

IN MADE MID TOWN?

A project of the Design Trust for Public Space
in partnership with the Council of Fashion Designers of America

Fashion Portraits: 22 Profiles from Inside NYC's Fashion Industry By Tom Vanderbilt

Larry Boger and Brian Kramer, suppliers
Guide Fabrics

Interlining is an invisible, yet essential, layer in fashion — the foundation bolstering the seductive architecture. “Almost every garment gets it,” says Larry Boger, of Guide Fabrics in New York City. “Interlining goes inside the garment, inside the shell - it gives it shape and form, gives the fabric a little bit of a roll, makes clothing more structured.”

Dwelling outside of the bright buzz of the runway and the pulsating boutiques, Guide Fabrics is one of the industry's many low-profile suppliers that play a part in making fashion happen. For a variety of customers from sewing rooms just around the corner and around the world, Guide fills orders for interlining from its storefront showroom on 38th Street, where rows of long bolts of multicolored fabric (known as “fuseables”) are stacked floor-to-ceiling. Cutting instructions are sent the way they always have been — someone fills out a piece of paper, attaches it to a clip at the end of a string, and tosses it over the rail from the second-story offices down to the cutters below.

What makes Guide particularly valuable for younger designers is its willingness to work with smaller orders. “A lot of our competitors won't do that,” says Boger. “They just want to ship by the roll, 100 yards. If someone wants 27 yards, we'll do it.” And so while Guide's longstanding clientele includes designers like Nanette Lepore, it also includes the burgeoning designer just out of school, who walks through the door and comes to rely on Guide's expertise as much as its merchandise. “People come in here not knowing what they need,” says Boger. “If

someone comes in and just says ‘fuseable,’ well, there’s a range. What type of fabric, what type of garment?”

Like many businesses in the Garment District, Guide is a long-standing family operation - Boger and his partners have been in the same building since 1977. Like many of their counterparts in the District, Guide has had to adapt as fabric mills closed across the country and large fashion companies shifted the bulk of their production overseas. Where Guide used to dye, or “convert,” its own raw materials (known as “gray goods”), that business has moved to Asia. Where the average sale was once several thousand dollars, it’s now several hundred. “I’m looking for business like I’ve never had to,” says Guide owner Brian Kramer. The bridal category is now central to Guide’s business: “lots of bridal people have stayed, and do most of their manufacturing here.”

Guide has also had to contend with a loss of space. Not long ago, Guide lost the lease on its storage spaces in the adjacent building. “We had a double basement,” says Kramer. “We lost literally two-thirds of our space. We had to consolidate and really scale down the quantities that we’ve kept in stock.” This means a smaller range available for designers, and more pressure to anticipate what will be needed. “This industry is so time-sensitive,” says Boger. “Someone will say, ‘I’ve got things on the cutting table now, where’s my goods?’ If I don’t have it, it’s not around the corner anymore. You have to have goods in stock.”

Paul Cavazza, marker and grader
Create-a-Marker

On the long, flat tables filling the center of the room are a series of large sheets of paper, each filled with intricately arranged geometric shapes that look like some grand puzzle. What’s happening here at Paul Cavazza’s factory is what allows customers to buy any piece of clothing in S, M, L, and XL and simultaneously answer a basic question of supply and demand: How much fabric does it take to make a garment?

Cavazza’s business, called Create-a-Marker, actually covers marking and grading. “Marking” is the complex physical task of extracting as many pieces as possible out of a section of fabric. Manufacturers, he notes, make fabric orders and price garments based on an estimation of how many yards of fabric it will take to produce a garment, e.g. two yards for a little black dress or a pair of trousers. “Once we get into marking,” says Cavazza, “every inch that I come down from the two yards is more profitability for the manufacturer.” On the flipside, if the manufacturer has underestimated the amount of fabric needed, costs go up, and as Cavazza notes, “they can’t go back to a store and ask, ‘Hey, can we add \$5 to that?’ ”

The other half of Cavazza's business is "grading," which is a little like cloning a garment in different sizes, turning the parent garment (say, a size 2) into a family of garments in every other size a retailer wants. The basic rules are standardized — e.g., an added inch for each size increase — but those figures disguise many complexities. One designer's size 8 is not necessarily another's (Cavazza points to a dress dummy from the early 1990s that is marked size 10 but which designers now consider a size 6). What's more, an error hardly apparent in size 6, for example, will be magnified at sizes 8, 10, or 12. And it's not merely a matter of adding raw scale; careful attention must be paid to things like pockets and repeating patterns in order to match the proportions and style of the original. "The whole thing about grading," says Cavazza, "is that if you take a look at size 8 and then 14, you're not changing the design. It just looks bigger." Which is to say, Cavazza's work is best when it is virtually imperceptible.

Cavazza, an FIT graduate, opened Create-a-Marker in 1997 as a third-generation participant in the garment industry (his grandparents, he notes, started with six sewing machines at the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II and ended up with 200). He seems to embody both the District's sense of tradition and the fashion industry's demand for new things. Cavazza admits he favors grading done the "old way," laid out on a table — "you can see the whole pattern, lay it out, and understand how it fits" — but he no longer uses the old manual Sunny Young grading machine, which the grader would use to hand-trace each size variation. While digitization is now the norm, Cavazza insists the human touch is still essential. There are many software programs offering "automatic marking," he says, but "not one system is out there that can beat a human."

