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SECTION II

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WWD COTERIE

Getting a Jump Start

An incubator project helps emerging designers and local businesses. By Cate T. Corcoran

RETAILERS ARE ALWAYS CLAMORING FOR THE NEW, THE DIFFERENT, THE UNDISCOVERED. New York State wants to help them find it.

Buyers at Coterie will find a section called Showroom New York, a design incubator for homegrown talent on the rise.

The Garment Industry Development Center started the showroom project in 2008 with the twin goal of helping fledgling designers and fostering local production. The program is funded by a two-year grant from the state legislature.

"Our mission is to get these guys off the ground, incubate them and move them to full-time showrooms," said Andy Ward, acting executive director and director of sourcing and designer development.

The program is juried, with a changing roster of retailers, manufacturers and fashion press each season. To qualify, the collections must be salable, press worthy and well constructed. The designers get a place in Manhattan where buyers, press, and stylists can view their lines, as well as a database of resources all the designers can contribute to and access remotely. In addition, the program offers the designers help in finding and working with local factories.

"We introduce them to as many sources as they need," said Ward. "They develop relationships, and we help them out with technical assistance any time."

Asked whether the designers could simply create their own showrooms and stores on the Web, Ward replied, "We've seen this a million times. Driving people to a Web site is difficult. Buyers will not buy from images. They have to see the actual physical sample. We're a market week-oriented business."

There are about a dozen designers in the program this season.

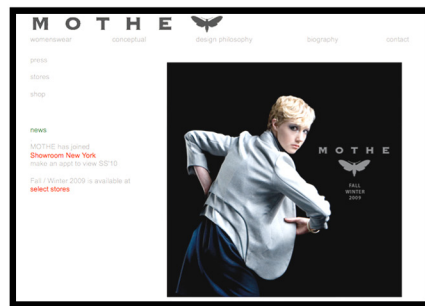
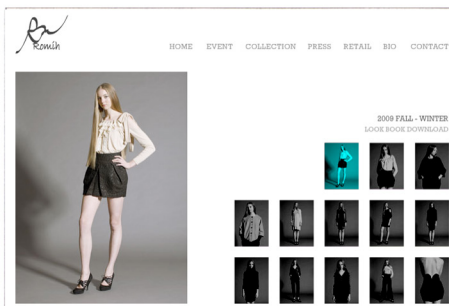
"There's a camaraderie with small businesspeople now. People are rooting for each other and people help each other out," said Schjanna Rydenour, designer of a collection called The Hilbert Project, named after mathematician David Hilbert, who she said was known for his dapper style.

"I'm just launching my line right now. I'm hoping Coterie gets us into a whole bunch of stores," she said, adding she would not have been able to afford to show at Coterie without the program. "We hope to grow into a viable business and hopefully, a few years down the road, we'll be running our own showroom."

"We're an item-based collection," she continued. "We're doing knit tops and pants, and also some woven tops, jackets and bottoms." Prices range from \$40 for a basic tank to \$140 for jackets and pants.



Eva Khurshid and Chulette (left).



▲ The Web sites of "Project Runway" winner Leanne Marshall, Romih, Kahri and Mothe, at Showroom New York.

"We were able to negotiate with vendors and factories and get prices we wouldn't have otherwise," said Nyla Hashmi, one of the designers and founders of Eva Khurshid. "Joining in Coterie and the Showroom has given us a ton of exposure."

Eva Khurshid specializes in sexy and fashion-forward, yet still modest, clothing. It is known for a tailored aesthetic with unexpected details, she said. Prices start at \$55 for a top, dresses are \$135 to \$165, and jackets wholesale from \$175 to \$190. "A woman who puts on our clothes will be infused with confidence, and confidence is a very sexy trait," she said.

"It's good because they helped me get into a few stores I wouldn't have been able to get to myself," said Lee Phutrakul of Chulette. "In the meantime, I try to do the sales myself, too, not only relying on them."

Everything is produced in the city. For fall, she is using organic fabric. "I try to be as green as possible," she said.

"We were able to negotiate with vendors and factories and get prices we wouldn't have otherwise."

— Nyla Hashmi, Eva Khurshid

The look is casual, yet sophisticated, clean and minimal, yet feminine. Lately, she has been experimenting with color contrasts, such as linings. Dresses wholesale for \$120 to \$160. Tops and blouses are \$70 to \$90. In the future, she will add jewelry.

Phutrakul also owns an online home decorating store, Shopmodi.com. Her next project will be to sell accessories such as vests online at a lower price point, she added.

Showroom New York has been a success, with most of its designers selling to a dozen or so boutiques, said GIDC's Ward. "It has had a great impact" on local product, driving a couple hundred thousand dollars worth of sample and product development business, and between \$750,000 and \$1 million worth of actual production each season.

The program received an extension, so it will exist for another year.

"We hope to make this place self-sustainable," said Ward.

The showroom initially had a looser mandate, but has honed its focus to contemporary designer ready-to-wear, said Samantha Bhatt, director of sales and marketing for Showroom New York.

"We can't really compete with China, but we can compete with Eastern Europe," she said. "The \$120 or \$150 wholesale dress is what we are focusing on. That's where we feel we can grow here in New York."

Added Rydenour: "We have all these wonderful manufacturers who don't want to go out of business, and they'll take a chance on these kids."

