

# SUSTAINING JOHANNESBURG'S FASHION DESIGN INCUBATORS: THE ROLE OF FASHION DESIGN EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

*Internationally, design incubators have emerged as a result of clustering. These design incubators serve as artist studios, or as design centers providing opportunities for young emerging entrepreneurs to acquire studio workspaces located within a cluster of similar economic activities. In South Africa, design incubators, particularly fashion design incubators, have emerged in the Johannesburg Fashion District, situated within the central business district of Johannesburg.*

*Research conducted in 2006 established that there were a number of emerging fashion designers located within the Johannesburg Fashion District design incubators. However, interviews conducted in 2012 revealed that the number of fashion designers positioned within these design incubators had declined. This paper contextualizes the fashion design incubators within the Johannesburg Fashion District and deliberates the reasons for this decline. The paper then moves on to discuss the fundamental role of fashion design education in sustaining these fashion design incubators. The paper pursues a qualitative research paradigm employing semi-structured interviews with business stakeholder participants affiliated with the fashion design incubators. A content method of data analysis categorized the raw data into themes. Two major themes emerged, namely, the factors contributing to the decline mentioned above, and the role of fashion design education.*

*Given that fashion design incubators may support economic development and the sustainability of the fashion industry, fashion design education could play a central role in sustaining these design incubators. As such, this paper contributes to the development of sustainability within the fashion sector and the discourse of fashion design education within a South African context.*

**Keywords:** *fashion industry, design incubators, fashion design education*

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## **Introduction**

This paper offers an account of the empirical findings of a research inquiry undertaken in 2012. The paper elaborates on the factors that have contributed to the decline of Johannesburg's fashion incubators and the role, within the South Africa context, of fashion design education in sustaining these incubators. I begin the paper by drawing upon literature and empirical evidence to contextualize fashion incubators, both internationally and within Johannesburg. Thereafter, the methodological approach is discussed before the findings of this research inquiry are presented. The paper concludes with a summary of the findings and recommendations.

Clustering is a term that denotes designated spaces of networks of specialized and related businesses and activities (Scott 2004; Hall cited in Gilbert 2006). Within these clusters, incubators serve the purpose of 'artist studios, or as centres for design', offering opportunities for small entrepreneurs to charter workspaces equipped with machinery and specialized equipment (Landry 2000, p. 123; Kruz 2010). Kuratko and Hodgetts

(cited in Kruz 2010, p. 33) advocate that incubators are enterprises with studio spaces for rent with pliant terms and cheaper rates. Furthermore, Burnett and McMurray (2008, p. 61) express the view that incubators function as a 'catalyst for business growth, and ... as a bridge between the internal protected incubation environment and the external exposed business environment'.

International research indicates that design incubators have emerged in countries such as Toronto, London, Rotterdam, New Orleans, Borås and Stockholm (Kruz 2010, p. 34). For example, Mills (2008, p. 22) mentions the New York-based Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable Innovation affiliated with the Pratt Institution. Although the Pratt Design Incubator for Sustainable Innovation accommodates various design offerings, some design incubators specifically focus on the praxis of fashion design. Such examples of fashion-specific incubators include the Textile and Fashion Factory in Borås, Sweden in conjunction with the Swedish School of Textiles (Kruz 2010, p. 37). A further example is a fellowship research centre funded by Skills Victoria for the Australian fashion sector. In addition, Walsh (2009, pp. 16; 18) identifies the Centre of Excellence, Design and Textile Incubator in Huddersfield, United Kingdom and the Fashion Design and Technology Centre for Fashion Enterprise affiliated with and originally set up as an incubator for graduates from the London College of Fashion. This last example elucidates, from an international perspective, the fact that collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) and design or fashion-specific incubators does indeed exist.

In South Africa, a similar fashion incubator, located in SewAfrica House in the downtown Johannesburg Fashion District, has materialised. The Johannesburg Fashion District is a regeneration initiative undertaken by the City Council of Johannesburg (Cachalia, Jocum & Rogerson 2004; Rogerson 2006). Under the mandate of the City Council of Johannesburg, the Johannesburg Development Agency coordinated and managed economic and regeneration projects in the Johannesburg City including the fashion district (Johannesburg Development Agency [n.d.]). Although forming part of the fashion district, the Johannesburg fashion incubators are privately owned, funded and managed by an individual business entity.

