

Timeline – A Brief History of Fashion in New York City¹

1670s	Paris becomes the epicenter of fashion under the reign of Louis XIV, who is often recognized as the one who inspired France to become a world-renowned hub of fashion by focusing on textiles and creating opulent dress codes at Versailles. ²
1820s	Influx of immigrant craftsmanship, largely from Europe including Eastern European Jews and Italians.
1850s	Invention of the (Singer) sewing machine in Boston, Massachusetts, enables mass production and, in part, ready-to-wear clothing.
1860s & 1870s	Birth of the New York City department store including Bergdorf Goodman, Lord & Taylor, Tiffany & Co., and Macy's along "Ladies' Mile", a premiere shopping district, that stretches 6th Avenue between 14th and 23rd streets, adjacent to the garment factories opening nearby. ³
1916	The first zoning law is passed which eventually leads to the development of the Garment District as it is known today.
1939-1945	The German occupation of Paris during World War II allows for other cities to gain standing as global fashion hubs. ⁴
1940s	New York City becomes a global fashion capital. The mayor, industry, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union worked together to create the New York Dress Institute to promote the city as a premier site for fashion. ⁵ In 1944, the Fashion Institute of Technology and Design is created with a similar joint effort. ⁶
1943	Originally called "Press Week", the first New York Fashion Show is established by the industry's first publicist, Eleanor Lambert, at the Plaza Hotel so American designers could gain exposure during World War II. ⁷
1950s	Modern sportswear (or "separates"), developed by American fashion designers, which began in the 1920s, becomes more popular in the 1950s as women's participation in leisure and athletic activities increases. ⁸
1960s & 1970s	Production sites outside of the U.S., such as Hong Kong, Seoul, and Dhaka are starting to be used given the relatively cheap labor. The number of garment manufacturing firms drops by half, from more than 10,000 to more than 5,000 and this downward trend continued through the 1980s and 1990s.

Timeline *continued*

1980s	Imports are increasing as a share of all clothing in the country. Some smaller fashion companies merge to form conglomerates, resulting in the growth of large, multinational, publicly owned corporations. To remain in business, small companies seek cheap labor to control costs. A resurgence in immigration to New York City around the same time made lower cost labor more widely available.
1987	The City Planning Commission creates the Special Garment Center District to preserve roughly 8 million square feet to manufacturing use through zoning in order to limit conversions to other uses. The real estate industry fights back, stating the uses are at odds with the current needs of the city, but the industry loses and the zoning amendments pass.
1993	New York Fashion Week begins in Bryant Park as a consolidation of citywide press events known as 7th on Sixth. ⁹
2004	The city rezones the larger area around the Garment District from industrial to mixed-use, allowing for both residential and commercial development. However, a Special Garment Center District “Preservation Area” rule prevents buildings larger than 70,000 square feet from converting to apartments, hotels or offices unless the landlord provides an amount of manufacturing space equivalent to what is being lost. ¹⁰
2018	The city modifies the zoning rules to allow office conversions in larger buildings by lifting the 1980s requirement for commercial landlords to preserve manufacturing space when converting a building to office space. That restriction remains in place today.
2024	New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) launches the M-CORE program designed to support the renovation of underperforming commercial buildings—some of which may be used to bolster segments of the fashion industry—by providing tax breaks for real estate developers.



Macy's (undated)



Macy's (2024)

Endnotes

- 1 For the timeline, unless otherwise noted, the source is Montero, “A Stitch in Time,” https://garmentdistrict.nyc/sites/default/files/admin-files/2022-04/GD_HistoryBook-ONLINE-lo.pdf.
- 2 Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, “The King of Couture: How Louis XIV Invented Fashion As We Know It,” *The Atlantic*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/the-king-of-couture/402952/>.
- 3 “New York City Fashion Documentary: History of Fashion Industry and NYC Garment District, Part 3, Birth of the Department Store, Ladies Mile Historic District,” *Urbanist: Exploring Cities*, May 6, 2020, video, 9:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qa9V27H2xUE>. Related blog, <https://urbanist.live/new-york-fashion-capital/>.
- 4 Montero, “A Stitch in Time.”
- 5 Montero, “A Stitch in Time.”
- 6 Montero, “A Stitch in Time.”
- 7 “A Complete Guide to New York Fashion Week”, *In Style*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.instyle.com/when-is-nyfw-7644376>.
- 8 Schorman, Rob. Review of *When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth of American Sportswear*, *American Studies*, vol. 48 no. 1, 2007, p. 153-154. Project MUSE, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.0.0157>.
- 9 Chantal Fernandez, “What Happened to New York Fashion?,” *Business of Fashion*, February 2020, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/fashion-week/new-york-fashion-week-2020/>.
- 10 Rececca Baird-Remba, “Garment District Rezoning Would Profoundly Alter Manufacturing Enclave,” *Commercial Observer*, October 19, 2023, <https://commercialobserver.com/2023/10/garment-district-rezoning/>; “Hudson Yards Redevelopment Plan,” *Empire State Development*, P 2-12, <https://esd.ny.gov/sites/default/files/HY-EIS-2-merged.pdf>.