

LIFE IN THE GARMENT CENTER



In the fashion capital of the world, New York City's famed Garment Center has been a driving force for years. Despite offshore competition and other challenges, decorators, businesses and committed nonprofits continue to innovate, keeping the Center vibrant.

By Christopher Ruvo
Photography: Jessie Ruvo



For decades, the dedicated staff at Dalma Dress Manufacturing Co. Inc. has been hard at work sewing dresses for leading New York fashion designers.





The fantasy of high fashion begins here. It's in this cramped 4,000-square-foot space on the 16th floor of a nondescript building in midtown Manhattan that the magic of the New York runway starts to sparkle. Right here, in this room on W. 39th Street, where the thrum of sewing machines sets a rhythm to conversations conducted in Spanish and English. Where skilled artisans take the piles of fabric stacked on long tables and cut them into a 7th Avenue designer's dream. Where hand-sewers meticulously weave the final touches of fancy into a lace gown that will be worn by an Upper East Side socialite, a European heiress.

Standing in his office, Michael DiPalma looks out at the production floor and sighs. The 49-year-old, gray at the sides and sporting a slight salt-and-pepper stubble, shoulders a heavy uncertainty. His crystal ball is clouded when it comes to predicting the long-term prospects of Dalma Dress Manufacturing Co. Inc. DiPalma's father, Armand, co-founded the business in Manhattan's Garment Center, and DiPalma has

worked here his whole life. Once a 250-employee operation that occupied two floors, Dalma's staff has dwindled to between 30 and 55 workers, depending on the time of year. "I'd like to think we'll maintain what we have," says DiPalma, who notes that the 2008 recession triggered a more than 30% decrease in business that has yet to be regained. "We're busy – we're still getting orders – but the volumes aren't what they were."

DiPalma's plight is common to many businesses in Manhattan's Garment Center. For decades, the neighborhood was the engine that powered the fashion capital of the world, providing Gotham's designers with arms-length access to the fabrics, sewers, embroiderers, patternmakers, pleaters and manufacturers needed to produce their collections. But the off-shoring of mass production, local economic pressures, business-killing import tariffs, and the general malaise of the American economy has eroded the once-vibrant center, causing shops to close or move elsewhere. "It's a shadow of what it used to be," says Garment Center embroiderer Louis Nunez, owner of Trim World Inc.

But the news isn't all downbeat. Despite the diminishment, the center remains a vital force in New York City's fashion scene, which is home to 846 fashion companies, more than Milan, London and Paris combined. Committed to keeping the core of the center intact, businesses in the neighborhood are diversifying and honing specialties, and nonprofits and some leading designers are advocating on the center's behalf. "I believe very passionately that we can continue to be the backbone of New York fashion, which is the backbone of the whole fashion industry," says Samanta Cortes, a *Stitches* advisory board member whose high-end embroidery studio, Fashion Design Concepts, is based in the Garment Center.

SAVING THE GARMENT CENTER

With borders loosely drawn between 34th and 42nd Streets and Fifth and Ninth Avenues, the Garment Center started to formulate in the 1920s. Powered by immigrant and first-generation labor, the district grew into an industry superpower, with designers on the avenues employing side-street factories to produce the sought-after



While a host of garment businesses still form a strong core of the Fashion District, it's not uncommon to see "For Rent" signs in the windows of shops recently vacated by apparel industry firms.



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Situated in the heart of the Fashion District on 7th Avenue, this 8-foot-high bronze statue is titled “The Garment Worker.” Created by artist Judith Weller, the piece is a tribute to the workers – many of them immigrants and first-generation Americans – who drove the Garment Center’s success.

clothing sold in city boutiques and beyond. By the 1950s, approximately 334,000 people were employed in New York’s apparel trade.

But when cheaper foreign labor became a viable option in the 1970s, apparel jobs started sailing overseas. The decline accelerated over the next decade, and in 1987, eager to protect what remained, the city enacted zoning regulations restricting much of the district’s commercial space to garment industry uses.

However, when Manhattan real-estate prices soared amid skyrocketing demand, landlords in the center cried foul. They argued there weren’t enough garment firms to fill their buildings, and lobbied to have the zoning restriction lifted, which would clear the way for them to ink potentially more lucrative leases with other businesses, like hotels and restaurants. Anticipating a zoning overhaul, some landlords drastically hiked rents, cut leases short, and refused to renew leases with apparel businesses. “They raised my rent 35%,” Cortes says.

