



Stitch-by-Stitch Revolution:

Kansas City's Historic Garment District & Museum

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If you were to take an inventory of the countries listed on the care labels of your trousers, coats, dresses and shoes a curious geography lesson would be in the making. From China to India and from Taiwan to Africa, textile industries have flourished in the late 20th century as international markets compete for Americans' insatiable need for comfortable and affordable clothing. If you had performed this same survey about sixty years ago, your list might be just as enlightening; in the 1940s Kansas City was rivaled only by New York in the production of pre-made clothing for the United States. Employing over 7,000 workers at its height, Kansas City's Garment District was essential in the realization of mass garment production. Located a mile-and-a-half north from the Crossroads Arts District — where contemporary Surface Design Association members are creating a tradition of textile exhibitions — the Garment District rose during Kansas City's birth as a crossroads of industry and cultural entertainment.

Imagining Kansas City as a crossroads seems a little hard, due to its current reputation as a fly-over state. In the years following the Civil War, however, Kansas City became prime for its location at the junction of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. The strength (and population numbers) of Kansas City ignited with the construction of the Hannibal Bridge in 1869. With the first bridge over the Missouri River, Kansas City became the central point for 11 national railroads (today, it remains the second largest railroad hub in the United States). This advantage made shipping to and from Kansas City extremely cost-effective for local businesses.

Prior to the construction of the Hannibal Bridge, Colonel Kersey Coats established the area to the immediate west of the Quality Hill neighborhood as a residential district. Due to its prime location, this area — bordered now to the North and South by 6th and 12th Streets and to the East and West by Washington and Wyandotte Streets — quickly filled with companies making and selling fabrics, shoes, clothing and hats. The Garment District fumed with activity as the entire area filled with vendors collecting products to resell to stores throughout the United States, models bustling to their next rendezvous and working women unionizing into groups such as the



International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Original companies included: Swofford Brothers Dry Goods Company, Barton Brothers Shoe, Mary Dean Dress Company, Burnham-Hanna Dry Goods, Montgomery Ward and Company, Danny/Debby Dare Manufacturing Company and Styline Manufacturing Company

During the 1930s, Kansas City became referred to as the *Paris of the Plains*. It was the city's entertainment venues rather than its fashion design that yielded this standing; designs produced in Kansas City were created to outfit the Midwesterner, the worker and the homemaker. Rather than couture clothing, designers of the Garment District created affordable and quality garments that maintained traditional styling. Its most prominent designer was Nellie Donnelly, who encouraged American mothers out of potato-sack like dresses and into her \$10 pre-made dresses that were flattering and form fitting.

It was Donnelly herself that contributed to Kansas City's innovative production methods that lead to the district's success. The first step towards Kansas City's success was its ability to purchase large quantities of raw materials from the east coast. Manufacturers would then hire local designers to recreate traditional suits, hats, dresses and coats. Once designed, manufacturers would step around the tendency to employ individual tailors for each garment and would instead organize a division of labor. Through this method, businesses could produce much quicker, but this was not the only advantage. Assembly-line workers would be trained to master a single technique: dyeing, cutting, steaming or stitching hand-bound buttonholes. Each stage the garment went through contributed to its quality. At its highpoint, the Donnelly Garment Company was "the largest garment factory in the world under one roof."

Demand for Kansas City's garments ran into a decline in the 1960s when various influences pushed the bulk of business elsewhere: Western distribution centers in Denver, Los Angeles, Dallas and Phoenix began evolving, and the industrialization of rural areas forced more people to relocate in cities where more buying options were available. Concurrently, independent sellers in the United States began losing bids to garment industries overseas. In 1973, the Garment District was placed on the National Historic Registry, and by 1980 it had diminished to half a dozen businesses.

Due to their establishment on the National Historic Registry, most of the original buildings within the Garment District remain in their original condition and have recently been restored into residential lofts and commercial office spaces after decades of abandonment. Capturing this history, the Historic Garment District Museum was founded in 2002 through the support of Harvey Fried and Ann Brownfield at the corner of 8th and Broadway (within DST's Poindexter Building's lobby).

No strangers to the district's history, Fried and Brownfield both worked within the district in their youth. Fried is the owner of the Fried-Segal Company, a garment wholesaler started by his father. As president of the Downtown Community Improvement District, Fried is committed to preserving the district and educating the public of its history. Brownfield, a designer, moved to Kansas City from St. Louis in the mid 1900s to begin her own manufacturing business. Within the museum is a black-and-white photograph of Brownfield in her youth working on one of her designs.

With photographs, timelines and artifacts, the museum maintains an important element of Kansas City's rich history. Though the museum brings together many marvelous artifacts belonging to local private and public collections, the experience leaves much to be desired. The exhibition itself can be difficult to view due to its appointment-only hours, the tiny exhibition space provides only enough room for a brief summary of the Garment District's history and the lack of interactive displays proves too distant for younger viewers.

Regardless of the museum's limited funding, the importance of the project has not gone unnoticed. Across the street from the museum is Garment District Place a park dedicated to the city in 1990 by Kansas City Parks and Recreation. Within the park, a 19-foot-tall steel sculpture of a giant sewing needle and button (designed by CDFM2 Architecture) resembles the Claus Oldenburg inspired needle-and-button sculpture located at the heart of the New York Fashion District. In 2003, the Jackson County Historical Society presented the Historic Garment District Group with an award to commemorate the group's investments in education. And, in 2006, the Downtown Council of Kansas City presented Harvey Fried with an Urban Hero Award — an award "bestowed on individuals and businesses whose contributions have made downtown a better place to live, work and visit."

During Kansas City's current extreme make-over revitalization, it is important for us educate ourselves in its history and to make a little room to commemorate how we got here. Tours of the Historic Garment District Museum are available by appointment only. To schedule a reservation contact Ann Brownfield at 913-205-8520 or annieb75@earthlink.net. A sister collection is open to the public at Oggi's Furniture, located at 600 Central Avenue, in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. •

Facing page: (above left) Industrial sewing machine creating button holes. (below left) Vintage yellow coat (detail).

This page: (above right) Vintage floral hat with netting. (below right) Vintage Vogue dress and accessories.

All photographs courtesy Amelia Ishmael. Artifacts from the collection of the Kansas City Historic Garment District Museum.

