



Shopping Routes: networks of fashion consumption in London's West End 1945–1979

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Forty years on from *Time Magazine's* celebrated identification of 'Swinging London', the 60s retain a powerful hold on the popular imagination, associated particularly with fashion and popular music. This multi-disciplinary research project places these mythologies within a more sophisticated study of the development of the West End as a centre of fashion consumption in the post-war period and its changing position in a hierarchy of world fashion cities.

KEY FINDINGS

- The transformation of London in the mid-1960s did not occur overnight, but evolved out of pre-existing structures of retailing, wholesale, promotion and consumer behaviour. As early as the mid-1950s, social commentators were identifying a more democratic turn in style and the importance of young working class consumers.
- The 'back region' activities of fashion supply chains, professional networks and the synergies fostered by spatial proximity were as important in fostering innovation in clothing commodities as the 'front region' practices of design creativity and consumer demand.
- The role of individual designers and boutiques needs to be understood in a broader context of relationships across sectors – including production, wholesaling and retailing.
- Consumption became increasingly significant for planning during the period, both in relation to changes in masterplans for the West End, and in the influence of the boutique movement on conservation.
- The shifting balance between boutiques, chain-stores and department stores in London's West End was shaped in part by changes in consumer identity, but the power of the commercial property market, particularly the vulnerability to speculation of some established stores was an important independent factor.
- The mythologies of the period were constructed and promoted less in the so-called 'Swinging London' films, which were often condemnatory of new consumer behaviour, than in wider cultural forms such as advertising, PR and journalism.

During the 60s there were claims that London had established itself as a new kind of world centre for fashion. The project provided the first systematic analysis of the concept of the 'Fashion World City'. The seemingly ephemeral fashions of the King's Road or Carnaby Street are part of a much longer narrative

connecting fashion and metropolitan modernity. This project was concerned not just to think about the connections between fashion and urban life, but also to show fashion's part in actively 'spatializing' the world – ordering it into a hierarchy of places of greater or lesser importance.

HIGHLIGHTS

Through archival, object-based and oral history work undertaken by a team of curators, urban geographers, fashion design and media historians, this project provides a re-conceptualisation of the practices of fashionable consumption in London's West End. There was a strong concern to go beyond the more visible and familiar histories of commodity in the shop and the street, towards the more hidden networks of manufacture and supply. The developments of the 60s cannot be understood exclusively in terms of designer and retail innovation, or shifts in cultures of consumption. Close study of both the Mayfair couture sector and the development of youth fashion in Soho show the ways that dramatically different dimensions of the London fashion scene grew out of longer industrial histories and wider geographies of production and supply. Our work also highlights the importance of the wholesale sector in the streets immediately behind the great shopping thoroughfares of Bond Street, Oxford Street and Regent Street.

The project also provides new perspectives on key elements of the standard history of the West End, such as the boutique. The project understood these new shopping forms as a part of divergent responses to the development of new consumer cultures. There were two novel approaches to retail architecture that emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s. In the first, the store was conceived as an integral part of the comprehensively developed centre, set amid a rationally planned urban landscape of efficient road grids, pedestrian decks and towering office blocks. By contrast, the boutiques of the King's Road and Carnaby



Juliet Glynn Smith,
psychedelic poster
for D. H. Evans, 1968

Source: V&A: E.868–1968

Street represented an alternative model of an ephemeral, even provisional, architecture of surface. These shops colonized the lower storeys of old buildings within London's historic street patterns. These shops were supremely 'of the moment', yet also very much in tune with the West End's well-established consumption cultures, and an important influence in the re-evaluation of London's Victorian streetscapes in the emergent conservation movement.

The project's concern for the wider landscape of consumption was also apparent in work on West End department stores. A series of closures of major stores took place during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. *The Times* described the closure of Gamage's of Holborn in 1972 as being 'as a majestic a sight as a ship sinking.' In part this was a story of failure to adapt to new consumer demands and behaviours, but the period saw successful in-house 'boutique' developments like Way In at Harrods or Miss Selfridge, that proved more sustainable than independent retailers like Biba. However, many traditional stores were vulnerable, not because their customer base was declining, or their retail methods were anachronistic, but because of the value of their sites in an increasingly frenetic property market.

