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Independent fashion designers in the elusive fashion city.

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Independent fashion designers in the elusive fashion city

Abstract

This article examines the cultural geography of fashion cities, focusing on independent fashion designers' relationship with their city. Through discussing the Australian city of Brisbane and its place within the hierarchy of fashion cities, we examine the position of modern yet peripheral locations that have what we term an 'elusive' fashion identity. The discussion highlights the complexities that make a city a fashion city, specifically the interplay between industry, culture, retail and design, as commonly identified as fundamental elements in the construction or transformation of fashion cities. The paper unravels the dynamics and discourses that have contributed to the contemporary conceptualisation of the fashion city; it evaluates the way in which local independent fashion designers (IFDs) can contribute to a reorientation of thinking about cities and their fashion; and it gauges how IFDs sustain a local fashion identity within cities that do not present the commonly recognised characteristics of a fashion city such as infrastructures. We argue that IFDs in peripheral cities have a very different relationship with their city than do IFDs in so-called fashion cities. By examining this relationship, and Brisbane's modestly placed position on fashion cities' hierarchy, we propose that except for the traditional fashion centres, other cities are in a constant state of flux, arguing that the concept of the fashion city itself is elusive. We propose that as cities experience fashion narratives that ebb and flow, they may present multiple characteristics that make them unique at a particular moment, thus they are 'elusive' fashion cities.

Keywords: fashion city, independent fashion designer, Brisbane

Introduction

The nexus fashion-city has long been recognised as providing fertile ground for the investigation of cultural, social and industrial relationships. The concept of the city as the physical location of industry and cultural production is based on the paradigm of creative industries and creative clusters, with an emphasis on creative networks and a critical mass of workers in the creative industries (Castells 2011; Sassen 2013; Scott 2000, 2008). The factors that identify a city as creative include the interplay between global centres and cultural production. In the last thirty years, this interplay has also been transferred to the identification of a ‘fashion city’ (Beward and Gilbert 2006; Currid 2006; Jansson and Power 2010; Skov 2011; Weller 2008). Bovone (2005, 359) states that ‘Fashion, fashionable goods and services, and the social actors that produce and consume them constitute a complex, organic circuit that is transforming the post-industrial city’. Bovone’s (2005) definition is emblematic of a common understanding of the fashion city as a complex interaction of people, production, marketplace, organisations, and even images, from concept to consumption (see also Rantisi and Leslie 2006; Bellini and Pasquinelli 2016). However, does this interplay necessarily transform every city into a fashion city? Does every fashion city present the same characteristics, and, do they need to be present at the same time for a city to be called a fashion city? Within a contested terrain, this study unravels dynamics and discourses that have contributed to the contemporary conceptualisation of the fashion city; it evaluates the way in which local independent fashion designers (IFDs) can contribute to a reorientation of thinking about the relationship between fashion and the city; it gauges how IFDs sustain a local fashion identity within cities that do not present the commonly recognised characteristics, or only some of the characteristics of fashion cities; and we propose a new way to categorise cities that go in and out of fashion narratives as ‘elusive’ fashion cities.

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3 As one of the fastest growing cities in Australia, Brisbane was chosen for this study to
4 demonstrate the fluid dynamics that can alter currently accepted perceptions of the peripheral
5 city and its relationship to fashion. Brisbane's rapid economic growth has propelled it to a
6 global city in recent years (BCC 2016), outstripping all other state capital cities in its rate of
7 population growth (ABS 2012). However, Brisbane is considered an outlying city because it
8 has never been on the Australian fashion map in the same way as Sydney and Melbourne,
9 which claim their prime position as fashion cities (GLM 2017). Given these contradictions,
10 and based on the perspectives of IFDs, we propose that the categorising of fashion cities is no
11 longer relevant in a time of extreme industry disruption.
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24 The case study of Brisbane breaks the fixed concept of a fashion city as a centre of
25 production or inspirational designer hub. To undertake this analysis of Brisbane's fashion
26 status, we drew upon industry reports, government and city policy, local fashion media and
27 fashion brand communication through websites, blogs, social media, and magazine articles,
28 environmental observations of retail and creative spaces. Additionally, we conducted semi-
29 structured interviews with industry participants, following institution's procedure for research
30 involving human participants. Eighteen local fashion industry stakeholders participated in the
31 study, comprising 10 Brisbane-based IFDs, four fashion experts including fashion academics,
32 journalists and suppliers, and four industry mentors. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and
33 one hour, were transcribed and thematically analysed according to the themes: independent
34 design entrepreneurs' production processes and their workspaces, their aesthetics and
35 philosophies, their education and training, their use of marketing technology, their
36 communication with industry networks, their interaction with clientele and their various
37 approaches to enterprise. These interviews contextualised and built Brisbane as a case study
38 (Yin 2013). The study also covered designers' length in business, the challenges they face and
39 the support they seek. In analyzing these data, we grouped them thematically according to
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3 fashion design, production, and production networks, as well as the culture of consumption.
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5 These themes guide the analysis of Brisbane discussed in the sections below.
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8 In determining the relationship between IFDs and Brisbane as a city, our findings
9
10 suggest that there is no stable causality between creative labour and locality, but rather, both
11
12 city and designers benefit from the part that small independent fashion entrepreneurs play in
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14 what we call an ‘elusive fashion city’. This means that, in a sparser fashion field (Bourdieu,
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16 1993), local independent designers can rapidly move to the centre, as they are supported by
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18 local press, funding and retail opportunities, as well as targeted mentoring, devoted consumers
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20 and local and federal government.
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24 The structure of this article begins with an examination of the definitions and
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26 characteristics of the fashion city and introduces the concept of the elusive fashion city. We
27
28 then explore the case of Brisbane, its recent past and the development of creative output as a
29
30 reaction to some of its particular features, referring to the literature where pertinent. We
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32 examine the factors of design, production networks, fashion promotion and consumption which
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34 embolden local IFDs, and demonstrate how their relationship with the city shapes the image of
35
36 the city, in turn reflecting on perceptions of local fashion productivity. The paper closes with
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38 our proposed application of the term elusive city to explain the more nuanced and complex
39
40 understanding of fashion identity and place within a peripheral global city.
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46 What makes a fashion city?
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48 Fashion has played a vital role in the cultural economies of cities around the world, and
49
50 in particular in the cultural geographies of select cities. Cultural historians, fashion scholars
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52 and cultural geographers have provided definitions and categories aimed at understanding the
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54 city as a place embracing fashion, culture and economy, focussing on the Big Four fashion
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56 capitals: Paris, London, New York and Milan (Benjamin 2002; O’Neill 2007; Steele 2007;
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58 Breward & Gilbert 2006). These cities have established their privileged positions as global or
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3 ‘tier-one’ fashion cities because of long-standing traditions of fashion expertise, industry and
4 culture (Rantisi & Leslie 2006; Skov 2011). They have emerged for different reasons, but they
5 all relate to the establishment of a high-brow fashion concept, the ‘culture of design’, connected
6 to a luxury market of fashion connoisseurs. Paris’ position in the global geography of fashion
7 cities is the result of a long historical process, closely connected to court life and consumption,
8 and the royal support of the textile industry in Lyon. London established its position partly in
9 opposition to Paris, but specifically because of the role played by the “Square Mile”, a quarter
10 characterised by the rising economic power of London during the British Empire, and quality
11 masculine sartorial production within its boundaries (Beward 1999, 241). Unlike Paris and
12 London, fashion ‘traditions’ have been established relatively recently in some world cities—
13 for example, New York and Milan only became fashion cities in the twentieth century,
14 proposing high end ready-to-wear as an alternative to Paris’ high-brow couture. New York rose
15 thanks to an urban renewal plan, including that of the Garment District in the 1930s (Gilbert
16 2000,19); Milan ascended for existing know-how and technical infrastructures based on a
17 tradition of furniture and interior design, along with advertising agencies and the publishing
18 industry in the 1970s (Ferrero-Regis 2008). The fashion city concept therefore has various
19 dimensions: "as centres of a culture of design, as central points in production networks, as
20 examples of distinctive consumption cultures, or as the subjects of representation in film or the
21 fashion press" (Beward and Gilbert 2006, ix).

