

## **The designer in the city and the city in the designer**

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The symbolic attributes of commodities as a basis for economic competitiveness in late capitalism has been a focus of analysis in the burgeoning literature on cultural industries. This literature, and most notably the works of Allen Scott, contends that aesthetic features can serve as a source of distinctiveness in the marketplace when most key innovations have become ubiquitous and that those regions and places that are best situated to exploit such attributes will come to define the leading edge of advanced capitalism. The system whereby symbolic attributes evolve, however, remains a veritable black box. Few studies have considered the process by which these attributes are produced, reproduced and commodified, i.e. deconstructing how 'culture' is produced.

In this paper, I examine the production of New York City fashion. I document the innovation system for the high-end women's wear industry and look at the ways in which fashion designers exploit local artistic and commercial institutions in the city for the conception, physical design and marketing of their products. A detailed examination of the system by which designers create distinctive commodities sheds light on the complex interplay between products and place. It reveals how a fashion design infrastructure in New York City actually shapes, conditions and gives meaning to the seemingly idiosyncratic act of producing 'culture'.

## INTRODUCTION

Studies on the origins of style and creativity are no longer the domain of art historians and cultural critics. The competitive pressures of a global economy and a growing segmentation of mass markets have made aesthetic innovation the new mantra of late capitalism, and consequently, a new focus in the fields of management, business and economic geography (see for example, Bjorkegren, 1996; Scott, 2001; Howkins, 2001; Florida, 2002). These new studies are centered on the increasing convergence between culture and the economy, as the “symbolic” attributes of goods and services are now deemed key elements of productive strategy (Lash and Urry, 1994; Scott, 1996). And the key questions that this line of inquiry poses are how best to enhance the creative process and to realize its economic value.

Conventional analyses have privileged the individual artist as the primary source of aesthetic innovation and have tended to focus on psychological processes (e.g. Koestler, 1990; Gardner, 1993; Ghiselin, 1996). Such an emphasis on an autonomous *créateur* however precludes an examination of the social and economic context in which the individual operates and the opportunities or constraints that such a context can afford. The creative process does not occur in a vacuum. And the same economic imperatives that have made aesthetic innovation all the more significant have also made the process all the more challenging for an individual to undertake alone.

Accordingly, a focus on the individual has given way to a focus on the broader set of relations that are implicated in the production of culture. First articulated by Hirsch (1972), this latter perspective assumes that cultural products are the outcome of a *series* of interrelated processes, encompassing creation, production, distribution and consumption. Particular attention is drawn to the role of intermediary organizations – such as wholesalers or media outlets – in establishing the links between creators and consumers. As marketing and distribution channels, intermediary organizations serve as gatekeepers that identify and promote particular categories of goods and services, and, together with the creators and consumers, are said to constitute *cultural industries* (Hirsch, 1972, 2000).

More recent extensions of this “industry” approach have also highlighted a *spatial* dimension to the process of cultural production. According to Scott (2000), cultural industries tend to agglomerate in cities to more easily access specialized labor, supply firms and support services, and to tap into the creative energies of other industries. Over time, some cities may even develop lines of specializations that create symbolic associations between the place and the cultural product, providing the product with a competitive advantage. In this way, the product and its creator/s reproduce the city and the city (as a set of institutions and images) becomes a critical input into the production process.<sup>1</sup>

### New York Fashion as Cultural Industry

The objective of this chapter is to examine this recursive relation between the city and cultural production through the prism of New York fashion, with a focus on the designer as the “creator” in this industry. New York City is the undeniable center for fashion in the U.S. It is home to world renowned designers such as Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein. It is the hub for the top ten fashion magazines and the top two fashion design schools in the country. And, alongside Paris and London, New York is host to one of the largest international fashion shows. The city’s industry accounts for approximately twenty percent of the value added for U.S. women’s wear and generates seventeen billion dollars in manufacturing and wholesale output (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997; New York Industrial Retention Network,

2001). Moreover, the New York industry has a specialization in women's wear, which accounts for over seventy-five percent of industry employment, and a dominance in the higher-end segments (e.g. dresses) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001).

