

Long Live the Industrial City

Today's successful cities are often regarded strictly as idea labs where creative types gather. But as New York City's garment district illustrates, manufacturing is vital to the innovation that cities foster.

BY TOM VANDERBILT

AGAINST A WALL IN R&C APPAREL'S CROWDED factory, in an unremarkable building on 38th Street on the far western edge of New York City's garment district, is a vast collection of sewing machines shelved with curatorial precision. The collection could be in a museum—many of the machines were built far back in the previous century, and are technically antiques.

For Ramdat Harihar, the factory's Guyana-born owner, who began his career sweeping garment factory floors, the machines are not obsolete, but tools for innovation. With a little tinkering—and an arsenal of cannibalized parts—they can be used to create entirely novel stitching effects, which find their way into the work of leading American fashion designers such as Anna Sui and Zac Posen. Sometimes, innovation demands using machines for new purposes; in one instance, a microwave oven—and a dash of vinegar—helped create a new pleat for Donna Karan.

R&C Apparel is in one sense an archetypal, almost metaphorical, New York garment district business:

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Immigrant laborers work on outdated machines in an old building in a well-worn neighborhood, doing the sort of work one imagines was long ago outsourced to cheaper locations. Indeed, most of it has been. Even as New York City was gaining in stature as a fashion capital in the latter half of the 20th century, its share of U.S. garment production underwent a full-tilt inversion, from a commanding 90 percent to less than 10 percent.

The story of this shift still haunts the district. "You couldn't walk on the sidewalk," says fabric wholesaler Bryan Kramer, recalling the jostling traffic of garment racks that once crowded the streets. Rodger Cohen, the second-generation owner of Regal Originals, keeps a tangible totem of the decline: a Pleaters, Stitchers, and Embroiderers Association wall calendar from the 1980s that lists some 400 members. "I'm the only unionized pleater left," he says. Across the street from his office, someone has hung in another office window a sign that reads "Save the Garment Center."

In the several months I spent researching the district as part of a team organized by the Design Trust for Public Space, I talked to everyone from designers to economists to one-man dress form manufacturing



Museum pieces? Hardly. Ramdat Harihar, owner of R&C Apparel in New York City's garment district, shows off one of the many old sewing machines that workers at his factory still use to produce innovative stitching effects for some of today's top fashion designers.

firms. (The team was convened in response to a proposal to alter the garment district's zoning that would have effectively killed the district off; the proposal has since been tabled.) It was not hard to imagine myself as a kind of industrial Indiana Jones, mapping the murky contours of a business hardly known for its transparency, plying dark warehouses where hulking machines sat mothballed, being handed business cards advertising long-abandoned embroidery crafts such as bonnaz, meeting workers whose average age was just south of retirement. When I asked Cohen what the learning curve was for a man who was working on complex pleating patterns—intricately geo-

metric, three-dimensional sculpture, really—he shot back, “There is no learning curve. The man spent his life doing it. There's nobody left who does it.”

But beneath the well-chronicled narrative of garment industry decline—perhaps captured most eloquently in the elegiac homage to glove making in Philip Roth's novel *American Pastoral* (1997)—I began to see another set of truths: that the garment industry is still New York City's largest manufacturing sector by employment; that the production, service, and supply businesses that remain play a vital, if underappreciated, role in the larger fashion industry of New York; and that even with the emergence of instant communications and far-

flung supply chains—not to mention the pressures exerted by landlords looking to convert industrial space into more profitable offices—there are still compelling reasons why this industrial network continues to cluster in midtown Manhattan.

It has become fashionable, in part due to the tireless work of urban studies theorist Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) and *Who's Your City?* (2008), to think of cities as big idea labs—creativity skunkworks—where, in science writer Matt Ridley's infectious phrase, "ideas have sex." Often, perhaps in reaction to decades of prophecies of urban decline, this theorizing takes on the zeal of

a crusade. You'd be forgiven for thinking no idea has ever been hatched outside a metropolis. While not incorrect, this theory is incomplete. Yes, cities are filled with the modern-day equivalent of the *luftmenschen* (literally, people who "lived on air"), creatives who breathe WiFi. But in many sectors of the "creative industry," there comes a point when something physical must be made, and when, because of financial or time constraints, it makes sense to have it produced locally. Where I live, in Brooklyn, the jewelry designer down the block may need something fabricated in metal—and *yesterday!*—and so will visit a fabrication shop in the Navy Yard; the craft beer that a table of graphic designers is consuming was brewed down the street.

