

## STYLE

# New Wave of Designers Opening Stores in SoHo

By CONSTANCE C. R. WHITE SEPT. 2, 1997

Abutting the stern black and red brick walls of Marc Jacobs's new store in SoHo is the soft creamy white exterior of Marie-Anne Oudejans's Tocca boutique, where last month workers were perfecting walls the colors of mint and pistachio.

SoHo encourages the kind of creative individualism exhibited in these two very different stores. And this freedom -- real or imagined -- is one reason the neighborhood has become the preferred site for designers opening boutiques in New York this year.

Mr. Jacobs's store opened at 163 Mercer Street (Houston Street) on Aug. 11, and he and his partner Robert Duffy are to hold an invitation-only opening party tomorrow in a garage next door. Tocca, at 161 Mercer, begins welcoming customers this week and will celebrate with a party on Sept. 10, and Jussara Lee opened on Aug. 20 at 125 Greene Street (Prince Street). Other SoHo stores scheduled to open this fall are Helmut Lang, D & G by Dolce & Gabbana, Kenneth Richard, Betsey Johnson, Rene Lezard and Atsuro Tayama. Ms. Johnson has operated a boutique at 130 Thompson Street in SoHo for 18 years. She will close it when she opens a larger flagship at 138 Wooster Street (Houston Street) in October.

With the mushrooming of these designer stores, SoHo has once again become a serious fashion shopping district, after having its creative ambiance thrown out of kilter by commercial giants like J. Crew and Banana Republic that swept in bearing bland, homogenous goods.

The latest entrants -- which include Vivienne Tam, who opened her first store in April down the street from Ms. Lee -- join other names that stand for innovation in SoHo: Anna Sui, Todd Oldham, Kate Spade, Nicole Miller, Cynthia Rowley and If. There are also the popular French labels Agnes B. and A.P.C. This boom in SoHo mirrors the store openings last fall on Madison Avenue, when Giorgio Armani, Gianni Versace, Prada and Valentino all opened stores within blocks of one another with lavish parties and celebrity-socialite gridlock provided by names like Eric Clapton, Oprah Winfrey, Lee Radziwill Ross, Seal, Mike Tyson and Robert De Niro.

Many of the SoHo stores, however, are having relatively quiet introductions. Rather than a flush bottom line, the openings, for several designers, indicate frustration with the increasingly difficult demands of big retailers.

Beyond that, emotional considerations have attracted this wave of designer-retailers to SoHo. Earlier this decade, renegade designers like Isaac Mizrahi, Ronaldus Shamask, Mr. Oldham and Mr. Jacobs sought refuge in SoHo's lofts from the commercialism of Seventh Avenue. They risked their businesses to be there. The sharp-tongued fashion scuttlebutt at the time held that retailers and fashion journalists would sooner hop a plane to Paris to see a line than take a cab or subway train to see some poor soul below 14th Street. A marginal amount of business can still be lost by a designer who chooses to place a showroom somewhere other than on Seventh Avenue, but clearly the tide has turned. For customers and fashion executives, SoHo is now a significant destination.

Though many art galleries have decamped to Chelsea, the Bloomsbury mentality that pulled early fashion innovators to SoHo is still a draw for designers. And being an image-conscious breed, they want that association for their stores, too.

"The energy here is artistic, and my customers are here," Ms. Tam said. "They're downtown, they're edgy. For my first store to be in SoHo is really important. I want it to be a fashion gallery. Madison Avenue has a more established feeling."

Like an artist's exhibition, the SoHo stores promise to be strongly individualistic, as if the designers have given as much weight to erecting their own self-actualization shrines as they have given to selling clothes.

Ms. Tam's Asian-influenced fashions are housed amid Chinese red walls and Asian carved doors.

A sloping terra cotta roof shades the dressing rooms in Ms. Lee's store, which sells her Brazilian-inspired women's line and children's wear. Ms. Oudejans's femininity and fancy are translated from her ethereal embroidered skirts and dresses into the candy-colored walls and delicate fixtures. And Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana are creating a home for their secondary D & G line that amply reflects the line's streetwise fake couture. The Jacobs store marries fashion and interior design in an orgy of minimalist luxury.

Designers opening shops in SoHo feel themselves part of a community that plays host to some of the city's most interesting furniture emporiums, like Modern Age and Palazzetti, and trendier eating spots, like Balthazar and Da Silvano.

"Marc, me, our friends, we tend to go out to restaurants in this area," Mr. Duffy said. "We always knew we wanted to open a store down here. I can relate. It's hipper, it's younger, it's cooler. SoHo signifies these things to people. It's weird for me to say younger because I'm a 43-year-old man, but I gravitate toward SoHo. And I'm also a 43-year-old man who wears designer clothes."

The companies that are bringing back a strong fashion presence to SoHo cannot afford to make their stores mere showcases, unlike their global fashion rivals uptown. SoHo rents run from one-half to one-third or one-quarter those on Madison Avenue. Prime SoHo locations between Broadway and the Avenue of the Americas and between Houston and Spring Streets rent for \$100 to \$125 a square

foot. But prices are rising fast, increasing as much as 60 percent in the last year.

"It's such a war zone down there with space," said Cynthia Steffe, a designer who is searching for a space for her first store. "When we started looking there were more spaces available between \$100,000 and \$120,000 a year. Now it's anywhere between \$150,000 and \$200,000 in the heart of SoHo. It's not only the American companies you're competing against, it's Europeans."

The Europeans include Mr. Lang, who is based in Austria and is to open his store at 80 Greene Street (Prince Street) in November. It will sell his men's and women's collections and his jeans wear. His partner in the venture is the Japanese fashion company Onward Kashiya, which is also backing Ms. Oudejans's venture on Mercer Street.

The D & G store, at 434 West Broadway (Prince Street), bows tomorrow, a week before Mr. Dolce and Mr. Gabbana open a store for their signature collection at 825 Madison Avenue (68th Street).

If shoppers, a large contingent of them tourists, are looking to be engaged by a creative endeavor rather than an institutional one, that may be these designers' trump card. Unlike their uptown colleagues, most are not household names with large amounts of department store space devoted to their merchandise.

For designers like Ms. Lee, Mr. Jacobs and Ms. Tam, their new stores are the only place in America where the entirety of their work and their creative vision is on display. SoHo has become a showcase and a welcoming club for them. Or perhaps, indeed, the "gallery" that Ms. Tam said she aspires her store to be. The difference is that there are shopping bags and a cash register at the door.

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