Within New York, almost two-thirds of industry is based in the historic Garment District (or "Seventh Avenue"), a four by six block area in the western half of midtown Manhattan. This district is comprised of a dense concentration of apparel manufacturers and contractors, as well as a wide range of support services, including design schools, forecasting services, textile design studios, fabric suppliers, trade shows, fashion magazines, fashion shows and buying offices. The Garment District is also located in close proximity to major retail centers, such as Fifth Avenue and Soho, and major cultural institutions, such as Broadway and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Together, these cultural institutions and apparel-related services (i.e. "cultural intermediaries") constitute a local industry system on which designers can draw, making New York an illustrative case in which to explore the city-fashion nexus.

In examining New York fashion as a cultural industry, I focus on the high-end segment of women's wear.<sup>2</sup> The high-end segment, in contrast to the moderate-to-low end segment, relies more on aesthetic innovation than imitation as a competitive strategy, and for apparel, the "moment" of aesthetic innovation is design. Following the lead of Hirsch (1977, 2000), I look at how cultural intermediaries contribute to the *realization* of a design by supporting its materialization and commercialization. However this analysis also examines how intermediary institutions in the city can act as a "creative field", offering aesthetic stimuli that shape how a design is *conceived* (Scott, 2000). I consider the role that the city can play as a source of both 'art' and 'commerce'.

## **THE CITY AS 'ART'**

The first step in producing a cultural product such as fashion is deciding what to produce. This decision entails the selection of fabrics, colors and silhouettes for a given season's collection, and the process generally begins with a concept that can be inspired by a range of influences. Interviews with high-end designers reveal that some of the most commonly employed sources of inspiration for that concept include New York-specific cultural institutions, which could be broadly classified into two sets: complementary cultural institutions (i.e., other design-oriented fields) and fashion-related cultural institutions, (e.g., those fields directly tied to the fashion industry). The following sections analyze how these sets of institutions provide designers with creative stimuli that can encourage aesthetic experimentation.

### **The Role of Complementary Cultural Institutions**

Apart from being an international fashion capital, New York is a renowned center for the performing and visual arts. Prior to the mid-1900s, New York was said to draw its artistic inspiration from Europe, with New York artists often visiting European capitals, particularly Paris, to acquire insights into new avant-garde techniques. In the aftermath of World War II, however, the power of balance in the art world shifted from Paris to New York, as many renowned European artists immigrated to the States. The closure of Paris afforded New York talent the opportunity to acquire the training and resources needed to sustain their own industry and to develop a uniquely modernist American style, as exemplified in the works of Georgia O'Keefe, Miles Davis and George Moses (Guilbart, 1983; Scott and Rutkoff, 2001). To this day, much of the nation's artistic achievements remain centered in New York. Notable

cultural institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum and the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts, reinforce New York's position within the international cultural circuit.

Indeed, the city's status as a cultural capital is an asset not lost on fashion designers. When asked about their sources of inspiration, over one-third of the designers interviewed cited architecture, art exhibits, opera and theatre as primary sources. The discussion of these sources centered on the conceptual elements that such industries could contribute towards the visualization of a design. According to one high-end designer, who cited New York architecture as a key influence, "architecture has always been the avant garde of the design industries...it plays an important role in defining the forms, textures, colors for a given period" (personal interview, 2000). The relation between the aesthetic qualities of New York and a fashion designer's vision was also highlighted in an *AsianWeek* interview with New York-based designer Vivienne Tam. Citing the New York skyline as a point of reference for her Spring 2001 collection, Tam states, "Many of the prints and patterns in the collection are the result of the views from my terrace...I love watching the light shimmering as it plays with the architectural corners and angles of buildings against a grey and bluish evening sky" (quote taken from Harlan 2000, [www.asianweek.com/2000\\_09\\_28/feature.html](http://www.asianweek.com/2000_09_28/feature.html)).

The link between theatre and fashion has also been strong in New York City, with the grandeur and detail of costumes contributing to the spectacle of a theatrical production and providing a source of inspiration for future designs (personal interview with a high-end designer, 2001, Owen, 1987, Museum of the City of New York, 2000). Historically, the bond between these two artistic fields was formalized in the New York context with the establishment of the Costume Institute (formerly, the Museum of Costume Art) in the late 1930s, initially founded by members of a local theatre group (Chase and Chase, 1954).

