

SYNERGY BETWEEN FASHION DESIGN EDUCATION AND FASHION DISTRICTS

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Abstract

Cities, and their inner-cities, are in constant flux. One of the reasons for this is the need to address the social and economic conditions which have resulted from the decline in manufacturing and consequent increased levels of unemployment. Regeneration is a means of addressing this problem. It requires a creative and integrated approach and necessitates developing the cultural and economic foci and resources of the city. Furthermore, regeneration also requires collaboration with various stakeholders including higher education institutions (HEIs).

Internationally, cities' attempts to regenerate and restore their cultural and economic foci have resulted in the emergence of fashion districts, particularly in cities such as New York (NY) and Los Angeles (LA). Such fashion districts have generally emerged as a result of clustering. Clusters are networks of interconnected businesses relating to a particular discipline, such as fashion. Fashion districts incorporate numerous fashion-related activities and businesses, such as textile and trims suppliers, wholesalers, design incubators, manufacturers, designers, and fashion design educational institutions. International experience with fashion districts suggests that clustering may be beneficial to the sustainability of the fashion sector. In South Africa, a similar fashion district has emerged in the inner-city of Johannesburg. However, despite the benefits that such fashion districts may present with regard to the regeneration of the fashion sector, it is imperative that various stakeholders, including HEIs, work collaboratively with these fashion districts.

This need for collaboration is addressed in systems theory, which underpins this paper. The paper is located within the theoretical interplay of systems such as fashion design education and fashion districts. Systems theory suggests that all structures and components are linked together. The paper, based on a PhD study, aims to contextualise three inner-city fashion districts, namely NY, LA, and Johannesburg. The paper, therefore, describes the synergy between fashion design education and fashion districts within the theoretical framework of systems theory.

Key Words: *Fashion design education, fashion districts, clusters, regeneration, systems theory*

Introduction

Regeneration of cities and inner-cities has been high on the agenda of policy makers, urban planners, local authorities and researchers. Regeneration has been necessary in order to address urban decline due to diverse factors, such as the decline of manufacturing, increased unemployment, and the relocation of office space (Cachalia, Jocum & Rogerson 2004; Neal 2003). Consequently, cities and inner-cities are in perpetual flux so as to address the social, economic, political and environmental needs of urban areas (Gratz & Mintz 1998; Montgomery, Stren, Cohen & Reed 2004; Jenks & Dempsey 2005). Landry (2000:6; 12; 20; 48) takes the position that regeneration requires a creative and integrated approach and relies on collaboration between various stakeholders. Such collaboration involves sharing knowledge and solving problems based on open-minded, lateral and conceptual thinking. The stakeholders involved include policy makers, organisations, local authorities, and higher education institutions (HEIs).

Regeneration can be achieved by developing cultural-products industries and resources, economic foci as well as the local characteristics of the city (Landry 2000; Bertolini 2005; Scott 2004). Cultural resources are symbolic of local products such as crafts, manufacturing and services and are "embodied in peoples' creativity, skills and talent" (Landry 2006:19). Several authors (cited in Scott 2004:463) maintain that the cultural-products industry is pivotal to job creation and urban regeneration.

The fashion industry is part of the cultural-products industry and can thus be regarded as a driving force behind local economic development (Scott 2004:463).

In an attempt to regenerate and restore the cultural and economic foci of cities, fashion districts in countries such as New York (NY), Los Angeles (LA) and Johannesburg emerged as a result of clustering. Rogerson (2001:52) argues that inner-city regeneration is made possible through the support of an “incipient industrial district and the enhancement of a cluster” of similar enterprises. Clusters, sometimes referred to as industrial districts or semiotic neighbourhoods, are described as amalgamated groups of businesses or “networks of production units tied together in relations of specialisation” of similar or interrelated activities (Porter cited in McCormick 1999:1532; Scott 2006). These clusters become branded for specific disciplines such as fashion, arts, design and media. In addition, they provide a platform for discussion forums, a physical hub and a consortium of resources for similar production activities while also “creating, running, and maintaining design as a core element in the district’s identity” (Koskinen 2009:4). Information sharing and knowledge creation and transfer occur within these districts because of the close proximity of businesses (Aage & Belussi 2008:481). This interweaving of similar businesses, production activities, information sharing and knowledge production appears to be located within a reciprocal systems interplay.

