

# MOPAN 2008

## Abstract submission

**Track: Inter-Organizational Knowledge Creation through Informal Organizing**

### Keywords

**Fashion industry; Design; clustered geography of production; knowledge**

**Title: Micro-sized design firms and design outcomes within a clustered environment**

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In this paper we examine the role of environment on design outcomes. In doing so we extend the considerable body of literature that has previously focused on the role of location, institutional context, and proximity on the organisation of production (Piore and Sabel, 1984, Krugman, 1991, Feldman, 1994, Storper, 1997, Porter, 1998, Grabher, 2004, Bell, 2005, Lindsay, 2005). This work has identified the benefits of clustering to firms, but almost none (one notable exception is (Furman, 2003) has considered how the environment impacts on the design stages of the production process, and feeds through into particular design or product outcomes.

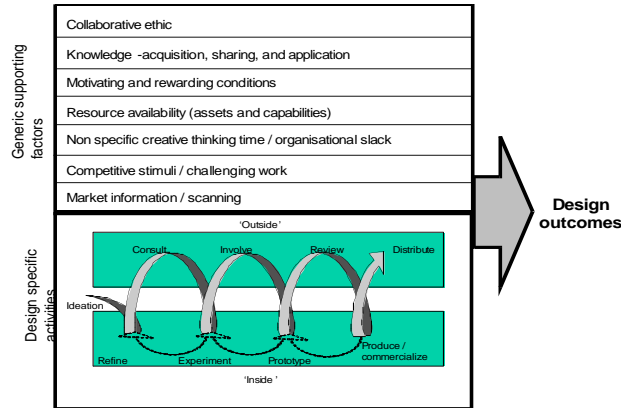
Our question is narrowed further to, how does the environment impact on apparel designers working in co-located micro-sized enterprises? For such designers, some of the most important features of their clustered location is the way that they have to draw upon multi-party, informal (i.e. non contractual), resources such as knowledge, or emotional support from peers, in order to create new artefacts – designs (Tallman et al., 2004). The resource constraints that result from their size require an outward-facing stance, meaning that they obtain resources in a less proscribed and contractually-defined manner than if they were working within a formal hierarchy (Sheremata, 2000). As such, a study of micro-sized design firms (MSDFs) provides a revealing example of a community of practitioners forced to negotiate and renegotiate access to an informal network that provides the resources that they need (Brown and Duguid, 1991, Spender, 1996, 1998)

We assemble insights from the economic geography (Leamer and Storper, 2001, Learner and Storper, 2001), knowledge- and resource-based view of the firm (Verona, 1999, Verona and Ravasi, 2003, Lindsay, 2005), strategy (Porter, 2001) and design literatures (Creigh-Tyte, 2005, Rantisi, 2004) into an apparel design development chain (below).

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Comment: Find country-specific design reference

## A design development chain



This diagram conceptualises design outcomes as emerging from an interaction between generic environmental factors and staged design-specific activities, which are linked and cumulative (Rieple and Gander, 2006). Each 'loop' is dependent on the progress of the previous activity, incorporating both 'internal' and 'external' inputs, although this progress is not necessarily as neat or as linear as the diagram may imply. Each stage may return to the previous 'loop' as the result of the various iterations experienced along the way (indicated by the dotted arrows).

Using this schema as a guide, we investigate how a networked environment, made up inter-alia of social institutions, material resources, designers and relationships, may influence apparel design outcomes. For example new ideas are co-developed within a stream of knowledge-rich fashion 'events' such as parties or trade shows, which are numerous and concentrated in specific locations. Accessing the knowledge enshrined in these events is not simply a matter of invitation, but is the result of physical presence in the local community (Learner and Storper, 2001). It is within these events and locations that design knowledge is shared, interpreted and altered, and thus localised design variants result.

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