



work ways

building an  
inclusive  
creative economy



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# Preface

## My lived experience

I am an immigrant. My mother is an immigrant and so is her mother. We all immigrated to this country separately within a span of 10 years. Like many immigrants, my mother came seeking better work opportunities. She got a job as a textile worker in a factory in the mid 1980's and witnessed the steady decline in the manufacturing industry.

This project allowed me to draw from my own lived experience and identity as an immigrant coming from a low income background entering into the creative field. I've been predominantly surrounded by white and upper class privilege as the dominant norm in my educational and professional settings. Carrying several marginalized identities myself, I felt like I was unable to bring my whole self into these creative environments. I have often felt inferior and less than.

For a long time, I was never comfortable with the responsibility of reminding others that we all do not share the same experiences, access to the same resources or support systems. It's uncomfortable for people to evaluate their own privilege. But I now know that it is my duty to address these issues in order to create equitable conditions.

If I place my lived experience at the forefront of my design practice, then all of my given identities can help me lead authentically and compassionately for individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with whom I share a common lived experience.

A large number of people do not have the same opportunities as privileged people. But that does not mean they should be left out. This is the dialogue that I want to have within design at large, building an economy that benefits marginalized people and ultimately addresses the underlying issues of economic disparity, which in the end, contributes to the lack of diversity in the workplace and beyond.

My purpose in life is to fight for the underdogs. Always.

## my personal values

This journey would have been impossible without doing a deep dive to learn what my personal values are, and then interrogating what I learned throughout the process.

### Autonomy

I believe all individuals are entitled to act upon their own values and interests without rigid social hierarchies being enforced on them. When an individual is presented with meaningful choices it allows for one to realize one's true self.

### Integrity

**I rely heavily on moral and ethical convictions. Integrity requires brutal honesty and humility, always holding oneself accountable for one's actions, and acting congruently.**

Creativity  
Self Expression  
Spirituality  
Intuition  
Abundance  
Interdependence

# Context

“ I called in with a fever and couldn't go to work and they said okay you can have the day off, but we will have to take the pay from yesterday as a penalty.

Anonymous undocumented worker



## Inequality faced by NYC immigrant population

New York City prides itself on being the most diverse city in the world and as the “creative” capital of the country. In New York City, it's clear that immigrants are drivers not just of the economy but shape the social fabric of NYC culture itself.

Immigrants make up 40% of NYC's total population and yet despite their high participation in the labour market, they are more likely to be in poverty than other New Yorkers - with a poverty rate of 25.2% in the City in 2017. Immigrants participate in the labor force at higher rates (66 percent) than their native-born counterparts (61 percent), with undocumented immigrants working at even higher rates.

## NYC's immigrant workforce trapped in low wage jobs

From 2009 to 2015, 57 percent of all new jobs created in New York City were in low. Naturally, I was curious to find out what occupations immigrants hold in NYC. While immigrants form a large part of the city's workforce, they are clustered in a relatively small number of occupations, dominating jobs that offer low to moderate wages in priority sectors such as food service, construction, health care, manufacturing, and retail. Lacking opportunity for advancement, many immigrant workers end up trapped in these lower wage jobs.

## Service industry

The service industry, such as hospitality & food service, is accessible to immigrants in part because it often does not require a higher education. Someone with limited english proficiency can still get a job. While it may be an appealing option, it funnels an entire class of people into jobs that offer less than a living wage, little job security and very few, if any, health or retirement benefits.

## Manufacturing industry

Surprisingly, an overwhelmingly high percentage of immigrant workers, most of whom are women, are in the manufacturing garment sector. The top ten occupations highest share of immigrant workers include pressers, textile, garment workers & sewing machine operators.



**New York City's  
Local Manufacturing  
Ecosystem**

**Stakeholder Map**

“

# Who is saying they want to invest in low skilled people?

Why are we building hotels and service jobs if manufacturing jobs pay more and we have the capacity to manufacture in nyc.

*Nguzi Okaro, Executive Director at Custom Collaborative*

## Mapping NYC's manufacturing ecosystem

I wanted to understand how agencies, organizations, & creative hubs were supporting local manufacturing in the city. Were any of these stakeholders advocating and working towards accessibility specifically focused on immigrant workers needs?

I began by mapping NYC's manufacturing ecosystem. It was definitely fragmented but I intended to hold interviews with anyone I could speak with. After conducting several semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and following up with secondary research this is what I learned. I've shared my key learnings on the following page.