Despite the need for fashion districts, clusters and regeneration, it is imperative that various stakeholders, including HEIs, work collaboratively. “System-wide interdependencies”, collaboration, and joint ventures are pivotal to regeneration and economic development (Scott 2006:12-13). Landry (2000:48) affirms the need for HEIs and local authorities to work in partnership in order to address regeneration. Scott (2006:5; 7; 11) also asserts that “private-public partnership” is essential both for vocational training and for drawing in a pool of skilled workers to facilitate regeneration. Furthermore, Scott (2006:8) argues that universities, design centres and research establishments are essential in order to support these clusters. It is thus evident that there is a need for fashion districts and HEIs to support each other and work together.

Design education, part of the higher education spectrum, can thus also be used as a tool for regeneration. Although design education incorporates various disciplines, this paper will focus specifically on fashion design. Aage and Belussi (2008:476) propose that fashion is a “cultural item” with “certain symbolic values” accepted by groups of people while Kawamura (cited in Welters & Lillethun 2009:xx) argues that clothes are “tangible material products”. The fashion design process incorporates diverse fields such as design, merchandising, marketing, manufacturing and business. In this context, manufacturing refers to the production of end products relating to clothing. This particular manufacturing sector is often referred to as the apparel industry or apparel manufacturing.

Scholarly literature relating to fashion districts tends to focus on urban, social and economic perspectives, but there is a lack of literature addressing the synergy between fashion design education and fashion districts through the lens of a systems approach. In view of this gap, this paper, based on a PhD study in progress, aims to contextualise three inner-city fashion districts namely NY, LA, and Johannesburg. Furthermore, this paper describes the synergy between fashion design education, offered at HEIs, and fashion districts within the theoretical framework of systems theory. Systems theory implies that all elements are inter-connected and places particular focus on the input and output of any phenomena (Banathy 1992:10; 28-29). Within this context, input refers to the contributions of both fashion design education and fashion districts. Outputs relate to the regeneration of inner-cities, the establishment of fashion districts and the sustainability of the fashion sector. This interplay of systems however requires that all entities are locked together in a grid of complementary, harmonious, and interdependent relationships. This suggests that there ought to be a synergy between fashion design education and fashion districts.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section aims to contextualise the three fashion districts, namely NY, LA and Johannesburg. The second section describes the affiliation between fashion design education and these fashion districts from the perspective of a systems approach.

Fashion districts

The need to address regeneration within inner cities as well as the need to sustain the fashion sector resulted in the emergence of fashion districts in cities such as NY, LA and Johannesburg, as a result of clustering. This section contextualises these three inner-city fashion districts.

NY Fashion District

The NY Fashion District materialised because of consumer demands in the United States (US) for ready-to-wear apparel manufacturing to accommodate the mass market (Rantisi 2002:592). Furthermore, as of the 1880s, the influx of mainly Jewish and Italian immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe contributed to the emergence of the NY Fashion District (ibid). This influx brought with it a specialised workforce, coupled with cheap labour, and resulted in the centralisation of the fashion industry within the New York City (NYC) region (Helfgott cited in Rantisi 2002:592). Originally, the fashion industry was located in the Lower East Side of NY but retailers and manufacturers relocated northward. This relocation provided manufacturers with the opportunity to acquire showroom spaces in which to present their work while, at the same time, being close to buyers (Rantisi 2002:592). By the 1920s the initial NY Garment District (currently known as the Fashion District or Fashion Center) was firmly established in the “western half of Midtown Manhattan” (Rantisi 2002:592).