Affording emerging fashion designers the opportunity to rent studio space furnished with focussed equipment, machinery, exhibition spaces and dressing facilities was the vision of the Johannesburg fashion incubator (Rogerson 2006, p. 226). Accordingly, stakeholders from SewAfrica House (cited in Rogerson 2006, p. 226) postulate that the incubators create a preparatory point from which young fashion designers can launch their career in the fashion industry. Interviews conducted by myself in 2012 with business stakeholder participants from the Johannesburg fashion incubator, substantiate the fact that creating affordable studio spaces for young fashion designers who were unable to afford the luxury of large rental fees was the vision for the establishment of the fashion incubators. This vision also entailed generating spatial positions for young graduate fashion designers to enter the fashion industry environment upon graduating from HEIs.

The location of the fashion incubators, within the cluster of the Johannesburg Fashion District, manifests numerous benefits for young fashion designers. According to Rogerson (2006, p. 226), stakeholders from SewAfrica House advocate that the fashion incubators make available the added advantage of being located within a cluster of similar activities. Malatse (cited in Rogerson 2006, p. 233) notes that fashion designers situated in the cluster of the Johannesburg Fashion District benefit from 'agglomeration economies and are more advanced in terms of their business development than those operating outside of the cluster'. Moreover, incubator residents have access to the Fashion Kapitol, a space where fashion designers can showcase their artefacts. The Johannesburg Development Agency ([n.d]; 2011) confirm that the Fashion Kapitol in the Johannesburg Fashion District comprises various shops and boutiques, offices and studio space, a restaurant, a small square, an outdoor fashion ramp, and an amphitheatre. In light of this discussion, it is apparent that the Johannesburg fashion incubators provide spatial opportunities for young fashion designers to work from, meet with clients coupled with the prospect of networking and wider target market engagement.

In 2006, Rogerson, in a national research project, quoted interviews with twenty resident fashion designers positioned within Johannesburg fashion incubators. Drawing from this empirical research, it is clear that twenty, perhaps more, fashion designers were resident in the Johannesburg fashion incubators. However, in 2012, I conducted interviews with business participants linked with the fashion incubators and found that only two fashion designers remain. This declining number of residents implies that the Johannesburg fashion incubator has undergone degeneration. My interviews revealed that this decline in fashion incubator occupants transpired over a four year period, and that 2010/2011 saw the most severe decline.

In the section that follows, I elaborate on the methodological approach taken towards data collection and analysis in exploring the reasons for the decline of the Johannesburg fashion incubators and the fundamental role of fashion design education in supporting these incubators.

## **Research design and methodology**

For the purposes of this research, a qualitative research design was followed. Merriam (2009, pp. 5-6) states that qualitative researchers are concerned with understanding the social and cultural contexts of people's lives, how they come to construct meaning and interpret their experiences. A qualitative research design was applicable given that I set out to understand the context of the Johannesburg fashion incubators, the difficulties that contributed to the decline thereof and the fundamental role of fashion design education with the purpose of supporting the sustainability of these fashion incubators.

In line with a qualitative research design, I employed open-ended, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with two business and manager stakeholder participants associated with the Johannesburg fashion incubator. This type of interviewing was considered appropriate given Babbie's (2001, p. 240) assertion that open-ended interviewing allows opportunities for participants to answer as they deem fit, and given Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009, p. 130) argument that semi-structured interviews allow for guided thematic topics to be addressed.

I conducted these interviews in the participants' natural setting and covered two thematic topics, namely reasons for the decline of the fashion incubators and the function of fashion design education. These interviews were captured via a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. The textual raw data from the interviews were then analyzed and interpreted employing content analysis which categorizes content into themes and categories (Burns 2000; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004). The raw data was arranged into two overarching themes, namely, the decline of the Johannesburg fashion incubators and role of fashion design education.