Fearing that removing the protective zoning would push the garment industry out of the neighborhood to which it gave a name, Cortes and several other local business owners sprung into action, launching a grassroots campaign called Save the Garment Center in 2007. From a humble first meeting attended only by Cortes and fellow co-founder Paul Cavazza and his business partner, the campaign quickly gained steam.

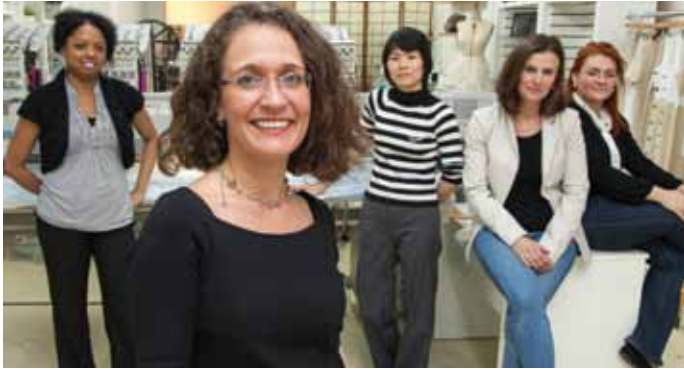
Major NYC designers like Anna Sui and Nanette Lepore threw their considerable clout behind the movement, appearing at public rallies, advocating in the press, and continuing to produce much of their collections in the city. The *New York Times* penned an in-depth piece on the pressures affecting fashion district businesses. HBO produced *Schmatta: Rags to Riches to Rags*, a documentary on the rise and decline of the Garment Center. The press, public outcry and petitioning of city officials helped stall what, at one point, looked like an inevitable rezoning of the neighborhood. Then the economy tanked, and the issue went on the backburner, where it has remained. “Nothing has really been resolved, though,” says Cavazza, owner of Create-a-Marker, a grading and marking firm on W. 35th Street. “I believe we’ll have to fight this fight again in the future.”

Which is, in part, why Save the Garment Center has remained active. An official nonprofit since 2009, the trade association supports factories, suppliers and designers through education and advocacy. The group raises awareness with politicians through rallies and e-mail campaigns that show the breadth of support for the fashion district. It assists factories that have lost their leases in finding a new space in the center, and campaigns to designers to have labels show “Made In NYC” or “Made In The USA.” Helping to connect emerging designers with manufacturers

and promoting the center through social media, the nonprofit also educates the public about the benefits to the local economy that come with having a center with the resources capable of helping to keep New York at the forefront of the fashion world. That positive ripple effect includes a significant inflow of tourist dollars, decent-paying jobs for city residents, and robust trade in high-end apparel retail and fashion-related publishing. “Our fashion shows in NYC generate the third-largest tax revenue for the city, and all industries and businesses make a lot of money during Fashion Week,” Cavazza says.

These days, Save the Garment Center’s executive director is Erica Wolf, whose full-time gig is as special projects director at Nanette Lepore. “I’m allowed to devote time to this because Nanette Lepore believes so strongly in the Garment Center,” Wolf says. “Without it, New York’s status as the world’s fashion capital would be at risk.”

Seated at a glass table in a posh conference room at Nanette Lepore’s fashion district headquarters, Wolf exudes passion for the Garment Center, excitedly explaining how the packing of apparel-related businesses into one neighborhood allows designers to quickly turn a sketch into a wearable reality. Within blocks, designers can visit shops to research fabrics, examine buttons, zippers and threads, consult with embroiderers, and have a pattern made and a sample sewn – often, some say, in less than



Samanta Cortes and her team at Fashion Design Concepts create high-end embroidery for iconic brands like Ralph Lauren and Monique Lhuillier at their studio in New York's Garment Center.

48 hours. Such easy access is critical for emerging designers, who lack the resources and order volumes to source from overseas. Big name brands benefit, too. By manufacturing here, Nanette Lepore gets inventory control, quality management and speedy turn-around times that wouldn't be possible if the district's businesses were dispersed or if the collections were produced abroad. Says Wolf: "There's an incredible synergy that happens here."

MIDTOWN STITCH ARTISTS

One of the intimate nooks where such synergy occurs is in the so-called "design cave" at Cortes' stitching shop on W. 39th Street. As Cortes descends the narrow, curving stairwell into the basement room, it appears as though she's entering a time-worn wine cellar. Downstairs, something just as precious as dust-covered vintage bottles awaits: a rack hung with some of the most innovatively embroidered skirts, tops and dresses you've ever seen. In her softly lit studio with an antique sewing machine in the corner, Cortes collaborates and consults with designers or their representatives, and creates unique embroidery concepts and techniques that help bring high-fashion garments to life. "People come here to get inspired," says Cortes, who has stitched for such iconic brands as Ralph Lauren.