I don't have in mind the Industrial City of old, with its huge buildings housing cardboard box factories, but rather, as the design critic Karrie Jacobs said in describing Brooklyn's emerging manufacturing base, one that is "pre-industrial revolution in scale and postindustrial



Back in 1955, the sidewalks of New York's garment district teemed with clothing racks and workers. Today, though overseas factories have drained away most of that business, the factories that remain are vital to the city's fashion industry.

in strategy." Having manufacturing close to the locus of creation isn't simply a matter of convenience; the process of production can inform and shape the creative process itself. So before another "industrial" loft is converted to a fantasia of Bosch appliances and Brazilian teak floors, before another productive building becomes a midrange hotel for tourists, let us take a closer look.

To understand how the garment district hangs on, it is worth considering why New York first became the nation's center of garment production—a mantle it claimed from the mid-19th century straight to the Nixon administration.

Blessed with deep ports, water (and later rail) connections to the rest of the United States, and easy access to oceans, New York City was a strategic nexus for the flow of goods, ideas, and people. As economist Edward Glaeser notes, in garment production, as with

sugar refining—historically, the city’s second most prominent industry—it made sense to center production at the point of entry for raw materials: textiles from England, silk from the East. By 1860, more than 80 percent of textiles imported into the country came through New York. This concentration of industry, with its talent and techniques, also sparked innovation; 19th-century New York gave birth to everything from ready-to-wear clothing to the Singer sewing machine. Even as New York’s role as a port declined, apparel production remained strong (owing in part, Glaeser notes, to the city’s small footprint and the continuing surge of immigrant labor).

But advances in communications and transportation—the real cost to ship goods dropped by roughly 95 percent over the 20th century—diminished New York City’s inherent geographic advantage in manufacturing. This narrative is interwoven in the personal history of any longtime “garmento,” shorthand for anyone who works in the business. Stuart Edelman, who makes outerwear for the upscale bag manufacturer Tumi, can trace an arc from working in his father’s business in the coat factories on 12th Avenue, to moving to New Jersey in the 1960s, to setting up production runs in South Korea in the 1970s. “Imagine a world of no fax machines, no FedEx,” he says. “If we made a sketch and sent it over to South Korea, it would take three or four weeks for the package to get there.” Now, an e-mailed “tech pack”—industry jargon for the specifications to assemble a garment—travels close to the speed of light, and FedEx deliveries from China arrive in two days. “We actually get it the next day, because of the time difference,” Edelman notes.

And so the question is not so much why the garment industry has shrunk and moved elsewhere, but rather why there continues to be a garment district at all. In asking this, we might as well be asking why cities continue to exist. “If we postulate only the usual economic forces,” observed economist Robert Lucas, “cities should fly apart.” Why would young designers scrape by in New York when they could materially live

better elsewhere? “People come to New York City because they want to be in fashion, and fashion came to New York because there were people who wanted

TODAY, CITIES ARE filled with creatives who breathe WiFi.

to be in fashion,” says Simon Collins, dean of fashion at the internationally regarded Parsons The New School for Design.

People come to be near other people—to draw upon their expertise, to exchange ideas, to compete. The power of proximity has long been understood: the access to specialized knowledge and labor, the lower transaction costs, the “agglomeration effects” in which like breeds like. Large American clothing retailers such as Wal-Mart and Kohl’s may produce and sell globally, but they have design studios in New York City. Firms locate in the same place to gain a sense of what the competition is up to and to hire talent, to benefit from the spontaneous interchange that can happen in streets and elevators, while groupings of showrooms provide one-stop shopping for out-of-town buyers. “There is not a buyer who will go anywhere else,” says Danielle Shriber, owner and designer of the boutique fashion house Prairie New York. “People have trouble getting buyers to go downtown. I’m on 38th between Eighth and Ninth; most showrooms are on 39th between Seventh and Eighth. They see one block as a big hurdle.”

