



# The Harvard Crimson ONLINE EDITION

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## Arts

### Wicked Haute

Published On 9/17/2009 11:52:04 PM

By **ROXANNE J. FEQUIERE**

**Crimson Staff Writer**

Tucked away on a tree-lined Cambridge side street, the Maria L. Baldwin School regularly attracts some of the greater Boston area's newest fashion talent. On select Sundays each month, a few splashy sandwich boards along Massachusetts Avenue alert pedestrians to the Design Hive. Located in the school's auditorium, the self-proclaimed "retail experience," and "urban street market" showcases the work of independent designers and various artisans.

Just beyond the public school's front doors, crayon-scribbled artwork mingles with arrow signs beckoning shoppers downstairs to the gymnasium, where smiling vendors volunteer information about their wares—those dresses are made from 100% organic materials and these handwoven handbags are actually made from recycled candy wrappers. On stage, a DJ spins a steady stream of feel-good tunes, the sounds of "Summer Nights" reverberating off the walls.

It's a far cry from the frenzied, bustling chaos of early autumn in New York City, whose Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, an eight-day whirlwind of runway shows and presentations, came screeching to a halt yesterday. Editors, buyers, socialites, starlets, and It girls converge upon the city biannually to kick off the sartorial festivities along with a sprawling flock of photographers, journalists, and hangers-on, only to later resume the party across the pond in London, Milan, and finally Paris.

With these four fashion capitals essentially dominating the industry on the basis of tradition and clout alone, it's easy to overlook the countless other fashion weeks cropping up in cities around the globe, to varying effect. Tokyo and Copenhagen maintain a loyal following with cult native designers like Junya Tashiro and Henrik Vibskov, while São Paulo is also emerging as a worthy contender. Still the future of Los Angeles' once-successful fashion week is uncertain in the current economic climate, suffering from waning corporate sponsorship and the steady relocation of local talent. And here in Beantown, the Boston Fashion Week has been hovering below the mainstream media's radar for years.

As the complicated formula for success in the global fashion arena continuously becomes more unpredictable, the laid-back, unpretentious atmosphere that permeates the Design Hive appears peculiarly quaint. Yet this calm, collected approach to the commonly high-pressure flights of fashion industry fancy is in fact an essential component of Bostonian style, one that can be seen across all aspects of the local industry.

#### NOT JUST ANOTHER FASHION WEEK

While the proliferation of fashion weeks appears to be a recent development, with eight cities celebrating inaugural ones this year alone, Boston's has been going strong for more than a decade. Spearheaded by founder and executive director Jay Calderin, the event aspires to recreate the buzz of similar productions in New York while eschewing the unwelcoming exclusivity. "The local designers and fashion community didn't have a central voice.... The whole Bryant Park thing was fairly new," he says, referring to the host location of the twice-annual New York Fashion Week, "[And] I thought, 'Let's do something similar, except for a Boston audience.' It would be grassroots and very accessible."

Since its inception in 1995, Boston Fashion Week has maintained this egalitarian attitude. A glance at this year's schedule, which

spans from Sept. 25 to Oct. 2, reveals an assortment of consumer-friendly events, including a recession-ready shopping tour and an introduction to the industry for teenagers, all open to the public with minimal or no admission fees.

Though New York's fashion week originally inspired Boston's own, Calderin insists that the city isn't competing for feature coverage in *Vogue* or a star-studded front row. "I think [Boston's] coming into its own for a particular identity. It has less to do with all the pomp and circumstance and more with the smart aspect of fashion," Calderin says.

Yet he acknowledges that the local fashion week does not currently garner the attention that other cities receive in terms of media coverage, noting, "Obviously we would love to have national coverage, but the truth of the matter is Boston... is not going to be high on the list of priorities."

In spite of the lack of high-profile media attention, a discernible Bostonian aesthetic is emerging over time. "Here in Boston, people will have fun with trends and playful things, but [the trends] don't have staying power," Calderin says. "Here, we're seeing more of the art and science of fashion being celebrated."

Whereas the romance of Paris or the grit of downtown Manhattan has inspired many a feminine frill or sleek black garment, it is the hardy intellectualism of Boston that informs local designers. "Bostonians really pride themselves on being academic, and it's such a college town, too," Calderin says. "[Boston's] being recognized as a city where you can cut your teeth as a designer... and do really cool things for the sake of doing them." Citing collaborations between designers and MIT students that have produced technologically innovative fabrics as an example, he continues, "It's kind of cutting-edge because you get to be an artist and a mad scientist."

