been lost."

ANNA SUI, DESIGNER ANNA SUI

"At Anna Sui, thinking I've always wanted a pair of silver glitter showgirl shoes," New York Times fashion critic Cathy Horyn recently Twittered from Bryant Park. "You know that feeling?" For the Detroit-born Sui, a voracious magpie of styles and influences raided from the thrift-store of history, this unerring sense of playing upon desires the consumer may not have known they had — the fashion dictum of "knowing your girl" —has helped transform her company into a global force, equally at home on the runways as in Target, with a string of boutiques and a dozen licenses, ranging from fragrances to her own "BoHo Barbie."

While her reach and influence are felt across the world, Sui's story began in the Garment District and continues there to the present day, as she chats in her lacquered black and purple studio on 39th Street, , surrounded by filigree Shiffli samples, snakeskin boots, and the swatch-and-print laden inspiration boards that inform her latest collection — a polychromatic clamor of arts-and-crafts splendor, William Morris, and Charles Rennie McIntosh tossed into a particle collider. "As long as I can remember I've always wanted to be in fashion," she says, remembering days of clipping from fashion magazines, studying with Talmudic intensity the Parsons School of Design ad in the back of *Seventeen* magazine.

Fashion school kept Sui only until her junior year, when she landed a job as assistant designer at Erica Elias' Charlie's Girls. "I was her only assistant designer, and she gave me my own room with two sewers and a woman who did the draping," Sui says. "We had five divisions, even the license to Dr. Suess. I could be very experimental." As with many young designers, she learned the trade by finding her way around the Garment District.. "My boss was very tough, whenever she wanted to see fabrics, I had to show her everything available," Sui says. She became an expert at scouring the Garment District for just the right fabric — at just the right price. "I think that became key to my career," she says. "I learned where the resources were. I learned how to use what would work for you. Like sometimes you'd fall in love with a purple and white gingham, but maybe the minimums were too high, but then you'd remember that somebody else could do a special color or had it available too."

These skills — and the firms in the Garment District — became essential when she launched her own company in 1981. So did another ineluctable asset that is bred by the proximity of New York's fashion industry (and indeed New York itself): the power of connections. She sold her first pieces at a friend's booth at a trade show; during her first visit to Paris' fashion shows, a friend from Parsons introduced her to Madonna. "When we sat down," Sui recalls, "she said, 'Anna I have a surprise for you. I'm wearing your baby doll dress.' That kind of really gave me the confidence. Here's somebody who could have anything she wanted. If she chose mine, maybe I could really compete."

While she laments that the contraction of the industry in New York has made it "harder to put together a collection," she still finds local production essential for her process. "That's the luxury of having your workrooms right here," she says. "You're able to make a selection and try it and see what works." Inspiration, she says, is often sequential. "When you're working on a collection, one piece leads to the next. If you have to wait a half month for something, you lose that much momentum." And there is no substitute for having the garments in front of her, in her hands. "It's not a flat medium you're working in — when you gather a piece of fabric, because of the thickness of it or the loftiness or the bounce-ability of it, you never know how it's going to react," she says. "It's so much easier when you can touch it. That's what we do. We manipulate fabric."

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The Design Trust for Public Space is a nonprofit organization devoted to improving New York City's public spaces. The Design Trust solicits research and design proposals from public agencies, nonprofits, and community groups that require expertise or resources beyond the scope of their budget or institutional structure. Proposals are selected by an independent jury based on feasibility, timeliness and citywide relevance. In this case, the 2009 project jury selected a proposal submitted by the Council of Fashion Designers of America, resulting in the *Made in Midtow*n project.

The Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) is a nonprofit trade association that leads industry-wide initiatives and whose membership consists of more than 350 of America's foremost womenswear, menswear, jewelry and accessory designers. In addition to hosting the annual CFDA Fashion Awards, which recognizes the top creative talent in the industry, the organization offers programs which support professional development and scholarships. Representing CFDA as a Design Trust partner are executive director Steven Kolb, general secretary Yeohlee Teng and architect Joerg Schwartz.

The Design Trust awarded five fellowships to private sector professionals to work collaboratively on *Made in Midtown:*

Jordan Alport shot, directed, and edited video for *Made in Midtown*. Jordan runs alport.tv, producing narrative visual media for brands and organizations. Prior to alport.tv, Jordan was a director at Desedo, a production and branding agency whose clients include Coca-Cola, Walmart, Sony Entertainment, and The City of New York.

Glen Cummings created *Made in Midtown's* graphic identity. Glen is the founder and principal of the graphic design studio MTWTF and a lecturer in graphic design at Yale University School of Art.

Interboro Partners created *Made in Midtown's* diverse set of diagrams, infographics and comics, describing the complex ecosystem of the Garment District and its value as an urban cluster. Interboro is a New York City-based urban design, planning, and architecture group founded in 2002 by Daniel D'Oca, Georgeen Theodore and Tobias Armborst.

Tom Vanderbilt interviewed people at every level of the fashion industry and wrote the collection of personal profiles and central essay for *Made in Midtown*. His most recent book is *The New York Times'* bestseller *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)*.

Sarah Williams analyzed decades of industry data and development history to create maps and infographics about Garment District real estate and zoning, and the role of the fashion industry in New York City's economy. Sarah is co-director of Columbia University's Spatial Information Design Lab (SIDL). Before directing SIDL, Sarah founded the Geographic Information System Laboratory at MIT.

Additional Contributors
Adapted Studio was responsible for the interaction design and web development for madeinmidtown.org. Founded in 2008 by Matthew Cooley and Eric Ishii Eckhardt, Adapted is an interactive design studio whose work ranges from websites and installations to video games and application prototyping.

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Special Thanks
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Major funding by:
Council of Fashion Designers of America
Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation
Lily Auchincloss Foundation
Nanette Lepore and Robert Savage

Additional support from:
A. Woodner Fund
The Fashion Center BID
Garment Center Supplier Association
Garment Industry Development Corporation
Reed Krakoff
Louise and Arde Bulova Fund
NYC Department of Cultural Affairs
New York State Council on the Arts
Newmark Knight Frank
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Workers United

Production equipment provided by:
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