In addition to the more formalized institutional fields, local consumers constitute another cultural institution that shapes the conceptualization of a design. Over one-half of the designers interviewed cited people on the streets or in local nightclubs and parties as key sources of influence. As one designer contends, "a lot of times, it's what you see everyday that helps you stay fresh. Everybody [here] is so fashionable. Stand outside for a minute and you can see so many different looks" (personal interview, 1999). In describing how local fashion is appropriated, another designer explains, "People inspire me. Watching people on the street... and the way they put it together. You know, I saw a girl who had on a dress yesterday ... I said 'that dress was so light'. But then I looked down, she had on these heavy, heavy tights. Then, I said 'that makes a lot of sense; somebody was thinking'" (personal interview, 2000). Within this context, New Yorkers themselves represent living cultural artifacts that are deemed important markers of cutting edge styles and savvy consumers of the culture that they help to produce.

## **The Role of Fashion-Related Cultural Institutions**

Another set of institutions that serve as a source of design inspiration are those institutions that cater directly to the industry and provide a space in which to monitor alternative approaches to fashion. The most obvious example of such fashion-related institutions is the New York retail market. Since the New York women's wear industry was initially developed in the mid-to-late 1800s by immigrant wholesalers and retailers, it is not surprising that today the city hosts a large concentration of retail shops, ranging from department and specialty stores to independent boutiques. The primary retail district in the city is situated on the east side of Manhattan, along Fifth and Madison Avenues (Jackson, 1995). These shopping corridors include such established institutions as Bloomingdales, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Henri Bendel, and

represent one of the most vibrant shopping centers in the country. They comprise the high-end segment of the local market and are said to cater to the 'corporate' woman.

Within the last twenty-five years, other distinct retail districts have emerged throughout the city, particularly in downtown Manhattan. The Soho district, for example, has become a shopping destination for residents and tourists in search of more alternative, avant-garde styles. It was formerly home to a large number of independent designers who would sell their clothes in their own boutiques. More recently, the area has become gentrified, as more established corporate institutions have been opened stores there. Consequently, a number of independent retailers and designers have now set up shops in adjacent areas to the east of Soho, creating new bohemian-style enclaves. These areas are commonly referred to as Nolita ("North of Little Italy") and Orchard Street, and they have become shopping districts in their own right (e.g. Pratt, 1997; Holusha, 2002). In contrast to the department and specialty stores to the North, the shops in these districts offer more exclusive and "edgier" products since they are not producing for a mass market (Rantisi, 2002a).

Since each of the shopping districts has a distinct character, the retail market as a whole offers a diverse array of stimuli. Designers can look to the creations offered by their direct competitors or to designs that are offered up at different price points and for different product markets (Rantisi, 2002b). Indeed, many of the designers interviewed said that they would regularly visit the stores to keep abreast of what is "trending" on the retail scene. With regards to the merits of shopping the local market, one sportswear designer had the following to say:

hen I go to Saks; it helps to inspire me. Its like I have some frames to work in... I can get a design off a wedding dress and make a sweatshirt out of it. Just because we are doing sportswear, I don't only look into sportswear. Because you can get different ideas from different things... even if its just the way they did a certain stitch or fabric or they way they combine fabrics. (personal interview, 2000).

Another fashion-related institution that serves as a source of creative stimuli is the bi-annual New York fashion week. In 1993, the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) established an organization that took on the task of coordinating and centralizing the fashion shows in the city by hosting them over the course of a week in the tents at Bryant Park, a park located to the northeast of the Garment District. Appropriately titled "7th on 6th,"<sup>3</sup> one objective of this organization has been to promote the exposure of local design talent to international buyers and the worldwide press, in an effort to put the New York industry on par with that of London, Paris and Milan (personal interview with the Executive Director of "7th on 6th", 2000). And the growth and success of the shows is evidenced by the acquisition of "7th on 6th" in 2001 by IMG, a global marketing company.