Even in an age of e-mail and overnight deliveries, fashion has particular reasons for desiring proximity. The industry requires a wide range of suppliers, specialized services, and skilled producers. Bringing a garment from sketch to rack requires the careful coordination of an entire just-in-time chain of production, involving any number of intermediate steps (that often involve working face to face), on a ruthlessly tight schedule. “It takes a lot of people to get something made,” says designer Shelley Steffee. “Even if it’s 12 garments. There are so

many hands that touch that garment.”

“Hand” is one of the garment district’s enduring metaphors. It begins with the “hand of the designer,” of course—the sketch that animates the idea. But this design does not develop in a vacuum. “There’s a naiveté to believing that a designer can do it alone,” declares Nanette Lepore, designer of a brand that bears her name and has 11 boutique shops around the world. Clothes require skilled hands. Hands to trace the patterns, hands to cut the fabric, hands to do the draping, hands to sew, hands to embroider, hands to fashion the intricate geometry of pleat patterns, hands to do specialized work such

NEW YORK CITY’S RISE as a global fashion hub can be traced to a critical mass of manufacturers, suppliers, and artisans.

as grading and marking, hands to carry all this back and forth. The work has an elegant tactility. In one shop, a worker puts polished stones on a fabric to smooth it out before cutting. In another, a worker uses sticks as weights as he rolls up a pleat pattern on a cardboard tube that will “bake” in a hulking steam oven. In still another, a seamstress deftly manipulates a complicated smocking machine, like a conductor working in colored thread rather than music.

The closer these hands are, the shorter the transit time, and the greater the control the designer can exercise over the final product. Fashion is an intensely iterative process in which time becomes an obstacle. “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,” says Tina Schenk, owner of the pattern-making company Werkstett. “One design is based on another. You want to keep the process going, you want to continuously look at the things that you’ve been designing.” Andrew Rosen, a third-generation garmenter who founded Theory, a fashion company that now grosses half a billion dollars a year, remarks, “Just from an efficiency point of view, I can make clothes faster here. Which is not to say we haven’t

shortened the lead times in China—we have. But there’s a lot more logistics that need to happen from 12,000 miles away than from 12 blocks away.” As Edward Glaeser notes in his new book *The Triumph of the City*, one thing cities do well is eliminate the “curse of complex communication.”

And as any *Project Runway* viewer knows from those trips to Mood Designer Fabrics, the massive garment district emporium where the reality TV show’s contestants scout for chiffon and charmeuse, it’s important to have the raw materials of fashion within easy reach. Fabric needs to be touched. “It’s not a flat medium you’re working in,” says veteran designer Anna Sui. “When you gather a piece of fabric, sometimes because of the thickness of it or the loftiness or the bounceability of it, you never know how it’s going to react.”

Proximity comes at a price, of course, one that large-scale manufacturers—or the consumers who buy their products—typically do not seem willing to pay. But judging from what’s said by midrange designers who work in the garment district, selling clothes not for several thousand dollars but several hundred, the assertion that it’s too expensive to make things in New York City isn’t so iron clad. Prairie New York proprietor Shriber says that while quality is her main reason for working locally, overseas production prices aren’t much cheaper. “By the time you pay your customs duties, air freight, you’re pretty much at the same dollar amount.” As evidenced by the recent trend toward “onshoring,” in which companies including Caterpillar and General Electric have said they will recall some of the manufacturing they have done in China to the United States, a whole host of issues—rising transportation and production costs, a weak dollar, quality control irregularities, intellectual property troubles—lay along the inexorable drift toward the low-wage periphery.

All of this is not to propose that New York City is poised to regain its stature as an apparel manufacturing giant, or even that it should. But as the critical mass of manufacturers, suppliers, artisans, and technicians that remains is increasingly threatened by redevelopment



Designers such as Nanette Lapore (left) don't come up with their fashions in a vacuum. Here, she consults with a worker at a garment district factory.

and rising rents, it seems evident that the potential impacts range beyond the loss of jobs or the loss of skills. What's at stake is that layer of infrastructure, little seen but elemental, that has helped enable New York's rise as a global fashion hub.