### **Decline of the Johannesburg Fashion Incubators**

Within this broad theme, four sub-themes emerged, all of which speak to the challenges that contributed to the degeneration of the Johannesburg fashion incubators. These sub-themes are: 1) spatial positioning and economic and social challenges, 2) the attitude of incubator fashion designers, 3) skills and knowledge deficiency, and 4) funding and partnerships.

### **Spatial positioning and economic and social challenges**

The spatial positioning of the Johannesburg fashion incubators within the inner-city of Johannesburg posed a major challenge. There remains a perception that the inner-city of Johannesburg is unsafe and afflicted with numerous socio-economic dilemmas.

Security in the Johannesburg Fashion District presented significant challenges resulting in twelve-hour, day-time operational access to the fashion incubators. Such limited and uncompromising operational hours did not allow tenant fashion designers the flexibility of longer working hours. In light of this confined accessibility, a number of fashion designers departed the fashion incubators and relocated to alternative sites in surrounding areas with twenty-four hour safe access.

In addition, from an economic perspective, the location of the fashion incubators did not entice the more affluent, higher-income target population who preferred to venture into neighbouring suburban areas such as Sandton, Rosebank and Parkhurst. Furthermore, those economically powerful clients who were inclined to visit the fashion incubators were stymied by the prevalent absence of secure parking facilities in the Johannesburg Fashion District. In view of this, incubator fashion designers were not able to reach the economic majority and, instead, were predominately exposed to lower income target markets that did not have the capital to engage in the purchase of luxury fashion artifacts. As a result, resident incubator fashion designers were susceptible to significant economic pressures leaving them in a position where they were unable to fund the production of their artifacts, as they required the capital they had to address more basic survival needs, such as food.

Linked to these economic challenges, the social dilemma of prostitution in the surrounding area of the fashion incubators and the semiotic neighbourhood of the inner-city Johannesburg Fashion District fostered a further drawback. By day the fashion district is a retail environment but by night the city's landscape changes to a non-affluent residential area lined with prostitution. Given the biased belief that where prostitution occurs, danger exists, fashion shows and evening events could not be held at the Fashion Kapitol. Although the Johannesburg fashion incubator's vision, as mentioned earlier, was for residents to have access and a platform to exhibit their work, the inability to host nightly events in the Fashion Kapitol resulted in fashion shows and fashion weeks occurring in more affluent areas that drew in retail buyers and a more economically attainable customer base.

These spatial, economic and social challenges resulted in incubator fashion designers relocating into more competitive surrounding neighbourhoods such as Juta Street in Bramfontein and Arts on Main on the outskirts of the Johannesburg inner-city.

### **Attitude of incubator fashion designers**

Providing space equipped with specialized machinery and equipment was the planned purpose of the fashion incubators. However, over time, this machinery was abused by resident fashion designers and the high cost of maintenance of this machinery far surpassed expectations.

Additionally, interviews revealed that resident fashion designers lacked an understanding of the fact that, in order to survive under fluctuating economic conditions, hard work and determination remain key ingredients. Interviews revealed that many resident fashion designers were more attentive to the fame and grandeur of showcasing their artifacts on the fashion ramp as opposed to commitment, diligence and engaging in hard work. Beyond that, while incubator fashion designers may have harboured notions that they were entrepreneurs, they lacked the entrepreneurial spirit to invest time and effort in securing contractual agreements with potential clients. The fact that Johannesburg fashion incubator residents viewed themselves as entrepreneurs contradicts the view of Kruz (2010, p. 25) who notes that many designers do not consider themselves as entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, the participants in this study confirmed that many tenant fashion designers were more drawn to abiding by international fashion trends as opposed to creating a sense of personal identity in design and

addressing the needs of localized target markets. Incubator fashion designers appear to have designed artifacts for personal gratification and corresponding to what they believed apt for the target market as opposed to recognizing the requisites of the target market that could possibly support financial growth in terms of generating sales.

### **Skills and knowledge deficiency**

Based on their tertiary education, incubator fashion designers possess the knowledge, skills and competencies in design and the technical know-how to manufacture clothing artifacts. However, they are deficient when it comes to business, marketing and entrepreneurial knowledge and the practical application thereof. This lack of business, marketing and entrepreneurship acumen is not only evident in South Africa. Kruz (2010, p. 26) generated similar findings in research conducted with Swedish fashion designers and industry experts. The literature does confirm the need for the development of business skills amongst fashion designers (Andrews 2011; Chapman 2011).