# Key Learnings

from Local Manufacturing Stakeholders

## There are many efforts and organizations, but they are fragmented.

The scope is either broad, such as “general workforce needs”, or is not focused on the creative industries such as design or manufacturing. Even less are dedicated to the needs of immigrants making up the garment industry in NYC. There is a gap. In fact, I spoke to several stakeholders who commented that the city hasn’t been super helpful. City structured initiatives have not met the demographics identified by these stakeholders. And yet, the city has access to so many who could benefit. Their resources are more geared towards college educated individuals. There is a gap. Some initiatives have disbursed a few million dollars but it hasn’t reached any of these populations and it’s not clear how the funding decisions are being made.

## Land use and industrial spaces is key to building local economies.

Maintaining accessible industrial spaces is critical and is interconnected to job growth and entrepreneurship. Spaces that could be used for manufacturing are instead repurposed as hotels or residential, furthering the gentrification of neighborhoods across the boroughs.

## Investment in technology is needed for NYC’s fashion garment industry to thrive.

New York is particularly behind, although Brooklyn is starting to see some more advanced approaches to manufacturing, assisted by technology. Several individuals were comparing NY to places like LA & Detroit, noting that LA & Detroit had much more modern equipment. The industry itself is identifying that they need investment from the city not only in equipment but in Digital literacy training which is a straight line to technical design positions.

## Private Sector Partnerships are needed.

Many stated that buy in from private industry is necessary. It’s clear that for local manufacturing purchase orders with smaller makers and fabricators would be needed. Many organizations mentioned their success with the private sector. Issues of nearshoring models seem more viable in regards to costs and wastage.

## research question

*What are the gaps and challenges local manufacturing organizations have identified in advancing their efforts?*

## Value in creating Entrepreneurial & Coop pathways.

The Program director of Made in NYC noted they have seen a drastic increase in the number of minority and women owned manufacturing businesses in their membership. Although manufacturing does remain a good avenue in creating jobs for those who don’t have a college education, entrepreneurship should also be considered.

The Cooperative business model structure is an opportunity for a community of new entrepreneurs to learn and scale their businesses, rather than just having one person do all the marketing, purchasing, etc. A community of owners working together, each carrying different roles, making sure all workers are paid fairly. This is particularly important when dealing with immigrant and undocumented women who are more vulnerable to exploitation and unjust working conditions.

## There is a Labor & Skills Gap in the industry.

Companies are having a hard-time finding people that want garment manufacturing jobs - even if the jobs are well-paying with good benefits and don’t require a higher education. Younger people don’t want to work in manufacturing because there is a stigma. The perception is that it is an assembly line. One person I spoke with suggested that the industry is not perceived as having as much value as other industries, i.e Design. It has been a struggle for some companies to find the skilled workers they need. Challenges such as an ageing workforce, while some jobs require expertise and experiences to carry out the work. For example a specialized job such as senior pattern maker. Pricing structure is broken and needs to be relooked. In local industry, too often very little investment is allocated for the worker.

## Flipping the Narrative on Digital Literacy for the workforce

Now suddenly you’re flipping the narrative and now you’re taking them out of an industry that has been built on the backs of their impoverished situation to making them the masters of advanced manufacturing. Now, they’re big, and they’re in demand because of their high advanced skills.

## Increase in Minority Women Owned Creative Businesses

What we have been seeing in our membership is a drastic increase in the number of minority and women owned businesses - and overwhelming increase.

## Equitable Pathways into the middle class

Manufacturing and Industrial careers are still providing job opportunities in NYC. It is an important equitable pathway for people in NYC.

## research question

*What are the current opportunities for immigrant women without a formal education to enter into the creative / fashion industry?*

**The number of Manufacturing jobs have been declining drastically in NYC.**

Manufacturing jobs are, for the most part, good working-class jobs in New York City. Historically, manufacturing jobs have lifted the working class into the middle class but Manufacturing sector has lost the greatest share of jobs among all industries citywide (a 40 percent decline between 2003 and 2013) According to the Garment District Alliance, it is estimated that only 5,000 garment manufacturing workers remain in Manhattan's Garment Center.

To make matters even worse, the Garment Center is in the process of being redistricted. The plan is to preserve and place the remaining shrinking design and manufacturing businesses into a building with a smaller footprint. Next year, the city plans to open Made In NY Campus in Brooklyn's rapidly gentrifying Sunset Park, using the city-owned Bush Terminal. Ironically, from 2012 to 2018, the number of garment factories declined by nearly half with the greatest loss in Industry City, where garment contractors were reduced by 71% from 42 to only 12 businesses.

Unfortunately without the city's protection or businesses committing to produce locally, these remaining businesses are likely to continue to decline.