The reason a city like New York still thrives, even after losing most of its industrial base, argues Richard Florida, is that economic success “no longer revolves around simply making and moving things.” Instead, he writes, “it depends on generating and transporting ideas.” Just as neuroscientists speculate that higher intelligence correlates with the number of network connections between neurons in the brain and the speed with which they communicate, the cities that function best are those with the “highest velocity” of ideas, and the most efficient and robust links between people. In fashion, ideas not only need materials and manufacturing processes to take shape, but arise from the interplay of designers and manufacturers itself. The closer the connections, the faster and more productive that interplay is.

Of course, as Elizabeth Currid, an urban planning scholar at the University of Southern California, points out in *The Warhol Economy* (2007), these sorts of creative exchanges are not purely economic in nature. “Agglomeration may be even more important to maintaining the social mechanisms by which the cultural economy sustains itself,” she writes. The key to understanding urban economics in the future, some argue, is in so-called nonmarket interactions—for example, an essential ingredient of success in the fashion industry is being around other people in the fashion industry, both at work and at play. New York City has become what sociologist Saskia Sassen calls a “post-industrial production site.” It is a place built for the spread of ideas. What the successful 21st-century city now produces is innovation itself.

Few cultural enterprises are as driven by innovation as fashion. “The first thing a customer asks when they come into a store is, ‘What’s new?’” says Ron Frasch, president and chief merchandising officer of

the upscale department store chain Saks. “They don’t want to know what was, they want to know what is.” As a cultural product, fashion has a perilously short shelf life. “We will sell 60 percent of what we’re going to sell in the first four weeks the goods are on the

to a creative industry of immense importance to New York City. And while cheap transport and labor means manufacturing can be done anywhere, service sectors such as law and public relations—and, I would suggest, fashion—still tend to cluster, notes economist Jed Kolko, “because most services involve at least some face-to-face interaction.”

CITIES DRIVE CREATIVITY because they bring together three vital ingredients: mutation, error, and serendipity.

The service suppliers of the garment district act as an informal incubator. That word may conjure gleaming Silicon Valley office parks more than it

floor,” Frasch says. “That fact hasn’t changed in my entire career.”

But what makes innovation happen, in terms of both inspiration and execution? Inspiration speaks to the intrinsic qualities of New York City: a willingness to accept new people and ideas, proximity to others drawn by these self-selecting qualities, and the fast transmission of ideas. The world’s great fashion capitals—Paris, Milan, London, now Shanghai—also happen to rank among the world’s leading financial capitals. Like fashion, finance is dependent upon the fast transmission of information. (Even as face-to-face trading has declined on Wall Street, firms are co-locating the data centers of their automated trading operations in New Jersey because even on the Internet physical proximity equals speed.) That those four cities also happen to be their countries’ media capitals illustrates people’s desire to be close to that information, to report and transmit it. And so the city itself, ever novel, ever regenerating, looms as an inspiration.

does old buildings with dodgy elevators, but the end result is the same: Ideas and infrastructure get provided to start-ups. While the rise of New York City fashion is indelibly linked to names such as Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger, whose brands now do most of their manufacturing overseas, their businesses didn’t begin abroad. Most young and emerging designers start their careers working out of apartments, using money borrowed from family and friends, working in quantities that are well below an order that any overseas factory would accept, and often under sharp time constraints.

The garment district firms do more than simply supply needed services; their role extends to everything from knowledge transfer to financing to simple moral support. Hence the value of specialized tradesmen such as Paul Cavazza, who runs Create-a-Marker, a grading and marking service. (In the garment trade, grading is the creation of patterns for each size of an item of clothing, while marking is the art and science of cutting patterns to minimize fabric wastage.) “I had a young designer walk in here last night,” Cavazza told me. “He’s just starting his line. He came in here at six. I was here with him until 8:30, walking him through grading and marking.”

