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## Can Chicago Become a Fashion Capital?

Don't laugh. Mayor Daley is trying to make the Windy City a center of design on a par with New York or L.A.

By KRISTIN KLOBERDANZ/CHICAGO



A dress designed by Ilissa Shefferman, who is starting her own label.

The city of Chicago is famous for many things — frigid windy winters, fine architecture, the hapless Cubs, to name a few — but high fashion is not one of them. For most people, what usually comes to mind when thinking of fashion in the City of Big Shoulders is baseball caps and khakis. But Mayor Richard M. Daley thinks he can change all that. Daley recently announced the creation of a Fashion Advisory Council, a city-backed coalition of local designers and industry champions who will promote fashion growth. By nurturing designers, the city hopes to bolster its retail economy, gain tourism dollars and heighten its image as a world-class city.

To help realize that dream, Daley has created the position of director of fashion arts and events in his administration. Melissa Turner, who recently took that job, will act as liaison between the council and local fashion organizations, design schools, designers and the community, and will prepare for September's Fashion Focus, a 10-day fashion blowout based in Millennium Park.

In the long run, the council wants to make Chicago a hospitable haven for new designers. The city boasts four design schools, but since there are no large clothing headquarters, many graduates quickly flee to New York or Los Angeles to find jobs as assistant designers; some, like Cynthia Rowley and Wendy Mullin, have gone on to great success. "If someone wants to design right out of school, their best option is to start their own label," Turner says. That, of course, takes capital that many young grads do not yet have.

Yet Turner is not entirely starting with a blank canvas. Over the past few years, high-scale boutiques showcasing local talent have been cropping up everywhere, and the organization Gen Art moved into town, creating buzz with New York-style fashion shows. Several experienced local designers who sell nationally, such as Orlando Espinoza, Lara Miller and Michelle Tan, have been garnering attention on the pages of glossy fashion magazines. "Down the road I believe many jobs will become available, particularly in areas such as fashion merchandising, modeling, fashion photography, fashion show production and pattern makers," says Espinoza, co-chair on the 19-member council. "I think you're going to see a drastic change."

Ilissa Shefferman, who graduated from Chicago's International Academy of Design and Technology last September, says it was a conscious choice to start her label, I.S. Designs, in Chicago. Was she concerned about setting up shop in a town known more for its pizza than its pret-a-porter? "It does kind of have a dorky reputation, but I think it's undeserved," she says, laughing. "Chicagoans are pretty open-minded, and they love to branch out wearing local designers — there's a feeling of pride."

That same pride is starting to actually lure some designers to relocate in Chicago from the coasts. Orlando Espinoza moved his business here from Los Angeles six years ago. And Joëlle Minassian, who designed for Versace and Gianfranco Ferré in Italy, returned to her hometown in December to launch a handbag business. "Chicago has a lot to offer," she says. "New York is a great city, but I think Chicago is more forgiving and there's more space to grow. There's so much talent here that's been overlooked."

Some established designers, however, are skeptical of the city's attempts to help them much in the next few years. "I love Chicago, but the industry is quite challenging," says Maria Pinto, a council member and life-long Chicago resident. "The resources are in other places, the buyers are all in New York; it's been tempting [to move] at times." She says she hasn't noticed things getting smoother for her business lately, but she hopes the Fashion Advisory Council will help start-up companies. "They might have a little easier time getting launched, and the city can surely have an impact on that." If all goes as planned, it could soon be the other way around, with the designers leaving their mark on Chicago.