

Free the subculture of the garment district in new york city research paper examp...

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The Garment District, which is a rectangular stretch of Manhattan that spans from west 35th street to 42nd streets, to 7th and 9th avenues, used to be one of the major clothing manufacturing centers in the USA. The shape and borders of the area changed over time, yet the core remained the same and contributed enormously to the industrial evolution of the country, as well as its cultural development. Now, however, certain activists plan to change the name to something more modern and fashionable because, in their understanding, it will attract designers and high tech companies as well as representatives of other creative sectors.

However changing the name “ Garment District”, would a historical mischief, because then it may take away from the city’s rich history. Besides, it may also discourage tourists and newcomers from getting the best of city’s culture and traditions.

Throughout decades the Garment District was not just a district, it was a geographical destination, it was a living entity. The term “ Garment District” originated from the nature of the labor-intensive industry and represents vast historical and economic heritage. Changing its title in favor of a short-time economic goal would be undoubtedly a sign of disrespect to all those who worked and lived there, as well as to the New Yorkers of the further generations.

The the ideal clothing fabric would be wrinkle free, and stain resistant, colorfast, soft to the touch, self-cleaning, keeps its shape and last forever.

Fabrics are the new fashion frontier; it’s not just how an item is cut or

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detailed that stands out, but the unusual “ techno-fabric” it’s made of. While new synthetics are too numerous to list here, the following appear regularly on our labels like: Tencel, alone or mixed with cotton, silk, wool, polyester, viscose or elastin, helps make all types of clothes colorfast, wrinkle resistant and easy to clean. Dorlastin, common in socks, pantyhose and lingerie, is the latest brand of spandex to offer resistance and elasticity, while Tactel give those same garments lightness and a luminous finish. Modal blends with cotton to give it a light, silky feel. Though microfiber is often as fine as or finer than silk, is actually a durable synthetic used in everything from dresses to coats. Neoprene, the rubbery fabric scuba suits are made of stretch and thermal insulation, not to mention a sporty, fast forward look. There was an opinion in the 1980-s that the troubled Garment District was in danger of being almost totally destroyed in the future because of excessive energy costs. Among other problems there were inadequate youth development programs, rigid state economic policies, and existing inequities in federal trade policy as contributing factors in the decline of the industry. New York city’s economic future depended, to a large extent, on a healthy garment industry. In order to make certain the industry prospers in the future it needed help and encouragement.

Originally the area took shape during the late nineteenth century and soon became the country’s leading center of garment production. Initially concentrated in tenementson the Lower East Side, the garment business gradually moved north and west as the garment manufacturers were driven by law from residential buildings into lofts and increasingly required fancy showrooms for marketing the district centered on Madison Square.

New York City became the nation's largest leading center of garment production by the Mid-nineteenth century. Irish and German workers entered the garment trade in the 1840s. Germans introduced the practice of home manufacturing to the garment industry. Aided by Elias Howe's invention of the sewing machine in 1846, apparel was the fastest growing industry in New York City from 1830 to 1860. In 1858, the New York City Garment District employed 32,000 workers.

Women predominated in the ready-made trade, men (who were usually paid more) in the custom trade. The shift from custom-made to ready-made clothing in the United States during the industrial revolution was stimulated by the growth of the middle class and a large increase in foreign-born labor. Which was women and skilled men from parts of Russia and eastern Europe. For unskilled male newcomers readily learned to use the foot powered sewing machine, and men were more adept than women at handling a newly invented heavy cutting knife around 1875. That supplanted conventional shears. Women were further displaced in the 1870s by men from Germany and Austria-Hungary who worked for substandard wages. Women who remained in the late nineteenth century worked in three kinds of shops. The inside shop, operated by a manufacturer using his own employees, the home shop where workers helped family members to assemble goods brought home from the factory, and the outside shop, operated by a contractor who received an assignment from a manufacturer and used either factory or home labor. Contractors enjoyed a competitive advantage because the cost of home labor was minimal.