While Cavazza says a rent increase at his former building on 38th Street (which now sits largely vacant, he notes) nearly forced him to close or merge the business, he happily reports his business actually grew 4% last year, even amidst the recession. While much of this owes to his client's loyalty, in a business where fit and relationships are key, Cavazza says there's another issue. "This is the only part of the business where you're going to walk in and see every type of garment, whether couture or t-shirts," he says. Whether it's a 150-piece gown for Chado Ralph Rucci or a simple lower-priced sundress, or an order for 10 units or 30,000 units, "you still need me," says Cavazza. "You still need to grade and mark."

Rodger Cohen, owner
Regal Originals

As it has just about every day for the last 30 years, the floor at Regal Originals, on 37th Street in the Garment District, clatters and hums with activity. Owner Rodger Cohen opens the door to a hulking, ancient-looking oven, and amidst a rush of hissing steam, he holds a hot parchment roll, wrapped firmly around a garment. Inside, the fabric has set in a pleat, a creased pattern that looks like the

folds of a hand-held fan. “That cooks and set the pleat,” Cohen says. “200 degrees. Some of them need five minutes, some of them need half the steam.”

Regal, the last unionized pleating shop in New York City, is where designers go for not just pleating but elastic shirring, tucking, smocking, or any number of embellishments to their designs. Moving amidst the tightly arranged machinery, Cohen stops to point to an intricate, many-fingered smocking machine—a kind of Cat’s Cradle that can embroider up to 96 different colors of thread — and laments that last July, he was forced to throw out a raft of irreplaceable machines, part of a wider downsizing that saw his floor space shrink by half. He prides himself, however, on keeping employees. Of his nearly 30 employees, he notes, “most of them are here 30 years now,” while two have been with Regal since its founding. “They have over 50 years with the company,” he says.

As a worker busily runs pieces of fabric through a pleating machine, Cohen notes that it’s part of a 30,000-piece order placed by a major department store. “What helped here is these goods are being printed in America, so it didn’t pay for them to send it out to China to make,” he says. Cohen offered the client a full “package” — he’d assemble the garment as well as do the pleating, which meant subcontracting out to a trusted colleague. Such large-runs were commonplace in the 1980s, when Regal had 200 employees and there were enough fellow pleaters to populate a trade association. “We’d almost put our noses up when someone had a 100-piece order” says Cohen. “Now I’d take a five-piece order ...I don’t turn down anything.”

There’s a lesson here, says Cohen, for companies who instinctively send things abroad to be made. “I’ve found that if a customer really looks into it, for a garment that doesn’t have a lot of trimming, is not so labor intensive, they can afford to make it here, more quickly, at the same price,” he says. “They don’t know that, or they’ve already lost the ability to produce the garment in house.” What keeps Regal afloat, apart from the occasional large run, is their ability to work with the pool of nearby designers on samples and smaller production runs, producing complex pleating patterns — he unrolls a “pineapple pleat” that took two weeks and several thousand dollars to produce, he says — and creating new patterns for designers. Take his “cross pleat,” for example, a sort of waffle pattern of cross-hatched pleats that was created when a worker ran a piece of already-pleated fabric through the machine. “Accidentally,” he adds. “That’s sometimes how it works.”

In other cases, creating new products is more deliberate. As with many small business owners, the recession has forced Coehn to develop new ventures. Later this year, he plans to launch “Scrub NYC,” a new line of medical scrubs onto which personalized graphics can be printed. Unhappy with the first printer he hired, he set about to find a new one. A few Google searches later, he called the person he eventually hired. “I explained what I was doing and I said, ‘I hope you’re conveniently located,’ ” he says. The address she gave was his own. “I

said, ‘You’re kidding. I’m on the third floor.’ She’s been in the building seven years. But I never take the elevator.”

Simon Collins, dean of fashion
Parsons The New School of Design

“We counsel our designers when they graduate to not start their own businesses,” says Simon Collins, dean of fashion at Parsons The New School. “And invariably they do.” Collins’ students might be forgiven their entrepreneurial streak, given that the school boasts alumni—including Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, Michael Kors, Anna Sui, and Jason Wu — who comprise the firmament of the city’s top designers, what Collins jokingly calls the “fashion mafia.”

Collins, who came to Parsons after several decades in the industry — including stints at Fila’s studio in New York City and creative director for Nike’s Asian operations — says that Parsons’ 40th Street location, embedded in the heart of the Garment District, wields a huge influence on students. “One young woman who left last year — I see her every day, her office is literally right next to the school,” he says. “It’s very familiar territory for them. They spend four years ferrying around the Garment District looking for cheap fabric and buttons, so it makes total sense for them to remain here when they start their own business or work for one of the big brands.”

Students have been coming to Parsons to study fashion since 1904, and while Collins is proud of the school’s storied reputation, he has already begun expanding its brief. Parsons is adding a professor of sustainability and a Master’s degree in fashion and society (ranging from ethnography to social implications). “We already train them to excel at design,” says Collins. “Now we want them to think about the context of what they’re designing.”

Certain themes, however, are an enduring part of the Parsons experiment. “We train artisans,” says Collins. “We teach them every aspect of physically making a garment. We know they’ll probably never sew another seam in their lives, but we believe a designer is really going to struggle if they don’t know how to physically make a garment.” Just as important, Collins says, are the relationships students and recent graduates build in the Garment District, citing the example of the young partners at Proenza Schouler. “The day they left their internships with Marc Jacobs and Michael Kors they got their first order from Barneys,” says Collins. “So the first thing they did was go to the same factories they’d been visiting on behalf of Michael and Marc. It was a very easy transition.”