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The current geography of fashion is a “construction” that is “absorbed and understood
without reflection” (Gilbert 2000,14). This perceived unproblematic approach to the
understanding of fashion and place has seen numerous attempts to re-writing the symbolic
geography of world fashion cities, with Skov (2011) identifying the continued emergence of
more fashion centres worldwide in the formation of a “polycentric” system. Newly identified
fashion cities with alternative offerings have become known as ‘second-tier’ fashion cities

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3 which compete for global market prominence (Skov 2011; Rantisi and Leslie 2006). Notably,
4 factors other than culture, tradition and identity as singled out by Sassen (2013), Castells
5 (2011), and Scott (2008) are prompting second-tier cities to jostle for geographical
6 redistribution on the twenty-first century fashion map. Rantisi (2011) contends that fashion
7 cities have strong production, marketing, distribution networks, local networks and designers
8 supporting one another, adding that the local aesthetic and sensitivity to place, intermediaries
9 such as boutiques and fashion weeks, and designer markets are critically important in
10 establishing a sense of fashion identity and place in a second-tier fashion city (2011, 262).
11 Furthermore, fashion education is increasing globally (Wang 2013) and plays an important part
12 in the development of a fashion city and rising number of independent fashion designers.
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26 Martinez (2007) identifies further characteristics that have given Antwerp the status as a
27 new fashion city. Here the fashion interconnections are seen as “mediatory forms and sites of
28 consumption, fashion designers, manufacturers, fashion institutions and local regional
29 governments, the institutions of civil society” (Martinez 2007,2451). The Global Language
30 Monitor (GLM 2017, 1) has ranked global fashion capitals since 2007, identifying 63
31 “established and emerging fashion centers of fashion” across the globe by tracking citations in
32 worldwide media, academic research and reports. Breward and Gilbert (2006) also add
33 consumption and consumers to the definitions that typify a fashion city, while Lazzeretti,
34 Capone and Casadei (2017, 207) identify two forms of fashion cities with: “a supply-side
35 perspective, which defines a fashion city as a ‘manufacturing fashion city’ based on its physical
36 image and presence of a garment industry, and a demand-side perspective, which deploys the
37 term ‘symbolic fashion city’ in line with its virtual image and new information and
38 communication technologies.” While many authors have defined fashion cities (Benjamin
39 2002; Breward & Gilbert 2007; O’Neill 2007; Steele 2017), Casadei and Gilbert (2018) argue
40 that there is not a singular model of the fashion city. Instead of underplaying fashion’s
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3 complexity and treating it simply as a cultural and creative industry, Casadei and Gilbert (2018)
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5 propose an analytical framework that highlights fashion's association with manufacturing,
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7 design and symbolic production. Brydges and Hrac (2017) argue further that new forms of
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9 independent production, digital technologies and mobilities are reshaping this landscape.
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11 However, the effect of and role played by the independent fashion designer on these
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13 movements are not captured in these scholarly classifications. Ultimately, categories reviewed
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15 here still prove insufficient in the analysis of a city in flux, prompting the need for a
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17 reconsideration of its identity which we propose as the elusive fashion city.
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24 **The elusive fashion city**