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## Garment Workers vs. Designers

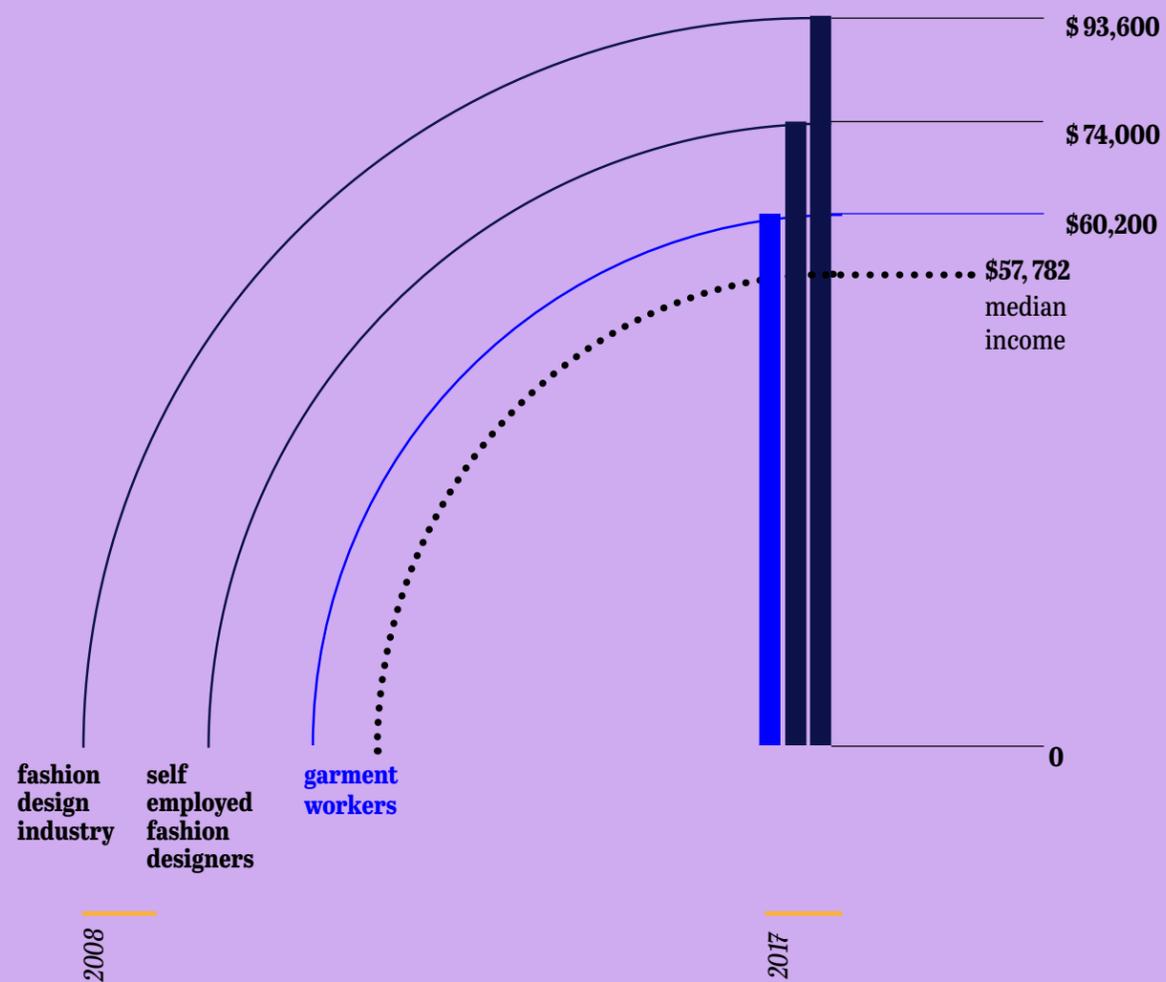
While the local garment manufacturing industry is steeply decreasing, NYC remains one of the fashion capitals of the world. The Fashion Design Industry as a whole is a prominent and growing field that offers high wages in NYC.

NYC's Fashion Design industry provides a high salary for workers.

The average wage increased to over \$93,600. Most of the job growth we have seen is from self employed fashion designers. These wages went up to \$74,000.

In the last decade, Fashion Production jobs have decreased overall in NYC, yet average wages in fashion production employment have risen to \$60,200.

The urban fashion manufacturing sector plays an important economic role in the city's ecosystem, although all of these professions provide wages above the city's median income. \*Median household income for foreign-born New Yorkers (\$43,700) is significantly lower than that of native-born households. Fashion production has the potential to employ large numbers of people without requiring high levels of formal education. I see this as an opportunity



potential to employ  
large numbers of  
women