Incubator fashion designers did not have the capability to furnish design concepts that were specifically market generated. They did not understand or recognize the shifts in market demands or what the market required. This lack of target market understanding is probably the reason why resident fashion designers were unable to market and establish themselves within the right target market. A lack of understanding of the target market made it difficult for incubator fashion designers to translate design and technical skills into economically viable artifacts. Beyond that, these fashion designers were found to have predetermined assumptions and dispositions regarding the economic and social context in which design artifacts are produced, thus leading to unrealistic costing of clothing products which far surpassed what the target market could afford.

Another prevalent contributing factor to the decline of the Johannesburg fashion incubators was the conceptualization and integration of knowledge, skills and competencies obtained from tertiary education into real-world socio-economic conditions. Prior to their entrance into the fashion incubator, interviews confirmed that tertiary education provided little or no exposure for fashion students to engage with real-world contexts, to make mistakes and solve problems. In light of this, I established that incubator fashion designers were not sufficiently educated with regard to problem solving skills due to the fact that their tertiary education provided little or no opportunity for the integration of discipline-specific knowledge, skills and competencies coupled with problem-solving skills in real-world situations. As a result, resident fashion designers had no experience with real-world engagement, little opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them with the intention of finding the best possible solution.

These aforementioned deficiencies in knowledge, skills and competencies hindered the success of incubator fashion designers.

### **Funding and partnerships**

As discussed earlier, international research suggests that design and fashion incubators are associated with higher education institutions (Mills 2008; Walsh 2009; Kruz 2010). Cachalia et al (2004, p. 540) confirm that a partnership did exist between the former Technikon Witwatersrand, currently known as the University of Johannesburg. Deducing from my findings, the intention of this alliance with the University of Johannesburg was to allow Baccalaureus Technologiae fashion student designers with the opportunity to acquire residency space at the fashion incubators while engaging with formal qualifications. My findings revealed that this collaboration between the fashion incubators and the University of Johannesburg no longer exists.

The non-existence of an affiliation with a higher education institution contributed to the decline of the Johannesburg fashion incubators. This problem was exacerbated by funding and subsidization challenges. As noted earlier, the Johannesburg fashion incubator is a privately owned, funded and managed business endeavour without any capital from government, industry or any other stakeholders. Funding, rental subsidization for tenants and sponsorships were never forthcoming for operational resources, maintenance or administration for the Johannesburg fashion incubators. Due to the absence of funding, personnel with the sole responsibility of managing the fashion incubators were not employed and administration thus became the responsibility of the individual private funder.

In contrast to the funding situation evident in the Johannesburg fashion incubators, Kruz (2010, p. 37) notes that the Textile and Fashion Factory incubator in Borås, Sweden is funded by 'government, communities and various other partners', and Walsh (2009, p. 17) affirms that product development in the Centre of Excellence Design and Textile Incubator in Huddersfield is sponsored by the Yorkshire Fashion Week. In another international case, Walsh (2009, p. 19) notes that the London-based Fashion Design and Technology Centre for Fashion Enterprise has 'access to large scale investment from industry' and assigns high levels of funding to its resident fashion designers.

The above cases suggest that international fashion incubators receive various forms of financial support from government, industries and fashion related organizations. Kuratko and Hodgetts (cited in Kruz 2010, p. 33) indicate that residents of incubators 'receive financial, managerial, technical and administrative support services' with modest rental fees or in some cases no leasing payment. Kuratko and Hodgetts (cited in Kruz 2010, p. 33) further postulate that the incubation period is 'limited from two to five years with the purpose to increase the chances of survival for small start-up companies'. Residents of the Textile and Fashion Factory incubator in Borås have free rental space for a one year period with a minimal fee in the second year of incubation (Kruz 2010, p. 38). Beyond that, Kruz (2010, p. 38) affirms that financial sponsorships are available to resident fashion designers to fund production, fashion shows or expositions. This international practice stands in opposition to the Johannesburg fashion incubator situation given the dearth of funding and lack of rental subsidization. These factors appeared to stymie the incubation period of resident fashion designers and manifested in the decline of the incubators.