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26 From this discussion of fashion cities and their discursive construction as elite world
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28 centres within fashion history, fashion studies, and the fashion system, it emerges that a fashion
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30 centre is considered a place where production and design, fashion retail and events such as
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32 fashion weeks, as well as awards and trade fairs, increase a city's economic productivity and
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34 cultural activity. Fashion credibility is achieved through originality of design, the endorsement
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36 of fashion authorities such as magazines, and the presence of international buyers at fashion
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38 weeks (Skov 2011). Ideas about fashion cities seem chiefly based on a highbrow understanding
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40 of fashion, the presence of elite or high-profile fashion brands, and an affluent local base of
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42 consumers, influential individuals and businesses high in fashion capital. This excludes the
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44 many local, lesser known designer firms creating alternative fashion discourses in places that
45
46 do not qualify as a fashion city. Indeed, Molloy and Larner (2013) argue that the success of the
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48 niche New Zealand designer fashion industry is underpinned by the designers' approach to
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50 remaining small and locally based specialist players, while situated at the forefront of
51
52 international fashion trends (Larner & Molloy 2013). The designers are conscious of the
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54 minimal fashion status of their 'not-so-global cities' (Larner, Molloy & Goodrum 2007, 281),
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3 but believe their output is not hindered as a result. To be clear, Weller (2007) sees that success
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5 in this instance is not based on the micro networks of individual actors but the macro trade
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7 policies of New Zealand and the common market with neighbouring Australia. Nonetheless,
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9 remaining small has worked well for New Zealand designers, such as Karen Walker, Trelise
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11 Cooper and Zambesi, some of whom have survived since their debut on the world stage in the
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13 late 1990s and now record sales in the tens of millions.
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17 Our discussion of Brisbane as an elusive fashion city reaches beyond current definitions
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19 of world fashion cities to embrace a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between
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21 place, fashion, culture and economics. This is because peripheral cities display characteristics
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23 which differentiate them from the bigger players, for example the greater importance of social
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25 networks and the more intimate role of intermediaries and significant community formation
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27 (Luckman 2012), while lacking the commonly recognised elements of fashion cities. Local
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29 ‘scenes’ and the advantage of collaborating with other arts/creative/activist communities in
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31 order to sustain ‘independent’ identities typifies smaller population areas (Gibson, 2010). The
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33 navigation of smaller markets, the creative freedom that comes from being distant from
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35 metropolitan/core trends, and principal gatekeepers add to the conditions found in peripheral
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37 cities (Gibson 2010; Collis et al. 2010). Supplementing the mapping of small-scale fashion
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39 activity by Felton (2012) and Luckman (2012), the idea of elusive fashion cities is offered as a
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41 way of describing all cities beyond the ‘Big Four’, even those without customary fashion
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43 industry attributes.
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51 In proposing that the definition of fashion city for all of the cities identifying as such can
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53 be misleading and selective, the concept of the ‘elusive fashion city’, inspired by Colin
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55 McArthur’s (1997) elusive cinematic city, is brought into discussion. Shedding light on the
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57 relationship between cinema and the city through filmic representation of the city, as well as
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59 through local and national policies that facilitate filming in a specific location, in his discussion
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3 of Glasgow as an elusive cinematic city, McArthur (1997) shows that hegemonic narratives of
4 cities are always fragile and contested. According to McArthur (1997), elements that create the
5 discursive presence of a city are to do with travellers' accounts, images, popular stories,
6 presence in paintings, poetry, literature, tabloids, newspapers, magazines, and so on. These
7 accounts and representations shift constantly, have no absolute and dominant meaning as they
8 reinvent and reshape the city according to changes in popular attitudes, while accommodating
9 alternative narratives, histories of traditions, and also affecting institutional policies as they
10 promote specific locations to increase local economies of tourism and labour.
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22 Similarly, the elusive fashion city is that which is considered outside dominant
23 narratives, and beyond prevailing national accounts of what constitutes a fashion city. The
24 consideration of a fashion city as 'elusive' opens up the existing analytical framework. Skov's
25 (2011) tiered framework of fashion cities assumes that their position remains fixed, but it is
26 well documented that single designers may do well in the global industry, while their city may
27 suffer from a decline, economic downturn or decreased press coverage. All cities are in
28 constant flux, with rise and decline phenomena.
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39 In Australia, Sydney and Melbourne have established their position globally as fashion
40 cities. Brisbane's representational narratives in popular media, art, global cultural discourses
41 have been fragile, and shaped it as a non-fashion city. As discussed, the status of a fashion city
42 is slippery because cities reinvent themselves continuously; different meanings are constantly
43 mobilised. The traditional status of a fashion city as having creatives, manufacture, retail,
44 fashion shows, fashion schools and media today is replaced by systems with unique strengths
45 that confer unique fashion status to a city. This leads to the acknowledgment that local fashion
46 systems, attuned to the city's aesthetic, industrial, cultural and economic activities, must be
47 validated. A more useful approach to fashion cities' scholarship is to recognise the power of
48 the Big Four in terms of *fashion centres*, and that all other cities are elusive fashion cities with
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3 their own fashion narratives that are legitimised and validated through a variety of shifting
4 cultural practices and business structures. A systematic definition of the fashion city requires a
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6 configuration of all of the agreed organising principles, while the omission or the scarcity of
7
8 one of these principles or criteria makes the condition of the city all the more interesting and
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10 worthy of analysis. According to Lampert (2001), Hegel excluded the city from aesthetic
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12 judgement because the city is nomadic and the result of infinite interactions, and thus it is
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14 difficult to define the aesthetic city based on any one set of terms. For Hegel, the city is
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16 constructed one piece at the time, it is its disunity built in the tradition of the city that makes
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18 the beauty of the city (Lampert 2001, 316). Likewise, we propose that the understanding of the
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20 elusive fashion city is stimulating because of what it lacks, rather than what it comprehensively
21
22 presents. The following discussion presents the case of Brisbane as an elusive fashion city
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24 based on its fluidity rather than the presence of established ‘fashion city’ criteria.
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31 **Brisbane as an elusive fashion city**

