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Garment District keeping up with the trends

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As someone who has spent his entire career working in the Garment District, the transformation of this Manhattan corridor has been nothing short of incredible.

Prior to my joining Handler Real Estate Organization, my family owned and ran G&G Shops, a junior fashion apparel chain. Our headquarters were right here in the Garment District, at 229 West 36th Street.

I started off as a stock boy at age 13, at our 34th Street and Broadway store, and over the 35-plus years thereafter, held numerous positions at the company, and eventually became the CEO.

During those years the Garment District (called the Garment Center back then) was a very upbeat, cool place to be. A generation of entrepreneurs was entering the business.

Unlike today, garment companies made goods on spec. They stocked goods. And though rare at the time, even a few major retailers based their headquarters in Manhattan, such as Burlington Coat Factory, Lerner's, and G&G.

The area marking West 35th to West 41th Streets, between Seventh Avenue and Broadway, was predominantly showrooms, while finished goods were whisked to and from various side street buildings between 7th and 9th Avenues, which housed cutting rooms, garment warehouses, factories, and sew shops.

Walking the streets was an adventure unto itself. What commuters were to the subways underground, four-wheel pushcarts were to the streets. You had to dodge the handcarts loaded with garments.

Yet when the working day was over, the neighborhood went dark. There was minimal retail during the day and none of it open on weekends.

Fast forward to 1997, and something significant happened. Bates USA, a major, high-end advertising firm, announced that it would be relocating its headquarters from the Chrysler Building to lease 200,000 s/f at 498 7th Avenue, between 36th and 37th Streets. That one change was the change — a precursor of things to come.

Twenty years ago you knew you were in the Garment District. Today, there are few physical remnants on the street. Now you'll find a variety of firms, including those in technology, advertising, media, and information, as well as entrepreneurs, finance leaders, and other professionals drawn to the District's 35 million square feet of modern office and classic loft-style space, and two million square feet of prime retail space.

The public open space, on Broadway's Garment District plazas, forms an oasis in the heart of the district.

The faces have changed — the New York of my youth doesn't exist anymore — but the entrepreneurial spirit of the Garment District is alive and well. It's really hard to walk the streets and think you're in the same place.



Energy and spirit are thriving in the Garment District.

The Garment District consists of 24 City blocks, now hosting over 6,000 different businesses. There are 16 subway lines and 55 bus routes. Penn Station is a short walk.

And the residential boom has been stunning. According to the Garment District Alliance, this former night-time ghost town has 7,000 residents, and climbing. There are 65 restaurants, and more than 150 coffee bars, and casual and specialty food options. There are sky lounges, approximately 550 retailers, and entertainment options of every kind.

At our Handler headquarters building at 561 7th Avenue, London-based Wasabi Sushi & Bento now has a beautiful glass-front, ground-floor retail space, packed seven days a week.

Once loaded with parking garages, the Garment District has seen most of them replaced by hospitality options, with 30 hotels and another ten in development, and some 6,500 rooms serving almost 720,000 guests annually.

The Garment District has long been a center of activity — action packed. It's just that this modern version is far different than what we're used to. The old-style garment firms may no longer dominate the area, but that energy and spirit is thriving like never before