Despite long hours, filth, and low pay, newcomers from Europe often worked

additional time so that they could afford to send for family members still in Europe. Economic distress and religious persecution of Jews in Russia during the late 1800s led to a flood of immigrants into New York City. Most were working in the garment trade soon after their arrival. The first wave of Italian, known as Contadini, or peasants, immigrated in the 1880s. Italian men with experience in the garment trades frequently found work in custom tailoring; those without experience became sewing machine operators and pressers. By 1900 Italian women who were experienced home manufacturers monopolized home garments finishing in New York City, making four to five cents an hour, single Italian women were more likely to work outside the home than those who were married.

In addition to enjoying a ready pool of immigrant workers, the garment industry in New York City benefited from the proximity of textile mills in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and upstate New York. The industry prospered and moved uptown, following the growth of the city and new transportation patterns, gradually a new garment center took shape on the west side, extending north from 34th to 40th streets and west from sixth to Ninth avenues. Although merchandise continued to be sold in Manhattan, the availability of highways and trucks made it feasible to move productions to cheaper locations in Brooklyn, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

The Garment Industry Envelopment Corporation established in 1984 by labor and management with municipal and state funds assists garments manufacturers in New York City with marketing, management education, and training programs. It sometimes works in cooperation with The Fashion Institute of Technology, opened in 1944 to train workers and managers. The

continued vitality of this enterprise is borne out by prominent designers and companies with headquarter and some productions in the city: among them are Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta, Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren, Nicole Miller, and Vera Wang. In 2007 companies based in New York City accounted for annual sales of \$47 billion and maintained 5400 showrooms. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center of September 11th in 2001, had a devastating effect on manufacturing in Chinatown. One hundred of more than 250 factories in the area in 2000 disappeared, and Chinatown's share of garment manufacturing was halved to less than 10 percent by 2005. Rising rents and real estate values, as well as imports and police security restrictions, compounded the difficulties.

However even now, despite all the difficulties of momentarily and structural nature, the role of the Garment District as a center of fashion not only at the national level, but at a global scale, remains. There it is possible, for instance, to get early access to the newest fashion trends and get an insight of the new fashion shows.

The exploration of the subculture of the Garment District of New York City also evolved a deeply interesting personal encounter. Being interested in expanding my experience with the district beyond formal criteria of this work and willing to get some first-person experience in research of the city which history and culture I love and respect, I decided to interview one of the natives of the area and a bearer of respective subculture and its values. The most prominent person that I have met in my research subculture was named Betty. Betty works at " Moods" fabric store in the garment district. She was very helpful with allowing me to interview her, as the store was very

busy when I was asking her questions. She told me things about her that was general information, like she is from Baltimore Maryland. She has worked at Mood fabric store since February and that she has always had a natural interest in the fashion, but would prefer to be a top New York City stylist. Betty finds her work very rewarding in the since of gaining more knowledge on the business side of the industry. But also learning more about where the fabrics come from, how they are made and, what brand name clothing lines use which particular fabrics for their cloths.

Betty told me as a consumer of the clothes that she wears, she has a better understanding of what the fabric really means now when she opens up the inside of the garment to find the tag. Whereas before working at Mood, she would look at the tags of her favorite brand names and, styles of clothing, but did not understand what the writing really meant. A lot of the fabrics that mood carries in their store comes from fashion houses here in New York City. It is the left overs, close out, past seasons international designers that keep their fabrics stored away in ware houses in New York City.

It was not a very difficult for her to get her job; all she did was walk in off the street in her regular cloths and ask to speak to the manager. He liked her style of cloths she had on that faithful February day ten months ago. Later the manager called her and asked her when she was available to start working, and the rest is history. Sometime customers she said wait weeks and up to months at a time for a specific order they placed to come in. But fashions designers and, fashion students, who do not have their own ware houses stocked with personal fabrics, know to place orders early months in advance.

If Mood is out sourcing fabrics from other countries, depending on the country and the size of the order, it has taken up to 7 months in the past. But that is a rare thing to happen. Sometime the fabrics come from different parts of Italy, mills in the south of France, family owned shops and seamstresses that weave fabric in parts of Spain. Rarely do they ever get fabrics from India, but at times they come in from their too. For as long as Betty has been working in the garment district, she only has one or two other friends that share the same interest. Outside of that, everyone she works with is either just happy to get by, happy to have a job, going to school for something completely different than what they are doing at mood fabric store.