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33 Brisbane’s place within the national cultural discourse has historically been that of an
34
35 inconsequential city. However, this derisive view of Brisbane is changing through a blend of
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37 policy that highlights cultural festivals, fashion incubators supporting enterprise, the opening
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39 of fashion schools, and an increasing population of affluent young professionals seeking an
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41 enjoyable lifestyle. These elements underpin the evolving narrative that the city is today
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43 becoming one of the world’s sophisticated cities (Gross, 2019).
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48 As the subtropical state capital of Queensland, Brisbane was settled in 1823, but not
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50 considered a city until 1924. In its short history, several socio-economic ebbs and flows have
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52 occurred and continue to emerge. While immigrants manned the city’s clothing factories in the
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54 second half of the twentieth century in Fortitude Valley, 2km west of the city centre, drapers
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56 lined the main (Queen) street offering mixed textile services. Distant from other capitals and
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58 functioning rather as a large regional centre for the state’s rural economy, Brisbane bore a
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3 reputation for fashion dullness (Buick & King 2015). Known as the ‘country cousin’ to larger
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5 state capitals Sydney and Melbourne, Brisbane was considered insignificant as far back as the
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7 Second World War when the alleged ‘Brisbane Line’ was drawn to protect the southern cities,
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9 leaving Brisbane undefended in the case of invasion (Hasluck 1970).
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12 The region came of age after the Second World War, when international service
13
14 personnel and tourism promoted the state’s features of sun and lifestyle. Beach culture took
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16 hold, and South East Queensland designers started producing some of the most venturesome
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18 swimwear fashions in the country (Schmidt 2013). But apart from seasonal consumption by
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20 vacationers, the region’s fashions and fashion businesses did not move beyond serving the local
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22 community.
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26 From the late 1970s through to the mid 1990s, Brisbane had a vibrant, political and
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28 sometimes underground arts and theatre scene, largely driven by a response to an autocratic
29
30 and extremely conservative State government which dominated for 17 years. During this time,
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32 authorities forcibly suppressed independent music, activists, students and LGBTQI and other
33
34 diverse communities. This is the setting in which Brisbane’s independent music flourished
35
36 (Bennett & Rogers, 2014) and not unlike grunge and punk fashion elsewhere, set the stage
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38 within which ‘poor’ dress culture emerged as an anti-establishment response, and can be seen
39
40 as a surge in the ebbs and flows of the elusive fashion city. This anti-elitist position influenced
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42 the lively arts/cultural position that Brisbane draws on today. The market dynamic is also
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44 slowly changing and, as more high-profile designers originating from the area such as Sass and
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46 Bide, Lorna Jane and Easton Pearson (see Figure 1) have gained national and international
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48 prominence during the last 30 years, the city is aspiring to replace its fashion dullness with a
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50 reputation for young designers producing colourful and creative outputs (Trinh & Taylor
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52 2017).
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3 Brisbane's fashion elusiveness is aptly exemplified in the city fringe quarter Fortitude
4 Valley, also known as The Valley, which was home to department stores, medium enterprise
5 men's wear manufacturing such as Freedman & Co, and a small hub for tailoring and bespoke
6 production, based on networks of post-war migrants (Ferrero-Regis, 2014). The progressive
7 de-localisation of fashion manufacturing of the 1980s dismantled the already fragile fashion
8 manufacturing structure, and saw the transformation of The Valley into a hub for illegal
9 gambling and prostitution, which contributed to the formation of a narrative of corruption
10 nationally. The quarter went through several recovery plans, including the opening of
11 Chinatown and its mall in 1987, that re-positioned The Valley as the centre for entertainment
12 and retail. In its current post-industrial urban and cultural regeneration, fashion has reemerged
13 as a vital activity integrated with furnishing, digital marketing agencies, architect and design
14 offices.
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30 The progressive gentrification of The Valley area over the last two decades has led to
31 the upscale development of the James Street precinct, a former industrial site and home to a
32 Coca Cola factory. A large-scale urban renewal initiative established in the early 1990s, and
33 that culminated in the Brisbane City Plan 2000, operated along three tiers of government: the
34 Brisbane City Council, the State government and the Federal government's Better Cities
35 Program input. This driver has seen the complete transformation of the area (Neislon 2008).
36 The neighborhood is now brimming with luxury retail and apartments, restaurants and niche
37 urban amenities which are unaffordable to many. In an effort to avoid the redeveloped city
38 fringe costs, Felton et al. (2010) observe that individual designers of every ilk have scattered
39 across the peripheral suburbs. Some such as Rant Clothing and George Wu are working in
40 larger home studios, or others such as CCC Manufacturing and Black Milk have settled into
41 industrial parks. Some like The New Garde, a consultancy hosting independent designers,
42 congregate in the few networks of shared spaces, still available in un-refurbished or trust
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3 managed buildings of the city fringe, taking advantage of the cheaper rents. Others such as
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5 Alice Nightingale have moved to locations like laneways¹, thus embracing the social aspect of
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7 peer-to-peer exchanges.
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10 Today, as the largest local government in Australia, this “New World City” (BCC
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12 2015,iv), is experiencing policy and population growth that is changing both its architectural
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14 landscape and cultural activity. Indeed, Stead (2015) discusses the ‘GOMA’ effect, describing
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16 the converging discourses created by the cultural edifice which is the state Gallery of Modern
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18 Art (GOMA). Stead (2015) sees such public buildings as symbolically underscoring local art
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20 and architecture, state policy and identity. Alongside initiatives with Queensland State
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22 Government planning agencies, the Brisbane City Council (BCC) has played a major role in
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24 shaping Brisbane’s urban renewal processes. This process links its built environment and urban
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26 planning to its cultural expansion (Felton & Collis, 2012)². The BCC Creative Brisbane
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28 Creative Economy 2013–22 policy aims to strengthen the city’s “livability as a vibrant creative
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30 hub, and to ensure Brisbane will be the premier location for talented people to live, work and
31
32 play” (BCC 2013). This strategy has manifested in extra funding, stipends, incubators and
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34 shared spaces such as the River City Labs and the Innovation and Creative Sparks Awards. The
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36 BCC and its various arms claim to connect, support and promote Brisbane’s creative
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38 practitioners and enterprises, improve access to Council’s facilities for creative sector use and
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40 promote creative and cultural events, such as the popular fashion exhibition ‘EP’ held at the
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42 Museum of Brisbane in 2019.
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52 ¹ Alice Nightingale located to California Lane, Fortitude Valley in 2018.

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54 ^{2 2} At the time of writing, the Queensland government had released *QDesign*, a policy aimed at
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56 improving the sustainability and livability of all cities across the state. Unfortunately, this policy only
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58 includes architecture and urban planning, excluding other design fields, networks and manufacturing
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60 clusters that may contribute to said sustainability and livability.