Lastly, there is the city itself: inspiration, muse, nexus. “We like to say that New York City is an essential part of the Parsons experience,” says Collins. “Even Wal-Mart realized they had to set up a New York design studio — it wasn’t an easy pill for some to swallow.” Fashion came to New York, he says, because

people who wanted to be in fashion couldn't imagine being anywhere else. "There's a lot of reasons why it's difficult to make it here," says Collins. "And yet people do."

Stuart Edelman, wholesaler
Level 8 Apparel

"I'm sure you're not aware of this fact," says Stuart Edelman in a conference room lined with racks of sleek black jackets his company, Level 8 Apparel, has produced. "You go into Macy's, or any other department store. You buy something. You're headed to the checkout, and they say 'oh, by the way, if you open a Macy's charge today you can save 15% off.' That gets charged back to the vendor. They don't pay for that, we pay for that."

By design and by tradition, the fashion industry lacks a certain transparency. Certain relationships are kept discrete, supply chains and processes can be far-flung, the full contours of the business are rarely revealed. Shoppers in minimalist boutiques trolling through spare racks of high-end garments are not likely to ponder the unglamorous workrooms from which they have come. Nor are they likely to pay much mind to a large, but rather occluded, segment of the industry: wholesalers and licensees, like Edelman, who produce garments in virtual anonymity for prestige brands. The brand name on the outerwear Edelman produces is actually better known for its high-end luggage. "A consumer thinks Kenneth Cole makes all the things that Kenneth Cole sells," says Edelman, but the reality is there's probably 30 companies that produce specific products under that umbrella."

A long-time outerwear veteran, Edelman has seen the business shift dramatically. In the 1970s, he worked for Cooper Sportswear, which produced coats in New Jersey for companies like J.C. Penney. ("There was a basic style, year-round," he says. "Now people want to buy in-season, trend-right.") In the early 1980s, he started his own company, a coat manufacturer that outsourced production to South Korea. "When we first started," he says, "if you could imagine a world without fax machines, without Fed Ex--if we made a sketch for Korea, it would take three to four weeks for the package to get there." There were endless rounds of visits to oversee the production, then downtime as samples were made. "My first year of business, I spent eight months overseas." He eventually shifted from producing coats for his own brand to paying the licensing fee to make coats for the big outerwear brands that emerged in the 1990s.

The production process has changed dramatically since Edelman's early forays into Asia, with e-mail "tech-packs" (the technical specifications needed to produce garments) and two-day express delivery. "We actually get it the next day," says Edelman, "because of the time difference." But as Michael Hong, Level 8's design director, points out, the logic of overseas production – the complex equation of speed, quality, and cost – differs for every designer. Men's

outerwear, for instance, is different from women's couture, with its intensive emphasis on fit and draping. "Men are pretty much figured out. You've got a set sloper, you just add pockets. And outerwear is even further removed from, say, a fitted shirt or pants."

Hong says he would love to manufacture the company's jackets and coats in the Garment District. "But it's more time-consuming here," he says. You've already established a machine and a rhythm [overseas] — I've visited Korea enough to tell them what I need," he says. In addition, big factories producing large quantities of garments usually don't charge the designer for the cost of developing the prototype or "sample."

While overseas production makes economic sense for Edelman, he needs to maintain his showroom and design office in the Garment District to attract people. "This is where the customers are, the buyers, this is where they all come," says Edelman. "In January, my calendar is filled from eight in the morning until seven at night." That's not all, says Hong. "I can't hire designers in Dallas. The schools are here."

For all of the changes Edelman has witnessed, he says, one thing has remained constant in the outerwear business: the importance of weather. "To have a good season, we need cool September mornings and evenings. Not cold, cool," says Edelman. "It just triggers a thought process in people's brains that it's time to get a coat."

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, Frasci 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, Frasci 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 Frasci’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.”

Ramdat Harihar, president
R&C Apparel

Against one wall in Ramdat Harihar’s bustling, just around the corner from the glittering 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 another 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."

Markus Kirwald, Product Development Manager
Stoll Fashion and Technology Center

The late-night walker in the Garment District, taking in the after-hours stillness of shuttered storefronts and dormant lobbies, might be surprised to come upon the large storefront windows at 250 W. 39th St. Hulking machines in a sterile white room, bathed in fluorescent light, churn away on some inscrutable task. Some kind of printing process? Semi-conductor fabrication? A Con Ed monitoring room?

Only a hint of knitted fabric—perhaps a flash of argyle—emerging from a small aperture reveals that the visitor has paused in front of the Stoll Fashion and Technology Center, a recently opened initiative from a German manufacturer of knitting machines. "It was always the idea that people would walk by and see the

machines,” says Markus Kirwald, the Product Development Manager. “In the beginning, we had mannequins on display — people thought we sold garments.”

What Stoll has created, in the heart of the Garment District, is a kind of one-stop shop for high-tech knitwear — not to mention the elemental stitches — that is part showroom, part boutique production facility, part technical institute. Faced with a constricting customer base in the New York area for the actual sale of its machines, Stoll was looking for a way to build its brand, increase business for its customers (there are more than 100 Stoll machines in the New York area), and educate designers and others as to what its automated machines could do. The company sensed an opportunity in sampling. “We heard that everybody is doing sampling overseas, and it takes a long time until they get their sample,” says Kirwald. “Often, and we hear it over and over, they don’t really get what they asked for.”

And so with Stoll’s “fast-track sampling,” the turnaround time for designers has shifted dramatically. “We have had cases where a designer has walked in in the morning with a sketch,” says Kirwald, “and the next morning they have the garment. Previously, it would have been weeks, maybe months.” The customer base ranges from students working on projects to well-known designers completing collections, and business has increased significantly, says Kirwald, “simply through word of mouth” and the machines in the window. But it’s not just about sampling. Stoll has collected its archive of knitwear, creating a kind of museum of stitches; it also offers classes in knitting, using more traditional knitting machines. While the older devices may seem quaintly archaic next to the humming “knit-to-wear” machines, which can take a piece of computer code and churn out a complete seamless garment, Stoll’s Beth Hofer says “you must learn basic stitch construction before you can even think of going to the electronics.”