A business owner in the Garment Center for 12 years, Cortes says the key to her longevity has been pioneering stitching techniques that can't easily be replicated, like creating elaborate couture embellishments with a low stitch count and developing the four-step process she used to machine-embroider a bridal skirt for Monique Lhuillier. "You have to come up with things they can't just immediately turn around and do overseas," she says.

Nearby shop owner Jose Ballena agrees. Leaning over the counter at The Embroidery House, which is wedged into the back of a store on 38th Street, Ballena explains how he develops stitch-



Jezebel Rodriguez (above) of Fashion Design Concepts puts the final touches on a dress, while below are some of the unique embroideries FDC has developed for leading designers.



ing approaches that keep him a step ahead, such as simulating hand-stitch designs with machine embroidery, a technique that makes his creations more cost-effective. "People have a look they want to achieve," Ballena says. "They come to me because I can translate that look into embroidery in different ways."

THE CENTER'S REINVENTION

Despite the innovation efforts, it's difficult for fashion district embroiderers like Ballena and Cortes to land larger-scale production orders. As a result of that and other economic issues, Cortes had to slash staff during the recession. "It's been the

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Jose Ballena, who has embroidered in the Fashion District for more than 15 years, stays ahead of the competition by developing innovative stitching techniques.

toughest three years of my career,” she says. But, passionate about her craft and committed to staying open in the Garment Center, Cortes recently diversified, founding The Thread Atelier – a series of digital couture workshops in embroidery and fabric manipulation. Run in her studio, the classes draw stitching novices and industry professionals who want to learn the language of embroidery. Sure, the workshops provide an important revenue source. But for Cortes, it’s about more than just money. “It’s a way of passing on what I love, and training the next generation so we can continue to do this work here,” she says.

Fashion Design Concepts isn’t the only business in the center to diversify. Regal Originals, a W. 37th Street factory whose expertise is specialties like pleating and tucking, spawned a sister company: Scrub/ink., Made-in-NYC. As the name indicates, Scrub/ink. makes scrubs and lab coats for the health-care industry. Customers include celebs like Dr. Mehmet Oz, who wore the scrubs on a holiday show episode. “You have to constantly reinvent yourself to stay afloat,” says Rodger Cohen, president of Regal Originals.

For Cohen, persevering as a factory owner in the Garment Center is important because it continues a family legacy. After surviving the Holocaust, Cohen’s father-in-law left Poland for New York. For years, Jack Krinick worked in apparel



To help his family’s sewing factory in the Garment Center stay afloat, Rodger Cohen, president of Regal Originals, launched a second business that makes medical scrubs and lab coats.

factories, learning the ropes and saving money with the hopes of opening his own business. In 1950, the classic immigrant dream came true when Krinick founded Regal Originals.

Employing 250 people during its heyday, the factory’s expertise has been drawn on by a slew of top designers, including Calvin Klein, Diane Von Furstenburg and Marc Jacobs. “The Garment Center provided a launching pad for people to give themselves a better life,” says Cohen, who aims to provide the same opportunity for the unionized workers he employs today. “I don’t want to lay anyone off. We’re trying to stay as busy as we can.”

Still, it’s tough. During the rush season, the workload is sufficient enough for Cohen to employ about 25 people. During slower times, the factory runs on a skeleton crew. On a balmy afternoon, after employees have gone home for the day, Cohen walks the factory floor, discussing the fate of the Garment Center, the car horns and street din a few floors below punctuating an eerie quiet. As he offers a grim prediction, one can’t help but be aware of the old Singer and Prazak machines sitting idle, like ghosts of the industrial revolution. “Every week it seems like a factory is closing,” Cohen says. “I don’t really see it getting better.”

‘THE SOUL OF NEW YORK’

But not everyone agrees. During his 20 years running a business in the Garment



Michael DiPalma, whose father Armand co-founded Dalma Dress Manufacturing Co. Inc., chats with long-time employee Angela Marciano about a dress the factory is creating for an internationally-known 7th Avenue designer.

Center, Cavazza admits he has seen a host of shops and factories shuttered. But, he says, over the last five years, a tipping point was reached, with firms that survived the painful bloodletting beginning to stabilize or even grow. “There’s more and more interest in Made-in-the-USA and Made-in-New York apparel, and that’s causing some manufacturing to come back,” Cavazza says. “I’m seeing more factories at capacity. I’m seeing cutting rooms at capacity and more designers who want to work with me than ever before. I talk to new customers on a daily basis.”