According to Rantisi (2002:592) and The Fashion Center Business Improvement District (FCBID) (2010), the NY Fashion District, in downtown Manhattan, is bordered to the “north by 40th Street, to the south by 34th Street, to the east by Fifth Avenue and to the west by Ninth Avenue”. The district includes a number of fashion related businesses including apparel manufacturers, textile mills, button and trim suppliers, accessory and jewellery showrooms, wholesale and retail shops, forecasting services, buying offices as well as two major fashion design schools, namely the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) and Parsons School of Design (Rantisi 2002:589; 594). In total, there are 4271 tenants, including fashion designers, wholesalers, suppliers, office professionals, architects, graphic designers, information technologists, artists and theatres, located within the Fashion District (FCBID 2010). Additionally, there are numerous restaurants and 24 hotels either in operation or in the process of development (FCBID 2010). This agglomeration of related activities has ultimately created a culture of local production and synergy (Rantisi 2002:589).

The FCBID, launched in 1993, is tasked with providing services to support the Fashion District’s real estate and tenant communities. The FCBID works in collaboration with “property owners, tenants” and the NYC to “improve the quality of life for all who live, work or do business” within the Fashion District (FCBID 2010). The FCBID is also responsible for promoting the Fashion District, creating a safe and clean environment and managing programmes such as the Fashion Districts Arts Festival, Kite Flight, the Art Space and the Homeless Outreach programme (FCBID 2010).

These FCBID initiatives have possibly contributed to the success of the NY Fashion District. The apparel industry has maintained its position as the principal manufacturing sector, in terms of employment, within the NYC region despite enduring decline over the past three decades (Rantisi 2001; Rantisi 2002). The NY Fashion District continues to be successful despite local and global challenges (Rantisi 2002:588). Moreover, this particular Fashion District continually refurbishes itself due to its variety and openness to new ideas and practices. This is evident on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where an alternative cluster attracts young, free-spirited, creative and “predominately foreign born” designers due to inexpensive studio space and a “unique mix of social and art-related communities” (Rantisi 2002:596-598).

LA Fashion District

Within the central business district of LA, there are designated areas concentrated on specific disciplines including fashion (Scott 2006:9). This designated fashion area focuses on apparel manufacture and fashion and was previously known as the LA Garment District. In 1996, property owners formed the first Business Improvement District (BID) along with the establishment of the LA Fashion District (Holter 2002:49). Currently, the LA Fashion District extends over 100 blocks in downtown LA, broadening from “7th Street on the North, Santa Monica 10-Freeway to the South, Spring and Main Streets to the West and San Pedro Street to the East” (LA Fashion District [n.d.]).

Pool (cited in Holter 2002:49) notes that the LA Fashion District declined in the 1990s but subsequently re-emerged. The LA Fashion District BID works in partnership with City officials and service departments to maintain and restore the Fashion District (LA Fashion District BID 2006:19). In an attempt to re-establish itself, the LA Fashion District underwent major transformation, moving from

dilapidated factory buildings to becoming a renowned fashion district with a “bazaar-like” ambience and becoming the “locus of upscale production and showroom activities” (Scott 2004:479).

The LA Fashion District houses various “textile establishments including fabric houses, trim shops and pattern and sample makers” (LA Fashion District BID 2006:11). Additionally, there are a number of designers, “manufacturers, wholesale distributors, importers, exporters and design schools” (LA Fashion District BID 2006:11). These design schools include the Otis College of Art and Design and the Fashion Business Incorporated. Although the LA Fashion District houses several fashion related organisations, there are also a vast number of housing units, restaurants, art galleries as well as the flower district (LA Fashion District BID 2006:9-11).

As a result of this fashion cluster, the LA Fashion District is regarded as the creative nucleus for the fashion industry within this region (LA Fashion District BID 2006:11).

Johannesburg Fashion District

The NY and LA Fashion Districts have served as a model in South Africa since a similar fashion district emerged in the inner-city of Johannesburg.

