MITRA CHESTER AT HER SHOP AND STUDIO, DELUXE

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

FASHIONING AN INDUSTRY

Local designers want to bring garment production back home

BY ALEX NOTMAN

EUGENE, ORE., APRIL 2015: The fifth annual Eugene Fashion Week is only days away and the Eugene Garment House is a beehive of activity. Frenzied designers dart around the open space on the third floor of the Woolworth Building overlooking Willamette Street, colorful swatches of fabric tucked under their arms and pincushions wrapped around their wrists. Apprentices hurriedly reorganize racks of fluttering paper patterns and sample garments while production sewers put the finishing touches on a pair of couture overalls and a hemp wedding gown. At one station, a team of interns dyes a line of jersey dresses. In the corner, set up as a mock catwalk, local designer Mitra Chester is fitting a local model in an edgy, tailored three-piece skirt suit made out of repurposed, studded leather. "Where are my recycled couch-brocade fabric cigarette pants?" one designer yells above the din.

This hasn't happened. Yet. No one is manufacturing couture overalls or hemp wedding dresses, or losing it over a cigarette pant in some hip loft space downtown. The Woolworth Building doesn't host and has no plans to host any kind of House d'Eugène. There is no Eugene Garment House — but there could and should be one. As Robert Kennedy said, "I dream of things that never were, and ask, 'Why not?'"

Now, sir, I'm no Robert Kennedy, but perhaps it time for Eugene to ask "Why not?"

A garment house, or a production factory, is where designers can go to have their designs professionally produced, allowing for much larger batches of couture overalls, for example, than an individual could possibly produce. They are equipped with industrial machinery, such as sergers (for hems and seams) and sewing machines that can easily send needles through inches of leather — machinery that is typically too costly for an indie designer to invest in alone — and depending on the factory, they provide services such as drafting, size grading, sample construction and design consultation.

According to many professionals in the local fashion industry, Eugene needs a garment production factory like Portland needed one in 2008 when clothing designer and entrepreneur Britt Howard opened the Portland Garment Factory to help local indie designers produce their smaller lines — lines that are too small to be profitable for larger domestic and overseas clothing manufacturers to take on. The Portland Garment Factory has been a wild success both critically and financially, receiving accolades locally (*The Oregonian*, *Portland Mercury*, *Portland Monthly*) and nationally (*The New York Times*) and now has over 45 clients.

Local designers and business owners like Mitra Chester of Deluxe, Laura Lee Laroux of Redoux Parlour, Loralee Harding of Circle Creations and James Breech of Trust Hemp are convinced that Eugene is ready. They don't just foresee potential for demand to make a production house profitable — the demand is already here, and they can no longer keep up with it. A factory where local designs are produced would not only be a boon for designers but an investment in the city's economic and cultural future, as well as a method of creating jobs and keeping labor conditions humane, especially after the fatal factory fires in Bangladesh in November. Before Eugene can become the next Milan (or Portland), however, an airtight business plan is needed, and, of course, financing. But if Eugeneans want their beer brewed around the block, their coffee roasted where they can smell it and their food harvested within biking distance, then why not their clothes?

A Passion (and Demand) for Fashion

"If I could, I would be producing my wallet cuffs like crazy," Chester says, while stirring a cup of coffee at Sweet Life Patisserie. Chester has a popular line of wrist cuffs, made of repurposed materials, that also function as wallets — in a nutshell, what Billie Joe Armstrong would