

Going Local: Design and Sustainability in New York City's Garment Center

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Abstract

Since its peak in the 1950s, New York City's Garment Center has lost more than 95% of its workforce, yet this design and manufacturing cluster remains a vital source of innovation within the global fashion industry. Across the world, fashion cities are becoming hubs of sustainable fashion, where creative ideas and production move together in real-time, maximizing efficiency and minimizing waste. From 3-D printing to advanced robotics and nanomaterials, the technological advances of recent years have created an agile manufacturing landscape that offers new possibilities for small producers. Simultaneously, a globally-oriented network of shared knowledge has emerged, connecting geographically dispersed communities with knowledge and software to enable creative design practices. How can these two trends work together to upend traditional design thinking and practice? What are the potentialities for globally-minded, locally-informed design? Is this type of global-local creation truly new, or simply a return to historical relationships between designer and producer?

To explore these questions, I propose a short paper taking the example of New York City's Garment Center as a case study. This vibrant cluster of designers and specialist producers, geographically proximate by historical necessity, remains one of the most interconnected examples of integrated design thinking with responsible manufacturing practices. As part of an ongoing digital humanities project to explore and document the nuanced, and often hidden, labor within New York's Garment Center, this paper will delve into the dynamics and challenges of fashion-making in this unique environment. Why has fashion production become divorced from the design process and how can sustainable local manufacturing foster a renewed exploration of fashion culture and fashion consumerism?

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