While Stoll’s primary base of operations is on Long Island, from the beginning, Kirwald says, there was no doubt where Stoll’s new facility would be located. “We knew right away that if we were to do this out on Long Island we couldn’t be as successful — designers don’t want to get on a train for an hour or a taxi before they’re finally on our facility. Here, they can just walk down the street, and we’re just here.”

Nanette Lepore, designer
Nanette Lepore

New York City’s Garment District has no more passionate defender than designer Nanette Lepore. She has traveled to Washington, D.C. to discuss the creation of a Congressional “Fashion Caucus,” given countless speeches, and championed the importance of the District’s manufacturing hub on the editorial pages of *The New York Times*. Ironically, this activist streak has come at a stage in Lepore’s career when, like many of her fellow name designers with boutiques and celebrity

clients, she could leave the District behind. “I could go to China and manufacture and I’d be OK,” she says at her offices on 35th Street.

Indeed, overseas production would provide more flexibility on costs. But there are more compelling reasons why Lepore does not want to do this. One is her memory of her own start in the business — and, by extension, her support for young designers working today. “I couldn’t have started my business if it wasn’t for the New York City Garment District,” she says. Hers was a fairly typical career track in New York’s fashion industry: she graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology, worked with Garment District veterans such as dressmaker Soo Young Lee, and then in 1991 opened her own clothing store in the East Village (cheek-by-jowl with a soup kitchen). “If you have a lot of money, you can start off with a big showroom, you can start off selling to department stores and have big orders,” says Lepore. “If you start out like I did, out of my apartment, I could sell 20 of something. I would go see the buyer at Barneys every month and show her a new dress, and she’d order 50. And I could take it to a factory around the corner.”

The owners of these factories helped Lepore learn the fashion business, gave her emotional support (“I was crying every week”), and provided what she calls “a stepping stone to get bigger.” Today Lepore helms a \$140 million global business, which ranges from her contemporary collection to swimwear licenses and a casual knitwear line (to name a few). But she still does the vast majority of her production within five blocks of her Garment District studio, and not for sentimental reasons. “I’m able to cut and sew something and get it back in — if something’s selling well, I can have it back in the store in two to three weeks,” says Lepore, who has nearly a dozen boutiques. “I don’t have that opportunity working overseas.” This ability to respond quickly to the changing market also helps keep supply chains tighter. “If I end up with too much inventory, it’s always the overseas merchandise that’s over-ordered — you’re guessing too far out in advance.”

And while the culture tends to promote the solitary figure of the designer — glamorous icon, creative genius — Lepore says “there’s a naiveté to believing that a designer can do it alone.” She calls the Garment District a “great lab of ideas,” noting “I’m able to race it over to the guy who does the special pleating or tucking and say can you help me figure this out?” Proximity breeds creativity, she insists. “You have a chance to step in, enhance the design, take it a step further, perfect the design —which is what I think the whole design process is about.”

Anthony Lilore, designer
Restore Clothing

The name “Restore,” recalls Anthony Lilore, sitting rather improbably next to a stuffed moose head in his studio on West 38th street, came about in a “quirky, alphabet soup kind of way.” He and his partner (life and business) Celeste Lilore were talking about the attributes of their new clothing line — casual but elegant active apparel that bridges the gap, as they put it, between “work and the work-out” — and as the words were shuffled on a page, an ethos-within-an-acronym was born: Responsible, Earth Friendly, Sustainable, Technological, Organic, Recycled and Ergonomic. “It forces us to stay true to the acronym,” says Lilore, a fashion industry veteran who has worked for companies ranging from Bill Blass to Club Monaco. “From a creative standpoint, there’s always some kind of spark when there’s a limitation. You have to find the freedom in that.”

From its small Garment District perch, Restore is trying to re-envision the entire life-cycle of clothing, from sourcing raw materials to production to care and cleaning. “The process for us starts with the fibers,” says Anthony Lilore. Restore, he says, was the first company to use the 100% post-consumer “Repreve,” a polyester yarn made from soft-drink bottles whose production consumes much less gasoline per pound of fabric than conventional materials. Everything from zippers to soy-ink hang tags are sourced according to the same standards.

But it’s not only about having a sustainable material to tout on a label. For Restore, sustainability must be embodied in the production process as well, which is one reason they choose to manufacture locally — not only to consume fewer “clothing miles,” but to have greater control and oversight over the process. “It’s more rewarding because you can find an authentic supply chain — a value chain,” says Celeste Lilore. “You look for integrity in the suppliers you work with. You know who owns the factory where you are sewing. Some of the workers you know by name.” She and her husband can see if a factory turns out high-quality needlework, but also if it has been recently audited. “We can’t necessarily do that on our own but if a larger company has done so and the reports come back clean, that’s a green light for us,” she says. “We always like it when Eileen Fisher does the audit. If Eileen’s sewing here, that’s a good sign.”

Like many emerging design companies, Restore says it benefits from the proximity of its suppliers and manufacturers. “Queens may be a subway ride away, but it still takes a chunk out of the day,” says Anthony Lilore. And even on a pure cost basis, he says, overseas production is not necessarily a no-brainer. “By the time you take into account the freight back and forth, the DHL and the Fed Ex, as you amortize some of that over some of the runs that we do, the price is actually pretty similar — provided there isn’t an incredible amount of needle work, and we’re not talking about making a safari jacket with 27 pockets and 87 buttons.”