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6 However, according to former local fashion business owner and Brisbane Fashion
7 Month founder Carly Vidal Wallace (2018) leadership and interest in supporting IFDs in
8 Brisbane is not strong enough. The Council encourages fashion retail marketing through local
9 fashion festivals, but these tend to uphold the larger brands rather than independent designers.
10 Some entrepreneurs that stage fashion events promoting major retailers with the aid of local
11 government funds put little back into the independent fashion community (Vidal-Wallace
12 2018). Therefore, although some effort is made on the part of the council to support creative
13 industries, it is a blanket policy leaving the independent fashion community to fend for itself.
14 Within a constantly shifting cultural narrative, recent initiatives, such as luxury hotels linking
15 fashion and lifestyle, new maker spaces, and the opening of Double Double, a megastore of
16 international independent brands, point to a fresh injection of private capital investment in the
17 city. This trend may propel Brisbane to an updated status as a ‘style centre’ similarly to
18 Copenhagen in the 1980s (Beard 2011), instead of a fashion city as commonly understood, thus
19 shifting its narrative again and signifying the characteristics of the elusive fashion city.
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40 **Brisbane’s fashion production and retail networks**
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42 Production networks include the physical manufacturing capabilities to produce clothing, as
43 well as the networks of cultural intermediaries who translate the fashion idea to consumers.
44 This section begins by addressing the location and physical manufacturing capabilities of
45 Brisbane, then discusses the local networks of agents, retailers and fashion press that are
46 essential to the symbolic production of fashion.
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54 Although small in comparison to other Australian capitals (around 700 businesses in
55 Queensland compared to around 1000 and 1300 in the southern states (IBSA, 2017)), the
56 proportion of textile, clothing and footwear (TCF) manufacturing companies in Queensland
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3 has grown over the past five years (Johnson, 2017). This increase is largely due to population
4 growth following the resources boom and increased migration to the state. However, local
5 fashion infrastructure is overwhelmingly oriented towards uniform and stretch wear
6 production. Pockets of manufacturing subsist in the outer southern suburbs, where there is a
7 strong presence of immigrant homeworkers (Nossar et al. 2015; SMH 2007). Figure 2 locates
8 the main TCF manufacturing sites in the city. Some fabric wholesale agents and cut make trim
9 (CMT) businesses endure, but they are slowly either moving to lower rents in suburban
10 industrial areas or moving away from Brisbane altogether.
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21 The increasing spread to outer areas or small quarters in distinct neighbourhoods has left
22 no central manufacturing hubs for designers near suppliers. Some practitioners in Brisbane
23 such as designer/maker Alice Veivers of the label Alice Nightingale have found alternative
24 solutions by changing their business model to incorporate agile supply chains, networking,
25 thrifting and sharing (Veivers, 2016). Veivers recounts, “Sometimes I don’t have the
26 equipment that I need, so I lean how to make it. Like working with wood, I make all my own
27 clothes racks. I’m learning to make stuff out of wood. Making all of my own things is one of
28 my life’s philosophies”.
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40 In contrast, local conceptual designer Gail Reid of the label Gail Sorronda relies on the
41 conventional supply chain, often procuring materials from known fashion industry sources
42 such as agents, trade fairs and factories, both nationally and internationally (Reid, 2016).
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48 **Please insert Figure 2 here**

49 Factors such as lifestyle, local media and support networks add value to the endeavours of the
50 local designers. Much like the designers studied by Wenting, Atzema and Frenken (2011) in
51 Amsterdam and Heebels and van Aalst (2010) as well as McRobbie (2013) in Berlin,
52 conceptual designers such as Gail Sorronda who have decided to settle locally benefit from
53 interaction with likeminded peers. Sorronda circulates in the local fashion design community
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3 but admits that she is most comfortable participating in arts-based activities. This preference
4 aligns with the links McRobbie has drawn between fashion and wider underground networks
5 and creative ecologies, including music (McRobbie 2015). It also echoes the evidence found
6 by D'Ovidio (2016) amongst fashion practitioners in London, who prefer to mix with artists
7 and designers from various disciplines.
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15 That designers choose to remain local regardless of the odds is a significant point in
16 reviewing the fashion identity of peripheral locations like Brisbane. Felton (2012) cites
17 lifestyle, and in particular a slower pace as another reason for creative workers to escape inner
18 city precincts. Chapain and Comunian's (2009) study of Newcastle in the UK also found that
19 people valued a slower pace, while Gibson, Luckman, & Willoughby-Smith (2010) echoed
20 related themes on their study of the distant city of Darwin. In interviews, Brisbane's designers
21 prioritised the balance provided by the city's reasonable cost of living (compared with
22 unaffordable rents in fashion capitals such as London or even second-tier fashion centres such
23 as Sydney), pleasant lifestyles, or being surrounded by family and friends and experiencing a
24 less frenetic pace. The designers accept the absence of high-level professional organisations,
25 and substitute with networked groups to assist one another.
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40 Intermediaries such as fashion agents are fundamental to establishing fashion city status.
41 In Brisbane, the demise of the independent fashion boutique has resulted in a reduction of local
42 agents (Tuite, 2019). The circa 50 agents left in Brisbane, of which only around 10 have a
43 profile amongst local designers (Hilton 2017), tend to function as wholesalers for imported
44 goods instead of distributors for local designers. This means that designers are left to seek
45 alternative means of reaching their markets. Our findings show that the local reduction in
46 intermediaries such as agents has been of benefit to some IFDs by lowering the number of
47 gatekeepers and consequent barriers to entry. Few local designers use the agent/wholesaling
48 arrangement today, first because this avenue is continuing to diminish and second because the
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3 designers prefer not to work with a ‘middle man’ [sic]. Indeed, Alice Veivers believes that
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5 designers can make a place for themselves locally, especially in Brisbane because its
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7 population is smaller than Sydney or Melbourne. “There is so much competition in Melbourne.
8
9 Everyone wants to go there because they think it is a fashion city” (participant interview 2016).
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12 Veivers reports a modest³ but sustainable income from her business, but also adds other factors
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14 accompanying her work add value.
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17 Sales channels for Brisbane’s IFDs are both similar and diverse among the designers.
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19 Depending on market level, some sell directly to overseas customers through aggregating
20
21 online platforms such as Etsy. In contrast, high end labels such as Gail Sorronda have a greater
22
23 ‘fashion reach’ through high fashion media exposure. In the case of Gail Sorronda, this is not
24
25 only due to the press her label enjoys, but partly because she has been physically present at
26
27 international events. Featured in glamorous fashion shows such as the Mercedes Benz Fashion
28
29 Festival and prestige international magazines (*Vogue Australia*, *Vogue Italia*, *Harper’s*
30
31 *Bazaar*), Gail does not advertise in magazines, but several high-fashion publications and blogs
32
33 have featured the label in editorial articles. Gail’s originality and creativity has attracted
34
35 journalists keen to present unique and original ‘local’ work (Barker 2015). Gail is beloved by
36
37 the Brisbane cultural press and institutions, is a mentor for the Australian Fashion Council’s
38
39 (AFC) Curated program and is regularly invited to public talks. Gail is the typical small
40
41 independent designer whose movement to the centre of the local fashion field, following
42
43 Bourdieu, has earned her national and international reputation. Almost to reflect physically and
44
45 geographically this symbolic position, Gail’s boutique is located in the James Street precinct,
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57 ³ A modest income is represented by net profit not below the National Award average of
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59 A\$38,486 pa (Fairwork Ombudsman, 2016).
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3 now one of the city's luxury retail and independent designer quarters. Sorronda notes that the
4
5 local media also reaches many people:
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8 It's not dressed up and as glossy, but people can just relate to it, which helps us.