He’s got numbers to back up his claims. Sales at his second company, Midtown Paper, have increased 15% in each of the last two years. It’s a relevant stat because the firm sells specialty papers to factories that use the products in the garment creation process. “I don’t think we’re in decline the way it’s portrayed in the media,” Cavazza says.

This past spring, a report from the Fashion Center Business Improvement District revealed that 70 fashion-related jobs were added to the neighborhood in the last year. From a garment industry perspective, however, the news was tempered by the fact that most of the 4,069 jobs pumped into the center over the last five years were in other fields, including hospitality, restaurants, film, visual arts and photo studios. In 2011, for the first time in four years, non-fashion jobs outnumbered fashion jobs in the cen-

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Adam Friedman, Pratt Center for Community Development

ter. “It’s a more diverse base – one that is creatively oriented,” says Jerry Scupp, Fashion District BID’s deputy director. “We’re seeing healthy development of new uses, with a diversity of technology companies and creative industries, like architects and graphic designers.”

While Scupp believes garment firms will continue to form an essential core of the neighborhood, others worry the center will eventually lose the businesses and resources needed to be relevant. To combat wearing away in the district, the Pratt Center for Community Development is advocating for the establishment of a nonprofit that would secure building space for apparel production, among other efforts.

Additionally, the Garment Industry Development Corporation, a nonprofit started in 1984, continues efforts to bolster apparel manufacturing in the city. “We have to provide assistance to strengthen what we have and to make people recognize there still is a lot here,” says Adam Friedman, executive director of the Pratt Center.

And there is still a lot here. There are the fashionista interns from design houses popping in and out of the seemingly endless numbers of fabric shops that crowd the side streets. There’s the aspiring designer talking with Cortes as a four-head embroidery machine hums in the background. There are the stitching room owners swapping stories over a thin-crust

pizza at Lazzara’s. And there’s DiPalma’s factory, where long-serving staff members smile with pride as they hold up the dresses they’re making.

“The Garment Center is part of the constellation that gives New York the allure it has,” Friedman says. “It’s part of what draws tourists and encourages innovators to come here to make their name. It’s intertwined with the history of the city – the story of how people came to this country and worked for the American dream and created international business empires. It’s part of the soul of New York, and we can’t lose that.”

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TOMORROW’S APPAREL INNOVATORS



Growing up in the Berkshires surrounded by apparel mills, Pamela Ptak developed a deep appreciation for the craft of creating garments.

Just as importantly, she saw firsthand how mill jobs helped sustain a

community financially and provided people – especially the predominantly female workforce – with a strong sense of worth. “I learned how working with your hands and creating could be of great value,” says Ptak, now a famous fashion designer who appeared on the television show *Project Runway*. “I grew up expecting it would always be there.”

But like Manhattan’s Garment Center, the once-thriving sewing industry in western Massachusetts has declined. Inspired by her upbringing, however, Ptak – like her New York counterparts striving to keep the Garment Center a force in world fashion –

is doing her bit to help carve a nook in the market for stateside apparel production. In her adopted hometown of Riegelsville, PA, a picturesque village set along a wooded stretch of the Delaware River, Ptak runs The Arts & Fashion Sewing Institute. At Ptak’s home studio, students learn everything from the basics of sketching a fashion design to advanced sewing, draping and pattern-making.

A big-picture dreamer with a make-it-happen work ethic, Ptak believes she’s helping to train tomorrow’s innovators, which could help bring more production back to the states. “If we want the fashion industry to produce in this country, it’s going to cost more,” she says. “But if you specialize in something, if you’re innovative and do something so well that no one can get that quality anywhere else, then people are going to pay for it, and we’ll make America a respected center again.”

The school serves a variety of students, many of whom are teens and young adults interested in going to New York City – only about 70 miles east – to make their name in the fashion industry.

Indeed, students from leading art and design schools – like the Fashion Institute of Technology – have trimmed, sewed, and worked on portfolios with Ptak.

“Pamela’s focus on precision in constructing a garment, as well as the details that go along with fashion illustration, are very important when you’re trying to set yourself apart from other designers,” says Liz Napoli, an FIT student who studied with Ptak. “Learning from her has greatly helped further my skills in fashion design.”

In Ptak’s home studio, students receive hands-on instruction hard to find elsewhere. The cozy, intimate setting is based on Maison Sapho, a prestigious in-home dressmaking school in Manhattan where Ptak studied and created a sample book that once helped her land a job working for Ralph Rucci. “The industry can be rough, but here there’s gentility and respect where creativity can flourish,” Ptak says. “I hope my students are inspired to become the smiling energized spark that joins the New York garment industry.”