In the end, changing how clothes are made means asking consumers to think differently about the way they buy clothes. “Are you better off spending \$80 on a eight \$10 t-shirts that have no accountability, or two \$40 t-shirts, or even one \$80 t-shirt that’s going to last for more than one season, which might be worn differently, washed differently?” he ask. “We try to ask that kind of participation from consumers.”

Françoise Olivas, designer
Françoise Olivas

The Brooklyn-based designer Françoise Olivas has a global outlook: she has forged fair-trade relationships with women from Guatemala to Sri Lanka to create hand embroidery for her dresses, she works with mills in Japan to source organic textiles, and a friend from Ghana dyes fabrics for her. Olivas herself works from her apartment in Greenpoint. But the place where it all comes together is New York City’s Garment District, where she relies on a carefully constructed network of pattern-makers and manufacturers to bring her designs quickly to fruition. “In a larger company you have all those people [in-house],” she says, “but as an emerging designer, you’re kind of picking the pieces and the players and putting together the puzzle that will eventually become your company.”

Olivas, who originally worked in advertising, began her life in fashion comparatively late — and thus with particular urgency — with a one-year intensive program at the Fashion Institute of Technology, followed by internships at Kate Spade and Nanette Lepore. “At Nanette we were dying fabrics, running around to all the trim stores,” she says. “I was immersed in this world that I completely fell in love with.” After a few years, she began to envision launching her own line, and the proximity and availability of suppliers and sewers made it possible to do this in her spare time. “What’s so amazing about the garment center is that my factories open at 7:30, so I was able to be there at 7:30, get an hour and a half of work done, be at Nanette at 9:30,” she says. “If I needed, I could run out at lunch or jump back out to the factories at the end of day.” There were 18-hour days, she says, and “there were definitely tears.”

As she put together her first collection, the Garment District proved to be an invaluable resource. Manufacturers like Ramdat Harihar were an invaluable source of expertise — and support. “I kind of call him my godfather,” she says. “I learned a lot from him too — almost a generational thing that gets passed down.” In January 2009, the Garment Industry District Corporation, a nonprofit manufacturers’ association, selected Olivas to display her samples in a showroom on 40th Street, giving her the kind of exposure to buyers that she couldn’t have attracted from her Brooklyn apartment.

Working in New York, and working with organic fabrics and fair-trade practices, does pose challenges too, particularly with retailers and consumers who have grown accustomed to rock-bottom-priced clothes produced in ever more peripheral edges of the global economy. “I’m organic, and I’m made in the U.S.,” she says. “My price point is not going to be \$19.99.” But she passionately believes that just as many people have learned to think carefully about their food – where did it come from, how was it made – they should be asking the same questions about their clothes.

But in the end, she says, it’s being in the Garment District that inspires her work, and makes it possible. “I’ll be running from showroom to factory and see someone wearing a sweater – what if I did something like that? It’s a little heartbeat of fashion.” Often the final successful iteration only comes in working closely with the manufacturer. “You can’t plan for something not working, that’s part of what I love about fashion,” she says. “Sometimes you make a mistake and it’s better.”

Rohan Rambaran, owner
Andy’s Dress Forms

The dress form is a fixture of any pattern-making shop or designer’s atelier, standing in mute, headless repose in the corner, stuck with pins and bearing the stenciled legend “collapsible shoulders.” Whether custom built to a model’s specifications, or augmented with padding to replicate a certain shape, the dress form does yeoman service; it is never sick, never late for an appointment, and it offers no complaint for standing for hours on end as a designer looks for that elusively perfect fit. It is a simple, yet elemental piece of equipment; in essence it is the drafting board upon which fashion comes into being.

It is not uncommon to find well-used forms bearing an address in the Garment District or the Flatiron District, but in actuality the form manufacturers have left New York City, with one exception: Andy’s Forms. Located in the back of a cluttered sewing machine repair shop on West 36th Street, Andy’s is a recent startup founded by Rohan Rambaran, a Guyanese immigrant who got his first job with a dress form manufacturer (Superior Model Form Co.) in 1979 and has been assembling them ever since. A few years back, he began making them on his own, at nights or on weekends in his basement in Astoria, and as word has gotten around, his business has grown, with clients ranging from the designer Pamela Roland to the pattern maker Werkstett to J. Crew to any number of students from schools ranging from Pratt to Purdue. He currently makes about 15 forms a week, but hopes to expand his space and number of employees.

Form making is an intuitive process that Rambaran compares to sculpture. A plaster of Paris mold is shaped, then wrapped in paper maché, which takes a week to dry; the form is then outfitted with padding, with a final layer of Irish

linen, used for its strength. As simple as it may seem, the discrete virtues of a well-made form becomes clear when Rambaran points to a dress form in a corner that was made in China. “This is a size 8,” he says, then points to one of his forms. “This is my size 8. They’re totally different.” The Chinese form, made from fiberglass and stuffed with newspaper, can be bought for roughly half the cost of an Andy’s Form. But its proportions seem almost comically askance. In a fitting irony, the form that Rambaran is putting the finishing touches on is bound for China, for use in a production facility.

Andrew Rosen, president
Theory

As an inveterate horseman, Andrew Rosen knows the power of bloodlines — and in his, fashion runs deep. His grandfather Arthur, a dressmaker, launched Puritan Manufacturing Co. in Boston nearly a century ago. “I remember as a young boy running around the factories and the warehouses, playing in between all the clothes,” he says. His father, Carl Rosen, took over the company, moving it to New York and straight into the modern world of fashion: he launched seminal licensing arrangements with celebrities ranging from Gloria Swanson to the Beatles, and eventually became the licensee for such designers as Calvin Klein and Diane von Furstenberg.