The project also reconsidered the form and influence

of the new British cinema of the period, particularly the so-called Swinging London films, like *The Knack*, *Darling*, *Georgy Girl* and *Alfie*. Far from being uncritical celebrations of new freedoms and cultures of consumption, these films worked within a reactionary moral framework that was particularly severe on independent young women enjoying the pleasures of fashionable consumption. The films represented a much more diverse urban geography than the anticipated focus on the key consumption sites of Swinging London. The London that is portrayed is often drab and hostile, and there are strong continuities with the look and moralities of the earlier British New Wave. These films were not just stand-alone 'texts', but also worked as a part of a developing 'extra-diegetic' network of promotion and celebrity. For new stars like Michael Caine, Terence Stamp and Julie Christie, there was a vital conflation between their 'real' public lives in the new London, and their on-screen personae. The lasting iconography of Swinging London is a testament not so much to the significance of contemporary British cinema, as to the emerging power of advertising, marketing and journalism organised around music and fashion cultures.

A major international conference on 'Fashion's World Cities' and a subsequent book examined comparative

Right:
Mary Quant, pinafore dress, 'Peachy'. Wool. British, 1960. Worn and given by Mrs Margaret Stewart
Source: V&A: T.27–1997

Far right:
'The Towers of London,'
Ambassador Magazine,
January 1965



histories of established fashion centres such as Paris, New York, Milan and Tokyo, but also looked at the connections between fashion and metropolis in other cities, such as Moscow, Mumbai and Dakar. The project argued that we need to go beyond the common focus on clusters of elite design, or on the significance of collections and couture systems, to provide a more multi-dimensional understanding of the connections between cities and fashion, that includes a much more active role for consumption practices and performances, as well as the relations between production and consumption highlighted in our London studies. This work also connects with ideas about cities as centres of economic and symbolic power, and with the analysis of global urban hierarchies.

Our exhibition 'Sixties Fashion' held at the Victoria & Albert Museum from June 2006 to February 2007 displayed around 70 garments from the period. The exhibition was organized geographically around districts of London's West End, to emphasize the diversity of London's fashion culture and the links between different kinds of fashion and different urban landscapes. New interviews with designers, journalists, society figures, retail-workers and consumers contributed to the exhibition and publication and were juxtaposed with

commentaries from visitors whose memories of the period are recorded on the Museum's website (www.vam.ac.uk/sixtiesfashion). The key interviews will be accessible at the National Sound Archive.

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study has significant resonances for those concerned with the development of fashion and other creative industries. One overlooked aspect of the 60s fashion movement, and of the transformation of popular culture more generally, was the significance of relatively affordable premises in areas just off established centres of fashion consumption. In different ways both Carnaby Street and the King's Road worked as urban 'interstices.' Our oral history interviews repeatedly feature the rhetoric that 'anything was possible' in the period – a key part of this claim relates to affordable premises in central London.

The study also indicates the lasting significance of connections between fashion design and manufacturing, wholesale and established retail sectors in the city. Our work indicates that this formation has been increasingly replaced by more separated and even globalised fashion structures, in which the synergies between cultures of production, supply, retailing and consumption have been

dissipated. At the extreme we identify 'Potemkin' cities of fashion, centres of elite retailing, but without the complex intersecting and overlapping geographies that characterized earlier fashion centres.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Shopping Routes: Networks of Fashion Consumption in London's West End 1945–1979 was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme and ran from October 2003 to September 2006 (grant number RES-143-25-0038). The project team was Christopher Beward at the Victoria & Albert Museum; Bronwen Edwards and David Gilbert at Royal Holloway – University of London and Sonia Ashmore, Pamela Church Gibson, and Rob Lutton at the London College of Fashion – University of the Arts London. The team collaborated closely with Jenny Lister, Curator in the Department of Fashion, Textiles and Furniture at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Beward C., Gilbert D. and Lister J. (eds.) *Swinging Sixties: Fashion in London and Beyond 1955–1970* (London: V&A Publications, 2006)
Beward C. and Gilbert D. (eds.) *Fashion's World Cities*

(Oxford: Berg, 2006).

Gilbert D. (ed.). *The London Journal*, 31 (1) (2006). Special edition on fashion in post-war London.

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

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