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## MENU

HOME

NEWS

BLOG

PRODUCTS

DIARY

COMPETITIONS

EXCHANGE POINT

CURRENT ISSUE

PAST ISSUES

ADVERTISING

SUBSCRIBE

ABOUT US

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## SEARCH ARTICLES

Search by:

Content



## MAILING LIST SIGNUP



## NEWS

09.24.2009

### Shrink-to-Fit

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A WORKER AT HER SEWING MACHINE IN THE GARMENT DISTRICT, WHICH THE CITY IS CONSIDERING CONDENSING. ALEX HALL

With Fashion Week in the air, a city proposal that could forever shrink the Special Garment Center District (mid-blocks from 35th to 40th streets, between 7th and 9th avenues) is turning heads. The idea is to consolidate garment manufacturers into one building, which the city hopes will save them while allowing rents to increase everywhere else.

At first it sounds appealing: Industries have been sequestered into districts to protect residential areas from pollution ever since zoning was invented. Producers often huddle together for efficiency and employee wellbeing. But the idea of moving all garment manufacturers into one building in the heart of a vibrant and productive urban area would further reduce New York's manufacturing base, stifle creativity, and ghettoize skilled workers, already besieged by outsourced manufacturing and the recession.

According to the Garment Industry Development Corporation (GIDC), there are currently about five million square feet of space zoned for all related garment businesses in the area, but actual production is concentrated in about 14 buildings, with 60 percent of the space devoted to apparel-related business. Two hundred small factories and businesses of fabric, button, zipper, machine suppliers, showrooms, and the like comprise a substantial 9,000 jobs.

Currently, landlords can convert from industrial to commercial use only if they set aside an equivalent amount of production space elsewhere in the district, but numerous illegal commercial operations exist. Already as a result of the January 2005 Hudson Yards rezoning, residential use has been permitted on more side blocks where cheap hotels are now under construction.

## ARCHIVE

Search by: Title



Displaying items 1 - 10 of 1097

1 2 3 4 5 > >>

### [Shrink-to-Fit](#)

09.24.2009

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### [Open> Restaurant](#)

09.24.2009

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### [Far From Over](#)

09.23.2009

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09.23.2009

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09.23.2009

Harris, New York

### [Bernard and Anne Spitzer](#)

[School of Architecture](#)

09.23.2009

New York

### [Barnard College Nexus](#)

09.23.2009

New York

### [Park Century School](#)

09.23.2009

Los Angeles

### [Watts Learning Center](#)

09.23.2009

Los Angeles

### [St. Albans School](#)

09.23.2009

Washington, D.C.

1 2 3 4 5 > >>



For some, such as Deborah Brand of the 90-year-old M & S Schmalberg Custom Flower Fabrics, the idea of consolidation is seen as a safeguard that “will keep our rent down, and increase business by having all the domestic suppliers together.” For other designers like Francoise Olivas, who often uses R & C Apparel for custom work, “It points to the lack of interest in the city, which would rather invest in new bio-tech start-ups than in New York’s garment industry heritage.”

The garment building proposal is similar to one-stop shopping at the D&D Building in Midtown or the failed IDCNY in Long Island City, as well as an unrealized post-September 11 GIDC proposal for a manufacturing building in Chinatown. But there is no mention of whether and how the building now under discussion at 270 West 38th Street would be retrofitted, how it would be decided who located there, and if there will be enough space for future expansion.

Alternatively, the Garment Center could be upgraded as a networked series of sustainable and productive factories integrated throughout the area, a vital place comprising part of the everyday urban experience. (Such alternatives may be getting a fuller airing, as the Design Trust for Public Space launched a new initiative on September 8, called “Made in Midtown,” to study the fashion industry’s place in New York’s creative economy.) At any rate, as Olivas said, “Fashion is both art and commerce. The single-building idea would prohibit a growth in the economy where the fashion industry could once again burst at the seams.”

*A version of this article appeared in [AN 09.23.2009](#).*

Nina Rappaport