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New York Should be a Slave to Fashion

Photographers, buyers and fashion writers crammed Bryant Park on Monday night to see Nicole Miller's line of fall fashions. Leggy models, proving that you can be sexy without a Wonderbra, strutted down the runway in new fall outfits - jackets, boots, skirts, slacks and evening dresses - under the big tent with lights flashing and music blasting. Only in New York could a park that was once an urban sewer be reinvented as the hub for the beautiful people.

But the success of "Seventh on Sixth" is not just about fashion, it's about the rebirth of New York's apparel industry. Nicole Miller - which makes all of its women's clothing in New York - proves there's a future for manufacturing in this town.

The mayor's Office of Management and Budget predicts just 5,000 new private-sector jobs in the coming year, and continued slow economic growth. So it's time to look at the industries that thrive in New York despite the taxes, the traffic and the corruption at the Javits Center. While financial service firms downsize and large industrial plants move out, manufacturing for New York's most sophisticated designers is flourishing.

Twenty-five years ago, New York's apparel industry could not compete with the cheap labor of the Third World. But today's fashions depend on speed and quality, which are easier to achieve in New York than in East Asia and Latin America. According to Bud Konheim, CEO of Nicole Miller, shipping costs, the hassle of trade regulations, plus the rigidity of long lead-times, have reduced the appeal of manufacturing abroad.

With its network of small-scale manufacturing plants, many equipped with the latest technology, New York enjoys new advantages in an age of rapidly changing tastes. Designs can be instantly modified in response to consumer preferences without worrying about time zones and unpredictable delivery from overseas factories. Synergy between designers and manufacturers is also easier to achieve when factories are nearby. As Konheim observes, "When it's 9 a.m. on Broadway, it's 9 a.m. on Seventh Avenue." If the goods have a defect, they can be rejected, rather than unloaded to jobbers and discount outlets. And, contrary to the stereotype, not every garment factory is a sweatshop.

The City Council recently held hearings on the manufacturing sector, and Deputy Mayor Fran Reiter has announced plans to establish yet another task force. That will undoubtedly divert energy and time from the urgent need to stimulate manufacturing, especially apparel, in New York.

With the real estate market drowning in 50 million square feet of vacant office space, the city should encourage converting obsolete commercial buildings to modern industrial facilities that combine manufacturers, designers and showrooms. With proposals afloat to rezone industrial structures for megastores, adult entertainment and the homeless, why not simultaneously change zoning regulations so commercial space can be recycled to serve apparel design, production and marketing?

Most important. New York needs to promote its goods aggressively. More than two decades ago, almost every New Yorker dismissed the idea that Bryant Park could ever be safe again, much less alluring. After decades of decline, too many public officials have given up on manufacturing, but the garment industry especially high-end fashion is coming back. With a little help from the city, every department store and boutique in Manhattan could make "Made in New York" the theme for its 1995 Christmas windows. There's no reason why "Made in New York" can't be the symbol for quality apparel, just as "Made in Japan" represents that nation's electronics industry.

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