The inner-city of Johannesburg has been the location of clothing manufacturing for more than a century but has endured massive decline in recent years (Kesper 2003:87-88). The decrease in the number of clothing manufacturers, elevated levels of unemployment within these sectors, scarcity of skilled workforce and increasing labour costs, have led to this decline (Rogerson & Rogerson cited in Cachalia et al. 2004:532). The City Council of Johannesburg has taken measures to address this decline and regenerate the inner-city of Johannesburg (Cachalia et al. 2004; Rogerson 2006). Regarded as the “seedbed for fledgling entrepreneurs”, and the preferred “economic activity to secure incomes” and job creation, the Johannesburg fashion industry is a vital role player in economic regeneration (Kamaha 2004:426). Organising and managing economic development initiatives in the Johannesburg City are delegated to the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), an organisation of the City of Johannesburg (JDA [n.d.]). One of the initiatives of the JDA is the Fashion District project which includes promoting the sustainability of the fashion sector and the development of the Johannesburg Fashion District (Rogerson 2006:221).

The Fashion District aims to create a “safe, secure, attractive and functional district; to afford access to social and economic activities; and to maximise economic growth” (JDA [n.d.]). The Fashion District Institute, funded by the JDA, has been assigned to “take forward the long-term development of the fashion district with the vision of becoming the locus of the fashion capital for Africa” (Rogerson 2006:226). The Johannesburg Fashion District as the “fashion capital for Africa” is to encompass, foster and encourage the diversity of design concepts and contributions of both “non-South African, as well as South African designs” (Rogerson 2006:226). Non-South African design concepts are the result of the influx of immigrant clothing entrepreneurs from neighboring African countries (Cachalia et al. 2004:533).

The Fashion District, symbolised by its “new paving, lightning and sewing emblems”, expands over 26 city blocks on the eastern end of the Johannesburg City center, bordered by “Jeppe, End, Commissioner and Von Weilligh streets” (Dawson & Davie 2004; JDA 2011). Within the Fashion District, there are over 200 fashion-related businesses including manufacturers, a budget clothing retail industry, established fashion designers, SewAfrica House and the Fashion Kapitol (JDA [n.d.]; Rogerson 2006; JDA 2011). The Fashion Kapitol, a square in the district, consists of an open-air fashion ramp, a small amphitheater, 30 shops, and a walkway connecting Pritchard and Market streets (JDA 2011:1). The Fashion Kapitol was officially opened on the 15 February 2011 in conjunction with the opening of the annual Joburg Fashion Week (JDA 2011:1). Unlike the NY and LA fashion districts, there are no design schools located within this fashion district.

SewAfrica House is a project aimed at becoming the core of African design; it promotes a uniquely African fashion design identity (Rogerson 2006:226). Located within SewAfrica House are SewAfrica Training Center, and design incubators. SewAfrica Training Center emerged due to research conducted between 1999 and 2001 which established a need for support structures to address training in terms of technical and business skills within the Johannesburg Fashion District (Cachalia et al. 2004:536-539). The design incubators, on the other hand, are studio hubs where young emerging

designers can rent out spaces equipped with specialised machinery and equipment, exhibition sections and dressing facilities that are necessary for the fashion industry (Rogerson 2006:226). Studio hubs provide the “starting point from which designers can launch their career in the fashion industry” coupled with the advantage of being located within a cluster of similar activities (SewAfrica cited in Rogerson 2006:226).

In light of the above, fashion districts such as NY, LA and Johannesburg demonstrate that there are benefits associated with clustering of interrelated entities. This authenticates the theoretical underpinning of systems theory wherein collaborative and interdependent relationships are essential.

The relationship between fashion design education and fashion districts

Landry (2000:48) argues that there is a need for HEIs and local authorities to work in partnership. This affiliation could also extend into fashion design education and fashion districts. This section highlights the relationship between fashion design education and the NY, LA and Johannesburg Fashion Districts.