After taking over the company from his father in 1983, Rosen served as CEO for more than a decade, followed by a turn as CEO of Anne Klein. In 1997, he launched his own company, Theory. “I wanted to mix the luxury of designer sportswear with the urgency of the jeans business,” he says, from a corner office overlooking Gansevoort Street in New York City’s Meatpacking District. Now a \$500 million a year business headquartered in a five-story building (with a sample shop across the street), Theory has shifted the majority of its production overseas, but still makes 30% of its line in Midtown, where Rosen prizes the quick turnaround and closer control over the production process. “I believe strongly that it’s one thing to design great clothes,” he says, “it’s another to make sure the fabric and fit and quality is also perfect.”

For Rosen, proximity is also an essential component of creativity. “Designing clothes is an art and a science,” he says. “I think it’s very important to be able to create clothes and see them very quickly. I think it’s very important for anyone creative, design wise, to be very interactive with the pattern-making process, sample making, and ultimately with the manufacturing process. And I think without having those skills present in New York City, it would be very difficult to create clothes that have a sense of excitement, integrity and design.”

While Theory is large enough that it can manage overseas production, Rosen notes that, not too long ago, he was a startup. “I never could have grown my business to the extent that it grew without the speed of being able to produce

things in New York City,” he says. “When I started my business, I spent as much time in the factory as in the studio, making sure the clothes were executed in the way I wanted.” Younger designers at Rag and Bone or Alice + Olivia, two companies he has partnered with, still depend on the District’s manufacturers for their know-how and willingness to work quickly in smaller quantities. “If young designers are going to work in New York, they need the assistance of the technical aspects of the business — the pattern making capability, the actual manufacturing.”

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’ve 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 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.”

Danielle Shriber, designer
Prairie New York

Shortly after September 11, 2001, Danielle Shriber, then an emerging designer focused on accessories, had a conversation with a jewelry maker she worked with in the onetime manufacturing powerhouse of Providence, Rhode Island. “He made all the flag pins for the U.S. government,” she says. “After 9/11 he assumed he’d have this huge order — but our government sent the order to China. They wanted it quicker and cheaper.” There was just one problem: the pins came back with the red and white stripes reversed.

Shriber, now at the helm of *Prairie*, a mid-priced women’s line, is something of a rarity in the fashion industry today: she designs, shows, and manufactures her clothing all under one roof in New York’s Garment District. “From a quality perspective I feel like I can get myself where I want to go doing it here,” she says. “And to be honest, the prices aren’t that much cheaper [overseas]. By the time you pay your customs duties, air freight, you’re pretty much at the same dollar amount.”

Like many young designers, Shriber initially worked with factories in the Garment District, but as her volumes began to grow, the appeal of moving it in-house became clear. “If you’re doing domestic production, or even overseas, you are one person trying to have your garments made along with 20 other people,”

she says. “Sometimes it’s where in the hierarchy you are, how many garments you have, who yells the loudest. To have it under my own domain made a huge difference.”

This also required a larger space, and when her lease on her previous space ran out, she began looking as far afield as Brooklyn, where tax incentives and space were plentiful. One thing was clear, however: her showroom would remain in the Garment District. “There’s not a buyer who will go anywhere else,” she says. She views the district not merely as a physical space or a collection of buildings, but as an integral landmark on the mental maps of buyers. “It’s a territory within a very large city that becomes a very comfortable place to do business.”

In the end, the citywide downturn in the real estate market enabled her to find a Garment District space big enough to house all of her operations. Now, one of her largest constraints is often finding people to do skilled work. A while back she envisioned trying to design a new version of the wool jacket skirts by the designer Adolfo (whose famous clientele included Nancy Reagan), to “really try to rework that for a younger person.” But she couldn’t find the yarn, or the people to do it. “What he had were women in the Garment District, mostly of Slavic background, doing it on hand-knitting machines,” she says. “They don’t exist anymore.” Sometimes these constraints literally inform her design. Pointing to an embroidered blouse, she notes that where some designs might have hundred of stones, “I only have these eight large stones...there’s no one here that could sew on 200 stones.”

And yet she believes the Garment District still offers the raw materials that designers need. “I have friends who opened up in Los Angeles, and they can’t find a place to buy zippers in any more than three colors. And there’s a big garment district out there.”

Tony Singh, owner
Four Seasons Fashion

There are many reasons why Tony Singh would like to keep his factory at its current location on 39th Street. The last time he moved, more than a decade ago, it cost him roughly \$75,000 — not including real estate fees. “Hiring the mover, setting up the factory — plumbing, electrical, boilers. I don’t think the city’s granting the permit anymore to do that boiling,” he says, gesturing to the huge steam pressers in a corner of the factory floor, which hiss away on a cold January day as workers prepare spring collections for shipment to stores by mid-March.

For another, even in the face of steadily rising rents in the Garment District, he believes his business would not be viable in a place like Long Island City, Queens. “There’s always things happening while we’re processing the garments,” he says. “The designer tells me ‘This is not working, what we can we do to change it.’ We

go back and forth five or six times with a pattern. If we went out of the Garment District, it could take us a whole day to resolve one problem.”

