

FASTFORWARD

בזרען זענען

On Delancey and Orchard: A Brave New Shopping World

By SUSAN M. KIRSCHBAUM

He signs along Ludlow and Orchard streets on the Lower East Side feature printed plates above the actual street names that read "The Bargain District." These days, the phrase "the new kids on the block" may be more accurate. The area, once a Jewish wholesale enclave, is now dotted with international tourists, limousines, models and entertainment types, all looking for the latest designs in the area's swanky new boutiques.

"About 20 or so new shops have opened in the past two years, and young designers have added a special synergy to the neighborhood. They sort of all feed off each other," said the executive director of the Lower East Side Business Improvement District, Matthew Bauer. His organization hoisted the bold bargain-street emblems five years ago. While you still may find an inexpensive leather jacket (\$150) at Carl & Sons (172 Orchard St.), trendy is rapidly replacing the traditional of *bubbe's* generation. On a recent afternoon, designer Tony Melillo sat in the basement of his store, Nova USA (100 Stanton St.). Formerly the

style director of Esquire magazine, Mr. Melillo was drawing sketches for the launch of his women's line. On his decision to open his store last October, he explained, "It was one of those jump decisions. I had a really good feeling [about the neighborhood] — the people, the energy, the kids."

A look inside Nova USA, with its floor-to-ceiling windows and minimalist white shelves stocked with judo drawstring pants (\$75) and T-shirts, manifests a sharp contrast to nearby discount hubs, with their search-and-find racks of suits and dresses and tags of slashed prices. Said Nova's publicist, Kerry Youmans, "The Europeans and the Japanese come down here to the shop. When there is an article in a French magazine, a few weeks later there will be all French people in the store."

The international set was more than evident inside Fragile (189 Orchard St.). There, a 20-something Asian woman in a black mini-dress searched for a "not little dress" for a weekend in Atlantic City. Damian Sarrazin, the 27-year-old Parisian who opened the store (then named

Xuly Bet, after its signature line) two years ago, pulled out another skimpy black number. "No, it's too much," said the girl. "Too much money?" asked Mr. Sarrazin. "No, too much

to the Lower East Side Business Improvement District, which covers Delancey Street from Allen to Suffolk and Grand from Forsythe to Essex, the vacancy rate for commercial space has declined to 5% from 17% over the past three years.

While the rents are reasonable, the bargains in these new-fangled boutiques aren't passed on to the customers. At DDC LAB (180 Orchard St.), a posh atelier opened a year ago by designers Roberto Crivello and Savania Davies-Keller, a fuchsia skirt and shirt ensemble (\$1,000) hangs just past the white-and-chrome espresso bar. The store also features such accessories as the Zippo Galuchat

Stingray (\$290), a cigarette lighter. Terri Gillis, a former artist who has lived in the neighborhood for almost a decade, takes a different approach. In TG170 (170 Ludlow St.), the shop she opened seven years ago, she carries less expensive, mostly New York designers. Said

Ms. Gillis, a small woman wearing a black Judas Priest shirt and square Gucci frames, "I try to keep it so that it's not just for rich people."

The Lower East Side shopping tradition originated in the 1890s when Eastern European Jewish immigrants sold and bought from pushcarts filled with wares. While some Jews fled in the 1930s, when space and air regulations required pricey renovations, the neighborhood remained the place to find deals on good coats or tailored jackets, especially on Sundays, the day Orchard Street closed to traffic but remained open for vendor stands and post-Sabbath shoppers. These days, Orchard still shuts down for the Sunday market, but as with many of the traditional stores in the area, business has died down.

For some, the adjustment to the Lower East Side's brave new shopping world has proven difficult. Kathy Amiri, an Iranian Jew, who lives in Roslyn, N.Y., with her husband, 22-year-old daughter and two teenage boys, opened Shab (199 Orchard St.), a discount store for women's designer labels such as Anne Klein and Liz Claiborne, seven years ago. When asked about business, she shook her head from side to side and raised her hands in the air. "I've been taking money out of my pocket for the past

couple of years to finance this. Things have gotten much worse," Ms. Amiri said. "Nobody comes in, and I try to supply more now for teenagers. It's like a war between the old and new generation."

When David Gatenio's father, Carl, a Sephardic Jew, arrived from Greece 48 years ago, he opened Carl & Sons Clothing Co., which features men's shirts, suits and leather jackets. Since his father passed away, the younger Mr. Gatenio has inherited five buildings his father had bought on Orchard Street three decades ago. "I don't think the boutiques will really help. I think they'll hurt us," he said, even though, as a landlord, he stands to profit from rising rents. "We're bringing in one type of clientele, and they are bringing in another.... They've got more spit and polish, as they say. It's too fancy, and it drives our customers away."

Mr. Bauer of the Business Improvement District put it another way. "About 25 years ago there were very few places to get discounts on designer clothing. Now there are outlets," he said. "The ability for mom and pop stores to compete in the city really rests on them being able to offer something different."

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COURTESY OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT
VENERABLE VERSUS CHIC: Above, right, the 50-year-old Carl and Sons; right, a new look at Fragile.