Some of the more fun exciting days at mood, is when television shows, like project runway, and a few other cable network shows come in with their cameras to interview people working there. Or at other times Betty told me she just like being on camera while she runs around the store with someone from one of the shows, to help them find what they need. For her, it's her 5 minutes of fame and exposure, if she is lucky to get that. When she has been able to see herself on a TV show, sometime they never show her face, only her hands. Sometime her face is blurred out, so you don't know who the person is. But she knows its her because she remembers what she said on the day she was being filmed.

Betty is working full time at Mood and some of her other interest outside of being a garment worker and dealing with fabric, is to be a professional bowler. She has been told by her family, to find some other line of work. Her parents would rather see here pursuing something else, and they are not

afraid to let her know when she comes in. Her mother is a lawyer and her father runs and operates his own dental office. Betty is following her dream, she is in her late twenties, eats everything with no diet restrictions. Before working at mood, she worked in radio. She often thinks of going back to it sometime, till she is done with school, because it paid better.

The case of Betty may be perceived as a typical success story of a person who chased her dream, did not cope with failures and did her best to live by the values of the subculture she considered fit for her. This is only one of tens of thousands destinies which were changed by the Garment District for good. One may ask: What is the point of searching for a relatively low-paid job in the heart of New York with so many other opportunities around? Why not become a stock broker, a market analyst, or, in the worst case scenario, a factory manager? The answer to this is pretty obvious. Those jobs, although normally well-paid, would deprive Betty of what she really loves – of being a part of the Garment District, breathing its air and sharing the passion for fashion as well for the past of the district. Betty walks the same streets and breathes the same air as generations of garment factory workers, immigrants, actors, artists and musicians enjoyed long before she had been born. This feeling of belonging to something greater than a stable company with proper bonus package gives Betty strength to overcome the troubles of the moment and allows to look into the future with reasonable optimism. Throughout this research I did my best to look at the Garment District from different points of view and came to several important conclusions. The district always was and still is an extremely significant landmark of New York city. It resembles a mirror which reflects the history of the city – the cit6y

build by millions of hard working, God fearing and honest people, who believed in a better destiny for themselves and their children, and were willing to work day and night in order to provide it. The hard work and somewhat challenging labor conditions did not preclude these people from developing their unique, one of a kind subculture. This spirit, the air of style and freedom did not develop throughout centuries, as it was possible in Europe. The people of the Garment District created it in slightly more than 100 years, and the impact of that creation can be observed up until now. Nowadays the Garment District is something much greater than another city area which used to be a manufacturing center. This district is a large fashion hub, hosting numerous events from all over the world. The history of the Garment District signifies its importance and value to the nation. In my opinion, it should be preserved and cherished despite all attempts to modify or renovate it. This district has long been and still is the icon of style and the symbol of America- the melting pot of nations, in which the true American character - honest, diligent and hard working - was shaped.

The Garment District may bring a lot of surprises for devoted fashion lovers. There are recent known cases when it was possible for selected customers to try on or even buy attires from the Spring 2014 collection before they were even displayed at a fashion show and long before the fashion editors, bloggers, retailers, and thousands of fashion week attendees have seen it, even before the clothes have been made. According to Elizabeth Wellington's article about young women from Philadelphia who visited the district this fall, long before Nicole Millers spring collection was available for a fashion gala at Lincoln Center, one young lady was visiting a showroom at

the Garment District, and, surprisingly, the new items were already there! And not only were the outfits already present, but they were also available for sale. This was a revelation for the Philly girl, who bought a fashionable dress from the upcoming collection, and later discovered same outfit on a model during the fashion show at New York Lincoln Center the following Friday. The fabric, the style, even the paste – all was the same! This kind of pleasant surprises is alone a substantial reason that the Garment District is worth visiting and exploring!

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