

SQUARE FEET

As Garment Industry Moves Out, Theater and Arts Move In

By ALISON GREGOR

Published: February 16, 2010

South of 42nd Street in Manhattan, the bright lights of Broadway start to fade and give way to the trimmings shops, fabric stores and designers' ateliers of the garment district. But in recent years, much of the clothing trade has moved overseas, leaving vacant factory spaces that have lured growing numbers of theater and arts groups to the area.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Michael Appleton for The New York Times
The Baryshnikov Arts Center spent about \$8.5 million to turn its space on 37th Street into the Jerome Robbins Theater.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Michael Appleton for The New York Times

Though the garment district isn't quite "South Broadway," real estate experts said it had become a logical choice for smaller organizations. Bounded by Fifth and Ninth Avenues from 34th to 42nd Streets, the area is a collection of smaller buildings with old tenements scattered among them, where rents have remained among the cheapest of any central business district in Manhattan, averaging \$45 a square foot on avenues and \$30 on side streets.

The Times Square area, which is full of new Class A office space, has an average asking rent of just under \$70 a square foot.

"There are lots of spaces, particularly on side streets, that are loftlike, large, clean and very affordable — great opportunities for arts organizations, many of them nonprofits," said Robin Abrams, an executive vice president at the Lansco Corporation, a commercial brokerage. "It's centrally located and relatively close to the theater district, so that's been the appeal."

Joining small theaters like the National Comedy Theater at 347 West 36th Street and the New Perspectives Theater Company at 456 West 37th Street are larger performing arts groups and theater service organizations priced out of

SIGN IN TO
RECOMMEND

TWITTER

SIGN IN TO E-
MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE

The 37 Arts building, which houses the Baryshnikov Arts Center near Ninth Avenue.

Times Square and other parts of Manhattan. In December, the Pearl Theater Company moved to a 4,300-square-foot office at 307 West 38th street near Eighth Avenue, from the East Village.

“If you walk through the area, it sort of looks like an arts district developing,” said Shira Beckerman, managing director of the Pearl. “In terms of the Off Broadway community, it feels as if there’s as many organizations in the garment district as there are right up in the Times Square area.”

Ms. Beckerman said the cheaper space had enabled the Pearl to house its administration, rehearsal studio and costume shop under one roof and near its performance space on West 55th Street. Two other theater groups have offices in her building: Primary Stages and the LAByrinth Theater Company.

Another newcomer is the [Theater Development Fund](#), which, after decades in the Paramount Building at 1501 Broadway, was priced out of Times Square. In May 2009, the fund moved into 9,000 square feet at 520 Eighth Avenue between 36th and 37th Streets, still close to its TKTS booth in Times Square.

“Small theaters in New York have always gone where there are spaces they can afford,” said [Victoria Bailey](#), the fund’s executive director. “The small theaters go first, then the larger theaters or the larger service organizations follow. What’s happened is you’ve reached a bit more of a critical mass here.”

The [Baryshnikov Arts Center](#) recently opened a new venue on the western fringe of the garment district. In 2005, the arts center bought the top floors of a six-story building on 37th Street between Ninth and 10th Avenues. Called 37 Arts, the building was developed by a group that included the Broadway producers Kevin McCollum and Jeffrey Seller.

The Baryshnikov used its floors as offices and studio space, while the lower levels of 37 Arts were three small theaters rented by performance groups.

Though successful musicals like “In the Heights” and “Fela!” appeared there before moving to Broadway, 37 Arts struggled, and in 2007 the Baryshnikov bought one of its theaters for \$4.5 million. After spending \$8.5 million to overhaul the space, the arts center opened it as the [Jerome Robbins](#) Theater on Feb. 16 with the [Wooster Group](#) as its resident company.

In May 2008, the [Orchestra of St. Luke’s](#) bought the rest of the 37 Arts building, including the two remaining theaters. The orchestra has announced plans to create the DiMenna

Center for Classical Music, which will be more than 20,000 square feet and provide a home for the orchestra along with rehearsal halls, studios and other amenities.

Asked about the garment district as a location for performing arts, Stanford Makishi, executive director of the Baryshnikov Arts Center, said, "It's gratifying that others have followed us here, because it suddenly feels like we made a really smart choice."

"There are really huge residential towers sprouting up all around us, and with that will come potential audience members," he added, referring to new high-rises that will bring more than 2,300 apartments just north and west of the garment district.

Yet that residential development, and its associated amenities, also means that rising rents could eventually drive out smaller theaters.

"Even though the space here is more affordable than other places, the performance spaces, particularly those on the ground floor, are competing against retail uses, so it's difficult for the smaller theater groups to make a go," said Jonathan Denham, a principal with Denham Wolf Real Estate Services, a commercial real estate firm specializing in nonprofits that has consulted with many arts organizations in the garment district.

David M. Pincus, chairman of the theater task force for Community Board 4, which represents the garment district, is also managing director of the WorkShop Theater Company. He said his theater and two others in the same building, at 312 West 36th Street near Eighth Avenue, were struggling to pay their rents, which had tripled over the last decade.

While theaters and arts organizations have been promoting the area as an arts district with a festival each October for the last five years, that may not be enough. Mr. Pincus is pushing a Manhattan-wide property tax abatement for landlords who lease to performing arts tenants.

He has also led an initiative to include 16,000 square feet of space for small theaters in the [West Side railyards](#) project, from 28th to 42nd Streets, which includes a western sliver of the garment district.

"Still, that's 10 or more years down the line," Mr. Pincus said, "and many theaters are on the chopping block right now."

A version of this article appeared in print on February 17, 2010, on page B5 of the New York edition.