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10 You've got your aspirational element but you've also got something else. You
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12 would think it would be the opposite but what is perceived as successful isn't
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14 necessarily so (participant interview 2016).
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18 The designer believes people like the idea of supporting a local designer or even just local
19
20 business: 'It's as simple as that' (Reid, 2016). As also experienced by Alice Nightingale with
21
22 *Frankie magazine*, local publications boost the label's visibility. And yet, Gail does not
23
24 mention Brisbane or Queensland anywhere on her website. Location is not necessary in the
25
26 promotion of her work although the support from networks within her city has brought much
27
28 value for the label (Heim, 2019).
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32 Working within tightly knit communities also reduces the effects of long-distance
33
34 logistics and regenerates the local economy (Gonzalez-Feliu, Semet & Routhier 2014). As
35
36 urban researchers Florida (2006) and Scott (2006) note, concentrations of creative practitioners
37
38 represent a dynamic element in a region's economic development and growth. In contrast,
39
40 Wenting, Atzema and Frenken (2011) found that fashion designers in Amsterdam did not
41
42 necessarily benefit from the business aspect of agglomeration but were more interested in the
43
44 superior networking possibilities that this arrangement afforded. Similarly, Heebels and van
45
46 Aalst (2010, 361) discovered that creative entrepreneurs in Berlin used their environment to
47
48 "reproduce and strengthen their creative reputations" rather than rely on production resources.
49
50 Differences between cities and designers in their approach to fashion production and
51
52 networking clearly outline that no one framework fits all. This observation supports our
53
54 approach to elusiveness, where elusive fashion city does not only indicate ups and downs in its
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56 visibility, but also lack of elements that are regarded as essential to a definite categorization.
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3 Recalling Hegel's reluctance to define the aesthetic city, we argue that categorizing fashion
4 cities is no longer relevant in a time of extreme industry disruption, where economic models
5
6 will be re-invented and local retail and re-shoring, amongst many others changes, will see a
7
8 growth (Amed et al. 2020, 20).
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14 **Brisbane's culture of consumption**

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17 Brisbane's historic reputation for poor dress culture points to the demand-side perspective of
18
19 the 'symbolic fashion city' discussed by Lazzaretti, Capone and Cassadei (2017). Brisbane's
20
21 retail backdrop for local designers has been ruptured by the exit of many independent boutiques
22
23 (Tuite, 2019). A few designer shops cling to inner suburbs such as Fortitude Valley, New Farm
24
25 and Paddington. Luxury brands such as Chanel, Gucci and Louis Vuitton are present, but few
26
27 independent boutiques exist in the city centre. Local designers located in the city include
28
29 Tengdahl, Pia du Pradal, Dogstar, Maiocchi and Sacha Drake⁴ (see Figure 2). Beside the
30
31 advance of high-street and fast fashion such as H&M, Zara and Uniqlo and the continuing
32
33 progress of e-commerce, many boutique owners cite normative tastes and undervaluing the
34
35 original as factors in the departure of local boutiques. A decade ago, Thea Basilou's eponymous
36
37 store, formerly known as Blonde Venus, had introduced new international designers to
38
39 Brisbane including Mary Katrantzou and Jacquemus, while fostering the local arts community,
40
41 thus building a connection between culture and fashion (Tuite 2018). Yet local dress practice,
42
43 although strongly influenced by the subtropical climate, is still maligned as it tends to casual,
44
45 street and active wear. Nicky Charman, owner of Calexico, an independent boutique located in
46
47 the James St precinct, which also stocks international brands, finds that she is constantly
48
49 'educating' her customer in the art of making good fashion choices. In contrast, Phoebe
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58 ⁴ Although their workrooms are located in city fringe locations like Milton, Paddington and West
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60 End.

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3 Paradise's laneway located boutique embraces Brisbane's reputation for low culture dress, and
4
5 takes a light-hearted approach by offering ironic statement pieces to its customers.
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10 **Please insert Figure 3 here**
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15 Brisbane's so-called 'low fashion consciousness' is sustained through examination of
16
17 retail trends in the city. Fashion consumer data from Brisbane city in 2015-2016 shows there
18
19 was a 114% jump in the consumption of fast fashion compared to 2% growth in designer
20
21 fashion consumption (IBISWorld, 2019). This compares to a 10% growth in designer fashion
22
23 consumption in Melbourne for the same period. Fashion accessories dominated the fashion
24
25 consumption in Brisbane which also suggests a lower 'bag price'. Surf and sportswear
26
27 consumption ranked second on the list, which points directly at local lifestyle preferences. This
28
29 means that on the one hand, IFDs remain constrained to marketing their goods to the niche
30
31 customer which itself gnaws at the viability of their ventures and keeps them out of sight of
32
33 fashion observers and consumers at large; on the other, lifestyle goods such as sport, active,
34
35 swim and street wear have strong potential in the local market (Britt, 2018, IBISWorld, 2018).
36
37 Conversely, the recent opening of boutiques of international luxury brands Tiffany, Louis
38
39 Vuitton, Chanel, Ferragamo and Gucci in the city centre create a new narrative of Brisbane
40
41 whereby the city is experienced as a retail fashion city, especially catering to a new, younger
42
43 and more sophisticated international tourist (TEQ 2019: BDO 2019).
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50 The shortfall of independent boutiques that stock local labels has left the designers to
51
52 find new and unique ways of bringing their product to market. Some designers, such as Rant,
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54 located in a western suburb, and George Wu, south east of the city, use their homes as both
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56 studios and sales outlets (see Figure 2); this is not ideal, as the designers cannot rely on passing
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58 trade or attracting visitors generated by the concentration of other nearby boutiques. Only a
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3 handful of designers, such as Gail Sorronda and House of Ezis, occupy their own boutiques in
4 the inner-city retail precinct (see Figure 3). Many instead opt to exhibit side-by-side at designer
5 markets and pop-up shops; many more pin their hopes on e-commerce.
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10 Although Brisbane designers rely heavily on national and international online sales,
11 some also count on alternative retail opportunities. However, these are mostly in
12 unconventional forms, once again fostered by local government policy that sees the advantage
13 in conspicuous cultural activity. Open-air markets such as Finders Keepers and designer
14 markets in Brisbane's cultural precinct, the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA), the Queensland
15 Art Gallery and State Library of Queensland, present just such opportunities that are growing.
16
17 In 2015, two Finders Keepers markets, two Bris Style markets and one Designer Market at
18 GOMA took place throughout the year. In 2017, this grew to 20 'designer' markets in
19 November alone. Markets not only provide an affordable platform for local designers; they
20 have traditionally functioned as a testing ground and go-between phase for designers on their
21 trajectory to expansion. The proliferation of markets and their lively patronage also points to a
22 shifting landscape in the preferences of local fashion consumers for alternative styles.
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37 Brisbane designers are not pressured by the fashion schedule as neither national nor
38 international fashion buyers come to the city for trade fairs. On the surface, this can be seen as
39 a handicap in the building of a sustainable business. On the contrary, this relative isolation is
40 conducive to heightened creativity. Also, Brisbane IFDs enjoy a relatively affordable lifestyle
41 in a relaxed climate. These are all factors that lead the designers to finding their own niches
42 and markets, and different approaches to what is normally considered success in the industry.
43
44 The lack of professional infrastructure inhibits connections with intermediaries at national
45 level, but they do have potential to make a viable long-term living. The affordances of ICT
46 reinforce their potential for success, and so they stay. Despite the fact that a unique Brisbane
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3 fashion style and culture is still emerging, the city's fashion identity remains marginal,
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5 incomplete and thus elusive.
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10 **Concluding remarks**