For high-end fashion designers, the centralized showing of the collections provides another means for observing the creations of their competitors. In most cases, the collections presented on the runways are not the collections that will actually get manufactured. The clothes are viewed more as theatrical, since the primary objective of the runway is to generate excitement and spark an interest in the designer (Chen, 1999). However, the runway styles do capture the general concepts for the collections that are to be sold – i.e. a certain color, stitch or trim that will be used –and in this way, they can have a "trickle-down" effect in the industry by defining the themes for a given fashion season. Several of the designers interviewed indicated that the fashion shows shape industry trends because they are "directional" "inspirational" and "fashion forward" (personal interviews with high-end designers, 1999, 2000).

## **Other Sources of Design Inspiration**

In addition to the complementary and fashion-related cultural institutions highlighted above, the high-end designers interviewed cited a number of non-local sources of design inspiration. Internationally renowned designers, such as Yohji Yamamoto or Miuccia Prada, for example, were a primary source mentioned. Other non-local influences cited include travels abroad to Europe, India and Africa, and old movies. All of the respondents cited more than one influence; however, the vast majority of the responses provided (over 80%) were specific to the New York cultural economy. Such findings clearly reveal a strong and positive relation between the city and the creative process.

## **THE CITY AS 'COMMERCE'**

Cultural institutions within the city do not only serve to encourage innovative dynamism by exposing designers to distinct ways of seeing and doing fashion; they also play a critical role in translating the designer's vision into a tradable commodity. Fashion-related institutions in particular are significant intermediaries in the process of linking designers to consumers. Historically, the emergence and concentration of these key institutions in the New York Garment District occurred in the earlier part of the twentieth century, at a time when the city was undergoing rapid urbanization. The high volume production of ready-to-wear apparel, in which the city specialized, demanded ancillary manufacturing, marketing and distribution services (Scranton, 1998; Rantisi, 2004). Over time, these services have come to function as part of a well-established production system, characterized by shared conventions and business practices. They influence the process of cultural production today by providing designers with market-sensitive information, the skills for using that information in the design of products, and the mediums by which to market those products. In the sections that follow, I examine how this occurs by looking at the role of the city in the materialization and the commercialization of fashion, respectively.

## **The Role of the City in the Materialization of the Design**

The materialization of a design refers to the process of giving material form to a concept, deciding its color, shape and texture. The institution that provides the foundation for such a process in the case of high-end designers is clearly the fashion design school. Ninety percent of high-end designers interviewed indicated that they received their initial training from either the Fashion Institute of Technology (F.I.T.) or Parsons School of Design, both located in or near the Garment District.

How do these training institutions help designers balance creativity with the demands of commerce? First, they shape the way designers "read" the city. They promote a strategy of viewing the city as "art" by sponsoring field trips to museums and art galleries and by providing reduced tickets for the operas, shows and theatres. According to the Chair of Fashion Design at one of the schools, students are also encouraged to walk around the neighborhoods and to take in their diversity, since "...in New York City, just walking through the streets – Soho, the Village – is an experience" (personal interview, 1999). This exercise sensitizes students to the broad range of stimuli that a city can offer. Moreover, it helps them to identify trends that cut across diverse cultural institutions and can be deployed in the establishment of design concepts that are innovative, yet fashionable (i.e. acceptable) within the broader cultural economy. The

second way in which the schools contribute to the development of fashion is through their explicit merchandising orientation. In addition to traditional courses in art history and draping, the fashion design programs at F.I.T. and Parsons cover business issues (e.g. apparel manufacturing, the costing of resources, new trends in fabric development) in their apparel design courses or offer separate courses in business and management. Both programs also have strong ties to the local industry, and industry leaders, who are often alumni of the programs, serve as guest lecturers, teach senior-level seminars and judge final-year design projects. Internships are another means by which industry links are forged. They help students to establish key networks and acquire hands-on experience (personal interviews with the Internship Director for F.I.T. and Associate Chair of the Fashion Design Program at Parsons, 1999).