## SAY NO TO UGGS: THE ANTI-FAD CAMPAIGN

Echoing the glitz and glamour of New York Fashion Week itself, *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour took the notion of consumer incentives to dizzying new heights on Sept. 10 with Fashion's Night Out. Billed as "a global initiative to promote retail, restore consumer confidence, and celebrate fashion," amidst an economic recession, the event took place throughout the five boroughs of New York City—with designers and celebrities stationed at nearly every other store—and in cities from London to Beijing.

"Let's make shopping fun again," designer Isaac Mizrahi exclaims in one of the event's promotional videos.

Though Boston isn't included on the cosmopolitan roster of participating cities, Mayor Thomas M. Menino issued an official proclamation which allowed Boston to declare its own Fashion's Night Out. Menino highlights the importance of the city's fashion industry, noting it "employs thousands of people and creates millions of dollars in tax revenues for the city," which necessitates a concentrated effort to reinvigorate sales. Shana Yansen, founder and president of the eco-conscious online boutique Jute and Jackfruit agrees that her sales could stand to see an increase. "We're an online company, so we make sales nationwide," she remarks on her year-old Arlington-based business venture's range of customers. "Still, we could use a boost."

However, that boost has to sustain itself without the aid of gimmicks in order to have a lasting effect. "The whole thing [Fashion's Night Out] is designed to create a stir, and to get that economic push that we need nowadays, but what I liked... that the Boston retail community embraced was to get creative about engaging the customer," Calderin says. "Yes, we want to make the sales, but how are you going to stand out from the next person?"

For most Boston stores, this initiative is more than a one-night engagement. In the case of an e-commerce site like Jute and Jackfruit, consistently catching the eye of potential customers involves making its brand visible beyond the Internet. Yansen runs a booth each month at Design Hive, featuring environmentally friendly clothes and accessories. She also connects with consumers at Down:2:Earth, a local sustainable living exposition.

For other fledgling retail ventures, however, attracting buyers still takes a dash of creativity, genuine friendliness, and the old-fashioned tactics so typical of the Boston scene.

If the whimsically styled mannequins in the window of Cambridge's Vintage Revenge don't pull you in, owner Denise Goldhagen and

her exuberant Great Dane, Yentzer, will. Goldhagen, who opened up shop two months ago after shuttling the business throughout the Midwest for 11 years, admits to handing out flyers, publicizing herself on the Internet, and even placing an ad in the phone book, though “hardly anybody even reads the darn thing anymore.”

Yet it’s the painstakingly acquired collection of vintage clothing, ranging from the 1880s to the 1980s and dry cleaned and mended by Goldhagen herself that will certainly keep the business afloat. “I have no life,” Goldhagen jokes, explaining that she often sews quality buttons onto 1950s garments simply because the era produced shoddy originals. The steady stream of compliments from customers proves that her work does not go unnoticed. “This store is phenomenal,” a shopper cooed breathily upon entering.

Echoing Calderin’s notion that the Boston shopper resists flash in the pan trends, Goldhagen says, “I’m always in, and I’m always out. My garments have lasted 50, 60, 80 years, and the things they make today are just disposable clothes.” Instead, she seeks out pieces that are “relatively clean” with “no rips or tears,” regardless of era or fad.

Likewise the Boston fashion blogosphere participates in a cool disregard of the next It item, taking notice of stylish residents regardless of whether they’re wearing the season’s latest looks. Martini Severin is one such blogger and the photographer behind Beyond Boston Chic, “a part of a growing street-style movement around the world where photographers attempt to capture the style aesthetic or essence of their city.”

“It’s hard to describe the “Boston look” because there are so many transient groups here,” she writes in an email to The Harvard Crimson. “There are the students.... there are the tourists. The one thing I have noticed though is that each city and neighborhood has its distinct style. Beacon Hill as we would expect is a bit preppy. Somerville tends to be a bit hippie. The South End tends to be a bit laid back and minimal in their dress—think of Scandinavian style. Every city is different which is what makes it interesting.”

Boston’s contribution to the melting-pot of fashion scenes appears to be its subtle rebellion against hyper-commercialism. Like the title of Goldhagen’s store, which signifies a defiant alternative to the cheaply-made clothing she feels dominates the market, the Boston fashion scene is engineered to quietly subvert the flashy, elitist extravagance of the fashion industry at large. From industry vets to retail newcomers, there appears to be a sense of solidarity and customer inclusion that seems to evade the various other fashion scenes, making the Boston industry appear at once welcoming and inherently self-contained. Though it may be years until Boston’s name enters the list of fashion hot spots, those who partake in the city’s sartorial scene are certainly privy to a uniquely local brand of considerate commerce and innovative design.

—Staff writer Roxanne J. Fequiere can be reached at [rjfeq@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:rjfeq@fas.harvard.edu).

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