Singh, who came to the U.S. from Guyana in 1982, started as a “floor person” at a Garment District factory. By “watching and learning,” he began to develop an understanding of garment production. After a decade working in the factory (where his English language skills proved invaluable to the owner), he struck out on his own, backed by a loan from family members. Business was good, he says —with occasional blips, such as after September 11, 2001 — but he has struggled in the face of the recession. “Our business last year was down 60%,” he says. While he currently produces 3 to 4,000 garments per season, he says he could easily handle twice that. He closed a cutting room he ran on another floor in the building (donating the machines to New York City’s High School for Fashion Industries, which, as it happens, his daughter attends), and has struggled to retain workers, already a challenge given the cyclical inconsistency of the fashion industry. “In our shop we train workers to multi-task,” he says. “When there’s not enough work, we lose those operators. Then they’ll find another job. We get busy, we call them back, but they’re already working somewhere else.”

This inconsistency extends beyond the labor force (currently 50 strong). Take cash flow, for instance. “Collection is one of the biggest things we have to manage,” Singh says. “Younger designers don’t have the capital of the bigger guys. They might work two seasons with me, but the next season they might go to another shop. It takes me another year to get paid.” While he likes encouraging younger designers, he is thankful the core of his business comes from established labels. “Working with the bigger ones you get paid.”

Shelly Steffee, designer
Shelly Steffee

Shelly Steffee’s storefront boutique on Gansevoort Street, one of the prime addresses of the Meatpacking District, is all at once a physical manifestation of her aesthetic, a place to sell her clothing, and a living catalog of her various enthusiasms (one can buy a exquisitely structured reversible jacket, or, say, the Taschen edition of *The Stanley Kubrick Archives*).

But it is also a laboratory of sorts, an environment in which she can prototype new designs and gauge customer interest firsthand. A black fur collar, for example, began life in her studio as an idea three years ago. “Usually when you work with leather or fur you outsource that to people who specialize in that, with the right equipment, the right needles,” she says. “This was something more organic. The design team and I cut it on the mannequin, we wanted to see what we could do with it. We just put it right in the store, to see, first, do people like it — and second, is it something that we can produce?”

Having her own store, as well as her own pattern-maker and sewers in the same building a few floors above, enables Steffee to test — and act on— new ideas quickly. Not being tied to the long lead times and large production runs of overseas manufacturing also gives her the flexibility and speed to create spontaneous “accessory garments” or a custom style for a regular VIP client. “Someone wants a garment I already have, but in a different color, or they want the garment before I’m actually delivering [to stores]— that’s why I need fast turnaround.” What she can’t do in-house, she outsources to the Garment District, where she can turn concept into reality in a matter of a week, “if it’s not during Fashion Week or in the middle of a production season.”

Steffee, a Pennsylvania native, worked for a variety of companies, ranging from Liz Claiborne to Brooks Brothers, before launching her line in 2001. “I started with one design assistant,” she says. “I did it all out of my apartment, and I was going back and forth to the Garment District, relying on pattern-makers there.” Her boutique was one of a handful of businesses in the Meatpacking District. “Most people thought I was crazy,” she says. “There’s no traffic here. How can you open a retail store with no foot traffic?” Before she became established enough to lure buyers downtown, she rented showroom space in the Garment District during market weeks. Buyers now come to her, but she still finds herself in the district, sourcing fabrics or looking for trims or hang-tags. “I’m there all the time even though I’ve left it, physically.”

The biggest difference between being a designer at a corporation like Liz Claiborne and running her own line, says Steffee, is losing the in-house support. “The bigger firms are more segregated as to who does what,” she says. “As you get smaller, as a designer you get more involved in the whole production process.” She views her manufacturers as virtual partners. “Especially because you don’t have a large production team, and someone sitting right on top of the process, you need to count on them,” she says. “You want them to speak the same language.” Going it alone, in other words, means relying on other people. “It takes a lot of people to get something made, even if it’s twelve garments,” she says. “There are so many people that touch the garment.”

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 bounceability 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.”

Shana Tabor, owner, and Brooke Backman, team leader
In God We Trust

“Fashion was always something I wanted to get into,” says Shana Tabor, founder of the Brooklyn-based boutique In God We Trust, “but on my own terms.” This is not mere bravado. Since graduating from New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology in 2000, Tabor has upheld her credo: she eschews the wholesale fashion market, instead selling direct from her stores; she manufactures her garments in-house or in New York’s Garment District; and in the midst of a growth-sapping recession she has just opened her fourth store, this one in Greenpoint, Brooklyn (joining a chain-let of stores in Williamsburg, Soho, and the Lower East Side).

Like many young designers she finds New York itself to be a foundational influence. “I think that anyone would be lying if they told you that living here, working here, designing here, that street fashion isn’t a huge contribution to that,” she says, speaking from her Greenpoint storefront, where handmade jewelry jostles with New York City-produced lines like the vintage-inspired chambray ties by The Hill-Side. The street’s “collective unconscious” comes to her, even in her sleep. “There is something to be said for the fact that you see someone wearing something on the street enough times, the idea actually becomes more comfortable with you.”

Making and selling clothing locally has become an integral part of her story. “We were wholesaling to other places, but for now we’re just doing it in our stores,” says IGWT’s Brooke Backman. “We can work more immediately, have more product for our stores, so we don’t have a bunch of overstock. Because we work in the Garment District, if we do sell through on something, we can put it into production again and have it our stores in a few weeks.” Tabor also notes the presence of specialty services, like grading and marking (creating different sizes of a given garment) or people who work with leather — “people who have machinery I’m never going to be able to afford” — as well as access to a wide range of fabrics. Without the district, she says, “where would I go — Jo-Ann Fabric on Long Island”?