Many of the high-end designers interviewed acknowledged that the career-oriented nature of the local design programs have facilitated their transition into the workplace. The success of this orientation is evidenced by the fact that, at F.I.T., over eight-five percent of students find employment in the local industry upon graduation, approximately half staying on at the companies where they held internships (personal interview with internship director at F.I.T., 1999). Moreover, the ability of graduates and interns to perform their required tasks was confirmed by several of the designers who hired them on as assistants. According to a New York-based European designer, who compares her own training process in Europe with those of the local interns she has hired:

American fashion, the way its taught, is all about merchandising...European schools are more about the idea...here, its about business, its all very worked out, the [fashion] seasons, the weight of the fabric, the price points. And my interns here, the way they teach them, they know all this stuff. I was never taught it in school.  
(personal interview, 2000)

In addition to the design schools, a number of fashion-related institutions in the city assist designers in realizing (or “materializing”) their vision. In particular, forecasting services and trade publications serve as important sources of market information that designers consult when deciding on specific design elements (e.g. the colors, fabrics and styles) that they will employ. Forecasting services, for example, will undertake market research and provide designers with the trends eighteen months in advance, so they can anticipate what materials or resources they will need to acquire and, if needed, validate expenses to upper-level management. According to the director of one forecasting service, her office acquires information through “endless, constant research...[by] shopping stores, museums, galleries, movies, and fashion shows to keep a pulse on fashion trends and popular culture” (personal interview, 2000). Approximately thirty percent of the high-end designers who were surveyed indicated that they acquired trend reports or individualized consulting from local forecasting offices. However, not all designers can afford the services, which can cost up to \$5,000 annually, and some designers admitted to acquiring them in indirect ways by attending free seminar presentations or obtaining free sample reports (personal interviews, 1999, 2000).

Trade journals serve a similar role as forecasting services in assisting designers to navigate the market and to identify the appropriate trends for their price points and product specializations. Such publications will often feature best practices in the industry, highlighting new developments in fabrics and who offers them or new design, marketing and production strategies. *WWD* (formerly, *Women’s Wear Daily*) is the most popular of the New York-based publications. In existence for over ninety years, this daily journal serves as the primary source of business news for apparel manufacturers, retailers, suppliers, fashion educators and other

fashion-related organization and has a circulation of 55,000. All of the designers and key industry actors interviewed said they would regularly consult *WWD*. According to one designer, *WWD* is the most significant resource because “it tells you the market, the newest trends, and it will tell you who’s doing well, what the stores are that you are competing with...you know, the business of the day” (personal interview, 2000).

Forecasting services and trade publications are particularly relevant for designers at the stage in which they are making their samples. Once samples are made, the key institution shaping the subsequent production runs is the retailer. Retailers can influence the production process through their decisions on which samples they will purchase, the quantity to be purchased and the price that they will pay. These choices affect the look and the quality of the garment because they determine the kinds of materials a designer can obtain and the manufacturing options they will have. In addition, retailers may make specific recommendations as to the colors or fabrics that a designer should use for a particular garment, based on their knowledge of last season’s sales or of the sales of competing lines. And the leverage that retailers have over the design process has been increasing over the past two decades due to a concentration of retail buying power in the hands of a few large companies.<sup>5</sup> The retailers will not dictate the designs per se, particularly since high-end designers can offer them quality products that are distinctive in the marketplace, but they establish the parameters within which designers create (Lubow, 1999).

### **The Role of the City in the Commercialization of the Design**

The transformation of a design into a material object is an essential part of the fashion production process, but for the object to constitute a commodity, it must formally enter the marketplace as a good to be bought and sold. Within the city, there are a number of cultural intermediaries that regulate this entry. Often referred to as “gatekeepers” (Hirsch, 1972), the primary role of these institutions is to link the designer to the consumer by serving as distribution or marketing channels. Their role, however, is not merely that of regulator. As Zukin (1991) suggests, these arbiters of taste represent a “critical infrastructure” that interprets the cultural product for a consumer, and in the process, may alter its symbolic value.

