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WHAT A DOLL

SYDNEY'S FASHION INDUSTRY IS DRIFTING OUT OF ITS TRADITIONAL STOMPING GROUNDS AS YOUNG (AND SOME NOT SO YOUNG) DESIGNERS INCREASINGLY OPT TO SET UP SHOP IN THE INNER WEST. STORY BY CARLA CARUSO.

When you think of Sydney fashion, what springs to mind?

The inner-city suburb of Surry Hills, where Wayfarerwearing fashion PRs navigate the hilly slopes in 13cm heels while machinists busily work behind the scenes to get the latest season threads ready for stores? Or, maybe the CBD, where big-name, manicured designers flout their wares at the equally manicured Strand Arcade and fashion-savvy customers flock to the tent in Martin Place for the annual Rosemount Sydney Fashion Festival?

Well, you'd be right on both counts. However, there is another area quietly garnering a reputation as a design hub that may surprise you... come a little closer... it's the Inner West.

Fashion and accessories designers are being increasingly drawn westwards, attracted by the cheaper rent, the street style inspiration and, last but not least, the lack of pretension in an industry life with it.

kana Stipicic is one of those putting the local area on the fashion map. The 29-year-old from Maricoville has been a finalist on Arena's hit reality show, *Project Runway Australia*, this season. The show features 12 of the nation's up-and-coming designers, who have to "stitch and bitch" their way through a series of challenges to work out who's "top dog." (The final screens on September 16.)

Of the show, kana says: "It does open doors. You get to meet the most important people in the industry. It gives you the type of platform that a year ago I didn't have. Now, the contacts and networking, for me, has just skyrocketed. I know who I need to know in the industry."

kana, who studied fashion design in Milan, has been in the Inner West for three years. She is currently working on the first collection of her own label, due for release for autumn/winter 2010. "I think it's a lot cheaper and convenient for young designers and artists here," kana enthuses. "I live in an apartment in a converted factory, where I also have my workroom. It's really spacious, with high ceilings and huge windows, so it doesn't feel too homey when I'm working. There are a lot of young people in the building and it's very close to Newtown as well, which I think is a cool area."

kana enjoys the laidback vibe of the place. "The Inner West probably has the most relaxed style in Sydney. People are not too pretentious," kana says. "No one in Newtown is going to yell at you in the street. You're from *Project Runway*, like they have done in Oxford St? It's more chilled out." And, she plans to stick around in the future: "I could work from here and show over in Italy – that's my master plan."

Accessory-making is also taking off in the Inner West.

Carona Jewellers, which has its headquarters in Leichhardt, has had its pieces adorn A-listers like Lara Bingle and Tati Hatcher. Lewisham-based Barcs Australia produces fashion jewellery for major local names like David Jones and Myer, as well as international clients.

Barcs Australia managing director Henry Reid says the company was started by Hungarian migrants in 1948 in a small factory in Newtown. It moved to Lewisham in 1986. "Being located in the Inner West, we have always been able to employ the creative and skilled staff needed to operate our business."

Maricoville fashion jewellery label Fuzz Design Workshop is the brainchild of Carmel Taylor, 42. On the range, which comprises such materials as acrylic, silver and chain work, she says: "People often say they've never seen anything like it. They're special pieces – not everyday ones." Taylor couldn't be happier with her Inner West base: "I like the proximity to the city and the Newtown/Leichhardt flavour."

The style here has become a lot sharper and I like the fact that the subcultures – the Goths and the hippies – influence each other. There are pockets where they go to enormous extremes to get dressed up. It looks like it has taken them hours! I love it."

So, where to head to pick up the hottest Inner West labels? Well, Newtown boutique Pretty Dog certainly has its five fingers on the pulse. Owner Tanya Stevanovic, 36, has been a supporter of local talent for the past 12 years, stocking the shelves with names from the neighbourhood, including some who have gone on to big things, like Maricoville's Theresa Rawsthorne and Tina Kalivas (who's worked for UK designer Alexander McQueen). Dion Lee from Newtown (the darling of this year's Fashion Week), and Balmain-based shoemaker Tristan Blair. Tanya says: "I think people in the Inner West are a lot more interesting and not scared to express themselves. Everyone's got their own style. It's not like Surry Hills and Bondi, where there's just one look."

Also supporting local talent – at its most embryonic level – is Chariot, a retail store for past and present students of the FBI Fashion College in Glebe. Buyer Elsie Kassiss, 26, says popular labels there include women's wear brand Sumakhi and men's jewellery line Adam No Eve. "Everything is done completely professionally – we look at a student's range and see whether it would work for the area. We don't guarantee all student work will go in there."

Further supporting burgeoning design talent locally is Runway Inner West – a new project set up to support young fashion designers to realise a collection under the mentorship of rag-trade professionals. Applications for this year's intake are closed and are now being reviewed, with parades to be held in November. Ashli eld Youth Theatre artistic director James Wintop, who's behind the project, says local talent is worth tagging into. "There's a huge population of creative types in the Inner West. Maybe that's because there's a strong focus on investing in young people's (creative) education here, with things like The McDonald College and the Newtown High School of the Performing Arts – or maybe it's just something in the water."

THE INNER WEST STYLE DEFINED

Hang Onment-Le, 32, is behind Newtown fashion boutique and label Barbarella Vintage, says it's that there is no one style – there are multitudes. "I love Newtown particularly, because it's one of the places in Sydney – or Australia – where the people really embrace their own style. They have a mind of their own."

They're not followers." Fellow Newtown designer Tao Pan, 30, says he likes the area's easygoing charm: "Basically, in Newtown, you could go to the supermarket without wearing shoes, because it's so laidback and so chilled, and no one would look at you! But 5km away in Darlinghurst, you always have to worry about what you're going to wear. I don't have attitude, so I belong in the Inner West." Eco fashion designer Rachael Cassar, also from Newtown, describes the feel as "eclectic." "The Inner West has quite a large creative community of all different industries. It's not pretentious and everything is quite close."

Still, Katrina Minichini, 25, who designs evening wear at the back of her own boutique, Katrina Ann, in Leichhardt, says people turn it up a notch at night, particularly in Norton St. "They like to look glamorous when they're going out – everybody's always dressed up and looking their best then."