Which brings us back to Ramdat Harihar and his sewing machines. Some might regard him as a vestige of a marginal industry. But Harihar—and all of the other manufacturers, specialized tradespeople, suppliers, and other workers who constitute the district—can also be seen not simply as cogs in the production business, but as suppliers of a vital set of value-added services

The garment district doesn’t merely provide a seedbed for the young designers who drive fashion; the iterative process conducted in proximity helps innovation itself happen. Quick turnarounds give designers test labs of a sort, with the final product often shaped by the manufacturers themselves.

“When you’re working on a higher-end collection,” says designer Shelley Steffee, sewers and pattern makers “are almost like designers themselves.” They help solve design problems, figure out ways to reduce costs in ramping up to larger-scale production, and even introduce new techniques. Another designer, Yeohlee Teng, says, “You could have a design you want cut in a certain way, and your designer could turn around and tell you, ‘I can get better yardage if you turn this piece around.’” In her fall collection last year, Teng used a sort of double-pleated “checkerboard” technique in a dress. This pleat came from Regal Originals, Rodger Cohen’s shop, just down the block. As Cohen told me, one of his workers accidentally fed an already-pleated piece of fabric into a machine, creating a striking effect. This mistake, made on a cluttered, ancient factory floor, has been transformed into valuable inputs in the image economy of global fashion.

Mutation, error, serendipity: These are the ingredients that drive creativity, argues the popular-science writer Steven Johnson in *Where Good Ideas Come From* (2010)—and nowhere more so than in cities, where ideas, drawn from various subcultures crowded together, leak into a “liquid network” and “influence their neighbors in surprising ways.” Shana Tabor, a young designer who heads the Brooklyn-based In God We Trust accessories boutique, says, “I love days when I’m in the garment district, going up on an elevator to some place, and the door accidentally opens on a floor—and you’re like, ‘What are you guys doing in here?’” With each level come new possibilities.

The cluttered floor of Regal Originals, filled with machines whose own manufacturers have long gone out of business, is a kind of proof to the late urban critic Jane Jacobs’s famous dictum, “New ideas need old buildings.” It was the garment industry of New York City that provided Jacobs, in her classic text *The Economy of Cities* (1969), with a compelling story of how innovation—creative, technological, market—occurs. In the 1920s, a dressmaker named Ida Rosenthal began creating cupped undergarments as a service to help her clients achieve a better fit. The modern

brassiere was born. Eventually, the bras became so popular that Rosenthal and her partners quit making dresses altogether. The service became a product, which became the lingerie company Maidenform. As Jacobs wrote, “New work arises upon existing work.” Yes, the company left New York, but what’s important is maintaining the conditions—such as the chains of contractors and producers—that help get such ideas off the ground.

This sort of innovation is often unpredictable, and not nestled within clearly delineated boundaries. “When new work is added to older work,” Jacobs wrote, “the addition often cuts ruthlessly across categories of work.” A little over a year ago, Stoll, a German manufacturer of knitting machines, opened a facility in a ground-floor storefront on West 39th Street. While its latest high-tech machines silently hum in the front window, the place does not exist to sell machines. Rather, it is part showroom, part boutique production facility, part technical institute. Faced with a constricting customer base for its machines, Stoll was looking for a way to build its brand and its sales. The company identified a market for providing what it terms “fast-track samples”—quick one-off prototypes—to the myriad designers in the garment district, offering a benefit in time and quality versus sending things abroad. There is no more common complaint among designers than sample quality. The decreased turnaround time makes new things possible.

Creativity in fashion, as in any art, can originate anywhere, or come from anything: a splash of color on a billboard, the movement of a symphony, sunlight dappling through trees, even a new stitch. It is not surprising that cities tend to be hubs of creativity—there are more things and people to be inspired by, more knowledge transfer, and, importantly, more ways to bring this creativity into actuality. The point, it seems, is less preserving this or another industry for its own sake, or even championing the idea that people are making *things* in cities, than enabling the seedbeds that help create and sustain the empire of images and aura that is New York City’s fashion industry. The loss of even a single fabric supplier, like a ripple in a pond, is felt everywhere. “It’s like a coral reef,” says designer Teng. “You don’t know how the reef will survive and what it will do if certain elements are removed.” ■