The fashion design process is diverse and includes design, manufacture, pattern technology, computer aided design, merchandising, marketing, and business related activities. International and local HEIs offer formal qualifications in fashion design with a curriculum that accommodates the varied fields of the fashion design process. The fashion design curriculum is both vocational and theoretical in nature. This implies that there is a combination of “knowledge, skill and judgement” (Guile & Okumoto 2009:22).

Within the context of the NY Fashion District, in a study conducted by Rantisi (2002:594), it was established that 70% of the designers located within the Fashion District obtained formal training from design schools/HEIs located within the NYC region. These HEIs, located within and around the NY Fashion District, include the Parsons School of Design, Pratt Institute and the FIT. Fashion design education offered at these HEIs “ensured a steady supply of skilled” workforce thus supporting the sustained levels of employment within the NY Fashion District (Scranton, as cited in Rantisi, 2001:4). These HEIs also provide the platform for “key social networks with the industry” and train students to design products that are creative, “easily produced, reproduced and marketed at an affordable cost” (Rantisi 2001:7). In interviews with the heads of two of the largest local fashion design programmes in NY, Rantisi (2002:594) established that “merchandising is a key element and distinctive strength in the NYC fashion design curriculum. This is reinforced through strong school-industry links, via internships and guest lecturers by industry heads” (ibid). In an interview with the internship director at FIT, Rantisi (2002:594) found that approximately 45% of design graduates find employment with companies where they did their internship.

In addition, these HEIs work in partnership with local designers and FCBID initiatives. ‘Tools of the Trade’, an economic development initiative by the FCBID in conjunction with FIT, offers a series of business related seminars (FCBID 2010). In Spring 2010, this programme focused on sustainable business practices in response to ‘going green’ (ibid). In Summer 2010, the ‘Fashion Center Sidewalk Catwalk’ promotion, presented by LF USA, a member of LI & Fung Limited, held an art exhibition to promote the Fashion District as a “world fashion capital” (FCBID 2011:6). This art exhibition featured mannequin art pieces created from waterproof materials by thirty designers from the NY Fashion District and two student design teams from FIT and Parsons School of Design (FCBID 2010; FCBID 2011). The FIT Costume Institute libraries house “old design sketches” and designers from the district are allowed to view these sketches for design inspiration (Rantisi 2001:7). It is thus evident in the NY Fashion District that there is a co-dependent relationship between fashion design education and the Fashion District.

Similarly, located within or adjacent to the LA Fashion District is the Otis College of Art and Design and Fashion Business incorporated. These institutions offer training in both design and merchandising (LA Fashion District BID 2006:11). Alumni and students from these institutions “provide a constant flow of creative ideas” into the LA Fashion District (LA Fashion BID 2006:11). Fashion designers and students collaboratively generate a creative location within the LA Fashion District which is considered to be “one of the most important creative centers” of the fashion industry in the US (LA Fashion District BID 2006:11).

In the Johannesburg context, an example of collaboration between the fashion district and HEIs can be found in the case of SewAfrica. In order to address training needs within the Johannesburg Fashion District, SewAfrica Training center required additional support structures in terms of materials and trainers. The Clothing Technology Department at the former Technikon Witwatersrand, a public HEI located in Johannesburg, was identified as a support partner to provide “materials and trainers” to support the SewAfrica Training Centre (Cachalia et al. 2004:540). This department is currently known as the Department of Fashion Design at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). The Department of Fashion Design at UJ assists in the provision of skills training at the SewAfrica Training Centre. In the past, students registered for the Baccalaureus Technologiae (BTech) qualification as well as graduates lectured at the training centre (Weber 2004:104), although this is no longer the case. It is now only graduates from UJ who lecture at the center and these graduates are equipped with the knowledge and skills required to address the needs of the SewAfrica Training center where the curriculum content is both theoretical and vocational in nature.