### **The role of fashion design education**

The previous section highlighted challenges that led to the decline of the Johannesburg fashion incubators. In this section, I examine the role of fashion design education in South Africa in sustaining the Johannesburg fashion incubators.

Scarcities in business, marketing and entrepreneurship manifested in the deterioration of the Johannesburg fashion incubators. A need for fashion curriculum content to focalize the development of business, marketing and entrepreneurship among student fashion designers was found. However, theoretical knowledge in business, marketing and entrepreneurship necessitates the translation and fusion of this knowledge into practice so as to support deep learning as opposed to attaining surface theoretical knowledge. Interviews confirm that generic understanding of entrepreneurship in real-world contexts does not suffice and there is thus a need for fashion design education to integrate theoretical components into authentic hands-on retail experience. In order to produce fashion graduates who are capable of engaging with target market population groups and who come to better understand the target market and shifts in commercialized demands, the curriculum content of fashion design could consolidate theoretical and empirical research for better articulation into real-world working environments.

In addition to the above, findings suggest that fashion design education does not adequately equip students to integrate curriculum content into real-world socio-economic situations. Graduate fashion designers were found to have knowledge and skills in design and technical aspects, but their education and training did not provide any tangible hands-on experience nor did it provide any opportunity for the application and consolidation of knowledge in real-world milieus. Opportunities to enable student fashion designers to obtain experience by engaging with the socio-economic conditions of real-world situations may foster greater ability and experience with addressing errors, experimentation, evaluation, and refinement in designed artifacts. Coupled with this, there remains a need for fashion design education to foster the development of problem solving skills within real-world frameworks. This is because it was established that incubator fashion designers were not trained in this area. It is the role of fashion design education to generate opportunities for students to practice problem solving in authentic situations.

Finally, drawing from the findings of this study, the sustainability of the Johannesburg fashion incubators requires a three-pronged partnership model between the incubator, HEIs and large organizational entities such as retail organizations. Interviews established that coalition with HEIs could be favourable in terms of postgraduate studies. Such an association could perhaps not only sustain the fashion incubators but also support research capacity development for HEIs. Empirical findings suggest that the fashion incubators could serve as a by-product for academic research thus becoming centres of excellence that foster a culture of practice-based research for postgraduate fashion students. One interview participant recommended that registered postgraduate fashion students could engage with research projects that inform praxis and this practice could be carried out in the form of a residency at the fashion incubators. This proposal is consistent with Kruz's (2010, p. 33) assertion that university-affiliated incubators act as a 'spin-off for academic research projects'. Kruz (2010, p. 43) also found that collective partnerships between universities and incubators are mutually beneficial because incubators are 'highly knowledge extensive environments'. In light of this, a symbiotic partnership between the Johannesburg fashion incubators and fashion design education could be advantageous to both entities.

## **Conclusion**

Empirical findings suggest that over a four year timespan, the Johannesburg fashion incubators witnessed degeneration in the number of fashion design residents. This paper set out to elucidate the challenges that manifested in the decline of the Johannesburg fashion incubators and the role of fashion design education in sustaining these incubators.

The spatial position of the incubators within the Johannesburg inner-city fashion district and the economic and social predicaments surrounding the district were major factors in this decline. The outlook of the incubator fashion designers coupled with their knowledge and skills deficiency supported this deterioration. Finally, the lack of capital support for the incubators and non-existent partnerships with HEIs presented supplementary contributing elements.

To sustain the Johannesburg fashion incubators, fashion design education can play a fundamental role by preparing student fashion designers with adequate business, marketing and entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and praxis coupled with problem solving skills for real-world contexts. The consolidation of fashion design curriculum content into practical real-life situations was also considered necessary. Additionally, reciprocal constructive partnerships between HEIs and the fashion incubator were essential and could support and develop postgraduate research.

I conclude with a call for fashion design education and training to provide opportunities for fashion students to engage with empirical research immersed in real-world socio-economic situations that may inform the practice

of design projects. The Johannesburg fashion incubators provide a lucrative site for academic and practice-based research; it is thus recommended that HEI's develop partnerships with such incubators.

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