In the case of fashion, two key institutions for marketing – and producing – culture are the fashion show and the fashion magazine. The fashion show represents one of the few occasions in which designers can control how their concepts are exhibited. In an effort to “turn heads,” designers will often use the most luxurious fabrics available on the market, employ celebrity models, and in some cases, even hire a live band to perform on the runway – all at a cost of thirty to fifty thousand dollars per show (personal interviews, 1999, 2000). Cultural institutions and artifacts in the city figure centrally in this effort. For example, to reinforce the company’s association with urban hip-hop, one designer used the following approach: “at the end of the show, we had people come out and beat on the drums...[like] ‘bring in the funk’ which was an idea taken from an urban musical playing on Broadway” (personal interview, 2000). In this way, the show highlights the entertainment value of fashion by creating a spectacle around the designer’s collection (personal interview with the Executive Director of “7th on 6th”, 2000).

The development of “7th on 6th,” as described above, has elevated the significance of the shows as a marketing resource by coordinating the locations and times to ensure maximum visibility for each participant. Since this event is not open to all designers, participants also benefit from the prestige of having been selected by a committee of their peers. Indeed, several participants acknowledged the importance of the event in helping them to get press coverage or to establish new retail accounts. Through their coverage in magazines and in



TV/newspaper fashion segments, the shows also serve to generate a broader interest in fashion among consumers. As one fashion consultant explains, this wide publicity is the event's *raison d'être* because "in other countries ... they're always doing fashion, have major fashion editorials in their newspapers. [But] that doesn't happen as often in America. So, it is important to get the customer excited twice a year" (personal interview, 2000).

Interpreting the runway shows is one means by which fashion magazines contribute to the commercialization of fashion. The magazines also play a "gatekeeper" role by providing editorials on the styles offered in the stores and by providing space for designers to advertise their products. Since New York City is a hub for the publishing industry in the U.S., established fashion magazines – including *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* – with a nation-wide circulation of thirty million are based in the city (Fashion Center BID, 2001). This location helps magazine editors to keep abreast of fashion trends since they can easily visit the designers' showrooms and attend industry-related events. It also gives designers opportunities to network with editors, since they often go to the same restaurants, clubs or cultural events (personal interviews with high-end designers, 1999, 2000). Both the magazine editors and designers concede that these social ties are significant for acquiring visibility and status within the industry.

While fashion shows and fashion magazines are directed primarily at the consumer, key trade publications, trade shows and buying offices serve as intermediaries that are directed primarily at the *retail buyer*. The potential significance of the trade publications, such as *WWD*, has already been highlighted above. However, there is one trade publication, *The Tobé Report*, that is targeted exclusively to buyers and deserves special mention. Established in 1927 by a leading retail consultant, this weekly report features upcoming styles and evaluates specific apparel designers to assist buyers in deciding which items to purchase and where to purchase them. In contrast to the fashion magazines which cover trends for the current season, the value of this report is that it follows the industry season, which is six months ahead. Many of the retailers interviewed said that they would consult *The Tobé Report* when making decisions about what products to purchase, and the President of *Tobé* has said that almost all major retailers in the country are among her clientele (personal interview, 2000).

The apparel trade show is another marketing institution that has become popular in recent years. Traditionally, a retail buyer would go from one designer's showroom to the next to view the range of products available on the market. Though the showrooms are concentrated along major streets in the Garment District, these individual visits would command a lot of time. Many buyers will now attend trade shows that are held at the major convention centers, such as Pier 94 and the Jacob Javits Center. According to one Garment District sales representative, the popularity of these shows can be attributed to the fact that "they bring hundreds of apparel manufacturers together under one roof, making it easier for buyers to shop and compare local offerings" (personal interview, 1999). Buyers also prefer them to the fashion show because of the difficulties of viewing products displayed on the runway (Agins, 1999b). Although designers are generally restricted to small cubicles at these shows, this marketing option has become increasingly appealing with the introduction of juried shows, such as the "Fashion Coterie" (personal interview with high-end designer, 1999).

A final institution that acts as cultural intermediary is the resident buying office. Dating back to the early-to-mid 1900s, these offices were created to link out-of-town buyers with local manufacturers at a time when the New York market was expanding. Today, they edit the market by identifying those designers that will best suit the needs of a particular buyer's clientele. In explaining the process, an account executive at one of the largest buying offices maintains, "for any given fashion season, we will view all the designers. We will identify the latest trends, and from an aesthetic vantage point, determine which manufacturers best interpret the latest trends. We also ascertain from the store what their mix and their specific

needs are" (personal interview, 1999). Most of the buying offices specialize in particular price points. Gregor Simmons, for example, will cater only to specialty stores dealing with high-end products (personal interview with an account executive, 1999). This specialization enables the offices to develop a better command of their respective markets, and thereby, enhance their standing as authorities or "arbiters" within the local production system.