Although her new Greenpoint space has room for a studio, with a pattern table and sewing machines, she still frequents Midtown. “I love days when I’m in the Garment District, going up on an elevator to some place like a fabric showroom or a dye house, and the door accidentally opens on a floor, and you’re like, ‘what are you guys doing in here?’ ” she says. “It’s amazing — all of that stuff is above street levels, and you have no idea what’s going up there until the door accidentally opens. People can walk around there and see the ten scummy fabric stores, and have no idea that ten floors above are people who have jobs are making stuff.”

While she first turned to the Garment District out of necessity, she now views it through a passionately ethical lens. Of designers who shift their work overseas, she says, “I don’t know how they can feel good about themselves, to let an area that built them, that made them grow into what they are — to let that die because they can make 20 more cents making something across the world.”

Yeohlee Teng, designer
YEOHLEE

“The process of assembling a garment, making a coat or a dress, it’s kind of eternal,” says designer Yeohlee Teng in her studio on West 35th Street. “Pants have two legs — three legs doesn’t work.” For all the tradition behind the making of clothing, however, she says the general public has little awareness of this process, even in the Garment District. “The tourists that ride by on Seventh Avenue, they gawk and look around, but they don’t really understand what it is happening in all these buildings.”

Teng, who came to New York from Malaysia (“everyone was going to school in London, so I came here,” she notes), began her post-Parsons career in a studio in the Flatiron District, crafting orders with late-night urgency for Bergdorf Goodman and Henri Bendel with a friend on a cutting table. While she initially enjoyed being outside the immediate orbit of the fashion industry, she eventually migrated north to the Garment District, and has become a dedicated partisan. “Everything that I needed was up here. Not only did I spent a lot of time commuting, my staff did too, so out of necessity and desire to be more efficient, I made the decision to consolidate and come here.”

Teng’s pieces typically emphasize rational beauty, architectural precision, and clean lines — all of which requires close consultation in the production process. She recently analyzed her staff’s itineraries in a typical week and found an average of 15 trips to suppliers and other service providers — and as many as three or four trips per day during the run-up to collections. “Sometimes you show the factory a new way to put things together, like this dress, for instance,” she says, pointing to a nearby piece, with tubular, fluted ribs running down its back. “It’s technical things, sometimes, that you go over and solve, and sometimes, in problem solving, innovation happens.” This elusive moment of invention is often the product—and the reward—of all of those trips to the factories. “You could have a design you want cut in a certain way, and your fabric cutter could turn around and tell you I can get better yardage if you turn this piece around, and if you’re right there, you can say yes, and turning the piece around can give you a different look.”

And the message she wants to send to those tourists passing by, who see nothing but tall buildings with cut-rate fabric stores and cluttered workshops at street level, is: this is where the future of design happens. “The new names happen

because here, in these rectangular blocks, are the people who can help a startup,” she says. “If you were to start a business today and you don’t have a huge backer, you can sew six garments in your apartment, take it up to Bergdorf or Bendel, sell it, and come down here and find somebody that will make a pattern for you, grade it for you, cut it for you, sew it for you and you can ship 20 pieces. When you’re a startup and you don’t have capital, you can’t send it to China.”

Michelle Vale, designer
Michelle Vale

It is an oft-repeated truism that the fashion industry in New York City runs on word of mouth. Michelle Vale, as they say here, knows from word of mouth. A newcomer to fashion, she was named a best new designer by *Lucky* magazine for her line of women’s handbags before any stores actually carried her products. She was referred to her manufacturer, Kulwant Chouhan, by a local sample maker. Even her intern came through the kind of spontaneous connection New York City encourages. “I met my intern at Bloomingdale’s,” she says, speaking from the floor of Chouhan’s factory, in Long Island City, Queens. “He commented on my bag, and told me he was just finishing his degree in design.” Vale now even shepherds fellow emerging designers to Chouhan — as long as their product doesn’t directly compete. “We’re trying to work as exclusively as possible,” she says.

What launched Vale into the world of luxury women’s bags was a simple but clever (and now patented) idea. “There was something missing in the bag industry,” she says. “The niche component of my bags is that the hardware is all removable. The straps can come off, so you can change the way you carry the bag — it goes from a cross-body to a clutch in a matter of minutes.” The hardware is also easily replaceable. “A lot of people either don’t like a specific color — silver or gold — or would like to have both.”

Vale had the idea, and with the help of an “amazing sketcher” she hired by posting an ad at the Parsons School of Fashion, she had the workable blueprints. The last step was meeting Chouhan, a long-time bag manufacturer who has recently relocated to Long Island City, Queens, after more than two decades in the Garment District. “The place I used to be at was renting for \$12,000,” he says. “Here it’s half. I can’t afford to be in the city.” Vale describes Chouhan (who goes by the moniker “K.C.”) as an essential partner, able to advise on fabric choices or the “fillers” that give bags their shape. “We’re always looking for ways to make the bags production friendly,” says Vale. “You work very closely with the manufacturer to come up with different ways to do things that keeps up the beauty of the product but allows it to be more seamless.” Working locally, she has greater flexibility in manufacturing (Chouhan says he can produce a new line in 30 days). “If a department store wants something specific, it’s more likely I’ll be able to do something special for them, like a different color.”

Vale lives in Battery Park City, the bags are made in Long Island City, the leather comes from Italy, and the hardware from Providence, R.I. — but the finishing touches still come from the Garment District, where it all comes together for her. “Having all the suppliers in Midtown is imperative. To go sourcing buttons, zippers — pulling all the pieces together before it goes into the sample process — without Midtown, there would be a serious problem.”

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 button, 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 newly 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 that 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.”