Despite this, the JDA (2004:35-36) maintains that there is a need to further strengthen the affiliation with the Department of Fashion Design at UJ. While, the utilisation of students and graduates from UJ is one way of contributing to the Johannesburg Fashion District, a survey conducted by Rogerson (2006:234) revealed that the majority of the designers located in the district’s design incubators received formal qualifications in fashion design from various other South African HEIs. This signifies that fashion design education is supplying a specialised skilled workforce to the Fashion District.

In another effort, African Fashion International, owners and organisers of the Joburg Fashion Week, in partnership with South African retailer group Foschini and the Fashion Kapitol hosted a graduate day entitled Fastrack (JDA 2011:2). Fastrack is “a development day that will not only showcase young designers, but will also provide an interactive platform with educational and informative activities” (Leisegang cited in JDA 2011:2). Several young emerging graduate designers from design schools across Johannesburg showcased their designs at the Fastrack event.

The above examples highlight that there is synergy between fashion design education and fashion districts. This corroborates the theoretical underpinning of this study, namely systems theory, implying that there are interdependent and collaborative activities between fashion design education and Fashion Districts. Such synergy is necessary to: 1) facilitate information sharing and knowledge production, 2) contribute to regeneration, 3) address the decline in manufacturing, 4) support economic development and, 5) ultimately support the sustainability of both fashion districts and the fashion sector. Therefore, fashion design education and fashion districts cannot operate in isolation or in opposition as this will not support these five fundamental elements of synergy.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the discussion in this paper that regeneration is possible by focusing on the cultural resources and economic foci of a city. In cities such as NY, LA and Johannesburg, the fashion sector is regarded as a cultural resource and economic focal point as well as a force for economic development and job creation. The fashion sectors in NY, LA and Johannesburg, traditionally located within the inner-city, faced the prospect of massive decline over the decades. In order to address this decline, regeneration efforts were implemented so as to maintain the original location of the fashion industry and ultimately ensure the sustainability of the fashion sector. It was thus that fashion districts in cities such as NY, LA and Johannesburg emerged.

These fashion districts, however, require a systems approach of interdependent, collaborative and symbiotic relationships with various entities including fashion design education. Although there is a synergy between fashion design education and the NY, LA and Johannesburg Fashion Districts, a problem exists with regard to further strengthening this synergy so as to foster greater economic regeneration and the improved sustainability of the fashion sector.

The literature suggests that there are two major differences between the US and Johannesburg fashion districts. Firstly, the US situation reflects a stronger link between industry, local designers and fashion design education. This may be because some of the design schools are located within the fashion districts. Secondly, the literature indicates that the US fashion districts focus essentially on production for mass market consumer needs but lack a distinct and unique design identity whereas

the Johannesburg Fashion District aims at promoting a uniquely African fashion design identity. Against this backdrop, the following recommendations are posed within the Johannesburg context.

Firstly, there should be stronger links between fashion design education and fashion districts in terms of collaborative projects and guest lecturing in order to enhance shared learning and knowledge production. Secondly, fashion design education could perhaps assume a stronger focus on entrepreneurship across all levels of the programme. The curriculum of entrepreneurship could incorporate theoretical and practical approaches so as to better equip graduates with the knowledge and skills required to develop their own businesses. This will support some of South Africa's leading branding strategies such as, 'MADE IN SOUTH AFRICA', 'WEAR ONLY SOUTH AFRICA (WOZA)' and 'MADE IN MZANZI'. Finally, design modules could be underpinned by Africa, as a source of inspiration, as opposed to adopting a Westernised fashion construct. International fashion designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Donna Karen have looked to Africa for design inspiration and the Johannesburg Fashion District is in a unique position to promote the construct of an African fashion design identity and compete in the global market for status as a world Fashion Kapital.

These recommendations could strengthen the synergy between fashion design education and the Johannesburg Fashion District since education provides the training for future emerging designers while the Johannesburg Fashion District provides an operational platform.

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Short Biography

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