## **SITUATING THE 'DESIGNER' IN THE CITY: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE CITY-FASHION NEXUS**

An examination of the city as a source of both "art" and "commerce" reveals how a number of intermediaries assist the designer in the process of producing fashion. On the one hand, these institutions serve to inspire by presenting designers with cultural artifacts, which they can exploit in the development of their own creations. The institutions however also play a directive role in guiding the design innovation process. By rendering what is possible, affordable and acceptable in the realms of production and consumption, they shape how a design is conceived, manufactured and marketed.

Presenting the city as a set of relations that are implicated in the development of fashion, however, does not negate a role for the individual designer. Within the fashion production process, the designer is not a passive recipient of influences from her institutional setting, but also an active shaper of that setting, in some cases challenging and altering its parameters. Numerous examples were raised in the course of interviews of how designers would assert their own individuality in response to constraints that were deemed restrictive. With respect to price constraints, for instance, one high-end designer sought a compromise between what was needed and what she desired in developing her lines. For her, "the line is normally a balance of different kinds of items, pieces you know are going to make money and then pieces that are the fringe and fluff, that give the line attitude" (personal interview, 2000). Rather than dismissing the influence of the designer within the fashion production process, the objective here is to properly situate this agency within its broader institutional context. A narrative of the process by which New York fashion is produced illustrates how the city can *endow* the designer with competencies and resources for managing the often contradictory business of "commercial art". It suggests that a *recursive* relationship between the city and the designer – rather than a linear one – is the engine that drives fashion.

The narrative above also draws attention to the challenges involved in preserving this recursive relationship. The city's ability to function as a source of aesthetic inspiration has been increasingly eclipsed by the corporatization of key cultural intermediaries.<sup>6</sup> Trends such as the consolidation of retail buying power and acquisitions within the fashion magazine industry create a hierarchical production system in which commercially-oriented institutions have more leverage over design and marketing activities (WWD 1999; Kuczynski, 1999). In the case of the magazines for instance, the cost of one ad in *Vogue* is now upwards of \$6,000, implying that entry is restricted to those designers who can exploit their economic – relative to creative – resources. In some cases, designers can bypass such intermediaries and disassociate themselves from a "corporate" identity by opening their own retail shops or by using public ads (see for example White 1997). These options need to be encouraged and made more viable. As McRobbie (2002) suggests, cultural policy with respect to design should be centered on providing alternative means of ascribing value to designers, which are not solely – or even primarily – based on entrepreneurial or business criteria.<sup>7</sup> Developing and supporting a diversity of institutions is critical for safeguarding the role of the city as a source of cultural capital, and for maintaining the delicate balance between "art" and "commerce" that drives the fashion system.

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## Notes

1. For insightful studies on the relation between place and creativity, see Zukin (1995), Leslie (1997), Crewe and Beaverstock (1998), Grabher (2001), Molotch (2002) and Drake (2003).
2. This analysis is based on in-depth interviews conducted in November-December 1999 and January 2000 with over sixty industry actors, including high-end designers, retail buyers, and representatives from buying offices, forecasting services, buying offices, trade associations, design schools and other fashion-related services in New York City. I also draw on a survey of twenty-eight high-end designers, conducted from December 1999 to March 2000.
3. '7th' refers to Seventh Avenue, the main corridor in the Garment District, where the showrooms for the high-end designers are located. '6th' is the avenue where Bryant Park is located.
4. The analysis in this section draws on Rantisi (2002b).
5. Ten apparel retailers control almost half of total retail sales, and among department stores, the top six chains control ninety percent of the sales (*WWD*, 1999).
6. McRobbie (2002) provides an account of how the climate of neo-liberalization has emasculated creativity in the U.K. fashion sector.
7. Santagata (2002) outlines some possible directions for such a policy orientation.