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12 Independent fashion designers play a pivotal role in the constitution of a fashion place and in
13
14 turn benefit from the cultural and production networks afforded by the city. Particular locations
15
16 are factors that add value to creatives' outputs because they offer the opportunity to share
17
18 knowledge, aesthetics values and inspiration, and, in turn, enhance their creativity, ultimately
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20 bolstering their city's reputation (Currid 2006; Hrac, Jakob & Hauge 2013; Heebels & van
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22 Aalst 2010; Scott 2006; Florida 2006). This has been seen to a limited extent in Brisbane, with
23
24 the promotion of IFDs such as Gail Sorronda and Easton Pearson in the local press and in
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26 cultural institutions.
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31 In his work on fashion and the spatial metaphor of field in relation to designers and
32
33 consumption Bourdieu (1993) proposed the way in which designers move between the
34
35 periphery and the centre of the fashion field. The fashion field can refer to fashion in a local
36
37 place (i.e. Brisbane) or to the global system of fashion. Designers occupy an interesting
38
39 position within the creative city as they act as both cultural producers and intermediaries that
40
41 disseminate fashion, bridging material production with cultural production (Tuite 2018).
42
43 Regardless of the lack of manufacturing infrastructure, IFDs in Brisbane have carved out their
44
45 own niche without the cachet of a large fashion centre by relying on local networks and
46
47 pertinent support from local institutions. A dense local fashion place is likely to position the
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49 city within tier one or two of the global fashion system, and therefore shift it from a perceived
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51 peripheral position to a central one. The spatial metaphor of the fashion field is used in this
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53 article to explain a double movement within a fashion place or centre: an internal movement
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55 and an outward movement. The internal movement is referred to the drive of designers within
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3 the city of Brisbane, their struggle to have a voice within Brisbane's fashion culture which is
4 currently overwhelmed by large global fast fashion companies. The way in which local
5 independent designers can find a dominant position within the city is to have 'subversive
6 strategies' (Bourdieu 1993, 133), which clearly influence the outward movement, as their
7 creative work aids in the construction of a city's narrative. The outward movement explains
8 how a global peripheral city like Brisbane may be able to move outside local and national
9 boundaries towards greater exposure within global fashion, or, at least, be recognised within
10 the global cacophony of fashion cities and aesthetics. Critically, a city's standing as a fashion
11 city is therefore not static but continually in motion and therefore elusive. In this respect, we
12 use elusive fashion city as a critical tool to unravel dynamics and discourses that have
13 contributed to the contemporary conceptualisation of the fashion city.

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28 The implications of place are demonstrated with a deeper discussion of the changes
29 taking place in Brisbane, exploring design ethos, production networks, consumption culture,
30 and the representation of the city. We propose that Brisbane, and other similar cities such as
31 Vancouver, Accra, Bristol, and Antwerp in the 1990s, must be seen as an elusive fashion city
32 because it displays approaches to fashion with an intense local flavour and a real presence of
33 local independent designers, despite its unfashionable past and the recent strong incursion of
34 global fast fashion companies. The discursive assessment of Brisbane is similar to many other
35 marginal fashion cities. It is neither a fashion industry city with a manufacturing side
36 perspective, intended as the centre of mainstream fashion production, nor a hub for small-scale
37 designers, as are the second-tier cities of Barcelona, Antwerp or Seoul. Yet despite its current
38 lack of fashion significance, influence and identity, the city is revealed in this study as a factor
39 in the success and resilience of its local small-scale independent designers. The influence
40 wrought by IFDs on the city is therefore the convergence of several dynamics. These include
41 the synergic effects that enhance reputation, inspiration that enriches creativity, infrastructure
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3 that facilitates production, proximity of related services that reduce costs and niche
4 demographics that increase markets. However, these attributes are not all present
5 simultaneously in a small-scale city such as Brisbane. Indeed, other factors may be at play that
6 dilute the perception of the cultural output of a city, even when community policy supports
7 cultural development. Further research could expand on these findings through investigating a
8 wider circle of actors within the city's fashion production and consumption networks, for
9 example, fashion educators, other intermediaries, policy makers and city marketers.

19 From our examination of Brisbane IFDs and their production networks and
20 consumption cultures, it appears that the interaction of the individual designer with their city's
21 relative fashion reputation is a dichotomous interchange. Neither being a global city with
22 fashion clout nor a regional area with valued traditions determines whether a city is a good
23 place for creative birth or rebirth. Therefore, we offer 'elusive fashion city', as a critical tool
24 to demonstrate the ways in which the city presents moments of local surge, for example with
25 underground cultural movements contributing to a homegrown fashion aesthetic, or with the
26 growth of local designers, such as Easton Pearson in the 2000s, who are able to forge an
27 international profile. Local designers are continuously developing their own and the city's
28 identity, in the same way the city develops following internal and external dynamics. The city's
29 low fashion status may even benefit their creative work. In this paper, the elusive fashion city
30 is considered as part of a discursive presence that is influential in determining popular attitudes
31 about the city and helps shape subsequent narratives.

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Figure 1 - Easton Pearson's exhibition EP held at the Museum of Brisbane, 2018-19, Author 2

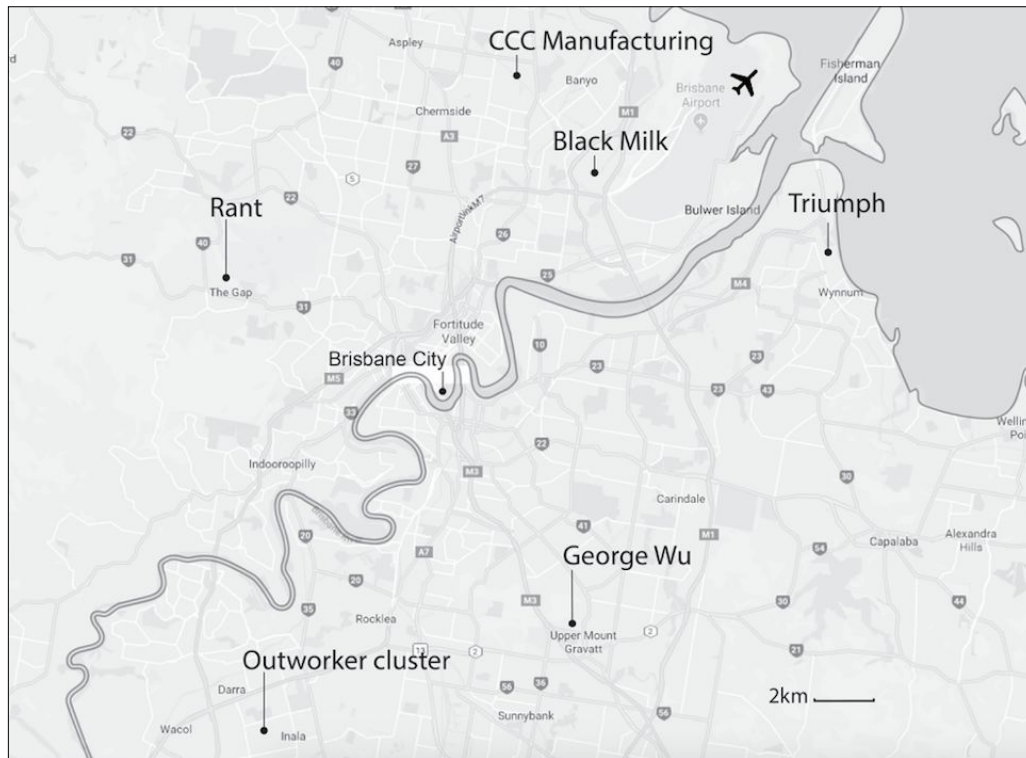


Figure 2: Map of Textile Clothing and Footwear manufacturing industry in Brisbane suburbs.

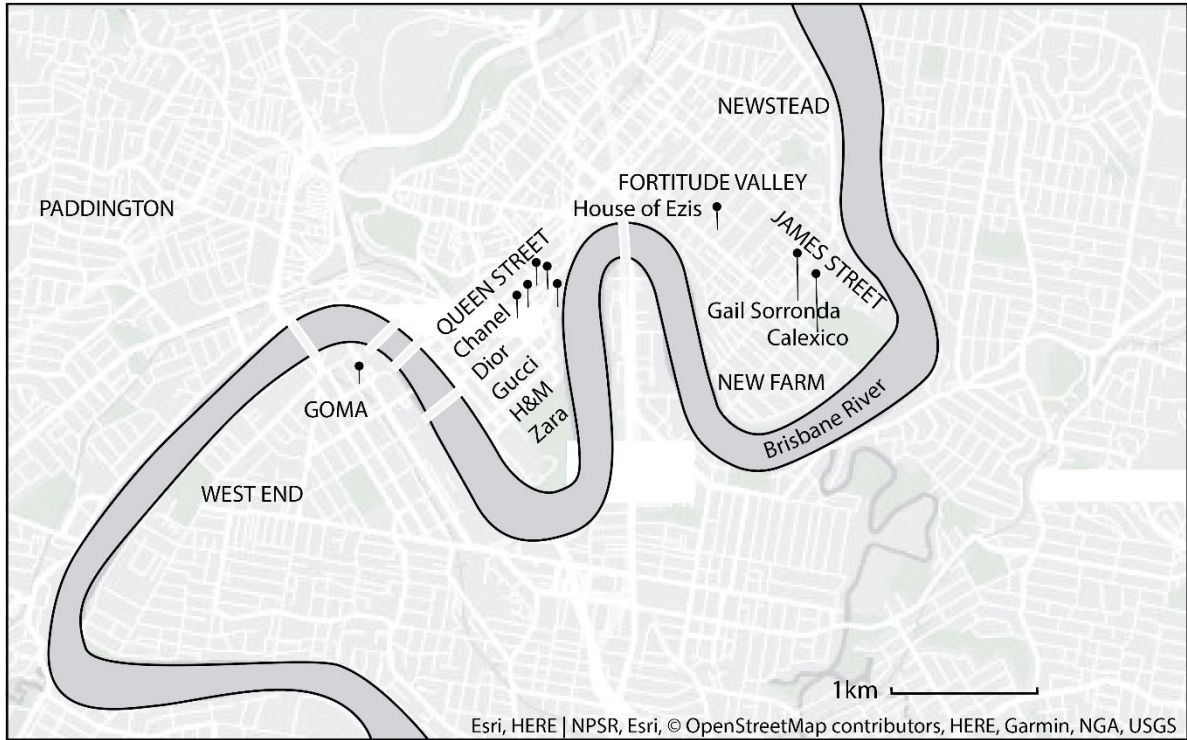


Figure 3: Retail map of Brisbane inner city, Author 1