Dressing Sydney resulted from a multi-faceted two-year research project conducted between UTS and the Sydney Jewish Museum. It incorporated a major oral history collection, primary research conducted by a team of five UTS researchers (Paul Ashton, Paula Hamilton, Peter McNeil, Cameron White, Amanda Scorrano), an exhibition in which McNeil had a major conceptual input (October 2012-February 2014) and an illustrated catalogue including a 10,000 word essay, ‘The Beauty of the Everyday’, by McNeil.

‘Clothing narratives’ have always been a significant component of the oral histories told of re-establishment. Many of the survivor-guides at the Sydney Jewish Museum, some of whom are now in their late eighties and early nineties, worked in the so-called ‘rag trade’ in the period from the 1930s to the 1980s. Until the research was undertaken, very little was known about how the clothing trade or schmatte worked in inter-war and post-war Australia.

In this project we recreated ‘fashion-scapes’ (in Appadurai’s sense) that joined word, image and sound and revealed new perspectives about Australian social and economic history. We explored migration and re-establishment in the face of the Holocaust, as well as the wider picture of innovation in Australian enterprise since the 1930s.

The show and the catalogue were described as moving and empowering in the visitor’s book at the Museum, and the exhibit was viewed by 20,000 people. The catalogue won Best Book Design at the 61st Annual Book Design Awards 2013. It received numerous positive reviews in academic journals (attached).
The Beauty of the Everyday

Peter McNeil
Associate Dean Research, Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, University of Technology, Sydney
Professor of Fashion Studies, Stockholm University

Dressing Sydney recovers a missing tale of fashion dreams and innovations: the story of the Sydney Jewish ragtraders, designers and entrepreneurs from the late 19th century to now. This narrative incorporates crucial economic, social and cultural changes within New South Wales and Australia, and offers hope and encouragement to a new generation of fashion professionals.

‘Clothing narratives’ have always been a significant component of the oral histories of re-establishment. Many of the survivor-guides at the Sydney Jewish Museum, some of whom are now in their late eighties and early nineties, were in the so-called ‘rag trade’ in the period from the 1930s to the 1980s. Yet very little is known about how the schmatt trade worked in inter-war and post-war Australia, no doubt because in a world that valorises consumption, histories of production are very ‘out of fashion’. Yet production and consumption in the clothing industries are inter-linked in a commodity chain. The case of Sydney, with its centre of production in Surry Hills, a suburb adjacent to the department and retail stores at Central Station and near Hyde Park, is a compelling example of this connection.

The Sydney Jewish Museum has a distinguished 20-year record of collecting hundreds of oral testimonies of Holocaust survival. It also acquires and exhibits artefacts related to the rebuilding of shattered Jewish lives in Australia. The making and selling of clothing has occupied the hands and imaginations of many Jewish people living in Sydney. The Museum decided to research parts of this clothing narrative with oral history as the driver. It has been a challenge to recover aspects of what is by definition an ephemeral material culture. Clothes wear out, become unfashionable, are discarded and turned back into rags. The materials that have been collected by the Sydney Jewish Museum move across production
PETER MCNEIL
The Beauty of the Everyday

Published essay, selected pages

In the 1980s, the Chinese government was the biggest importer of goods from Hong Kong. The Chinese government encouraged the development of the "Made in China" industry. However, the government faced many challenges, including the lack of infrastructure and basic security for workers in the rural areas, and the challenges of maintaining a peaceful and harmonious environment.

Despite these challenges, the Chinese government continued to support the development of the "Made in China" industry. The government provided incentives to encourage the development of this industry, including tax breaks and subsidies. The government also implemented policies to improve the living conditions of workers in the rural areas, including the provision of housing and education.

Thus, the development of the "Made in China" industry continued to progress despite the challenges faced. The number of workers in the industry increased, and the quality of products improved. The "Made in China" industry became an important source of revenue for the Chinese government, contributing significantly to the country's economic development.
The Beauty of the Everyday

Peter McNeail

PETER MCNEAIL 

Savvy Hills was important in the automotive industry because we were there. Everyone scoured to get into us, get a seat on the floor, or get a seat on the floor and be able to get in. People planned to get into Savvy Hills, and they were a little bit of a cult.

Savvy Hills was a secret place in the automotive industry because we were there. Everyone scoured to get into us, get a seat on the floor, or get a seat on the floor and be able to get in. People planned to get into Savvy Hills, and they were a little bit of a cult.

PETER MCNEAIL 

The Beauty of the Everyday

Peter McNeail
Dressing Sydney

The Jewish Fashion Story

An Exhibition

Sydney Jewish Museum
Dressing Sydney

The Jewish Fashion Story

Edited by
Rochelle Segalman

From
Peter McNeil

Sydney Exhibition
Jewish October
2012 December

Prepared by
Peter McNeil

Production
Peter McNeil

Book contents

Glimmer, Sydney

The Beauty of the Everyday

UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY

PETER MCNEIL

The Beauty of the Everyday

Book contents
Dressing Sydney: The Jewish Fashion Story, An Exhibition

The contribution of Jews to the clothing and textile industries is a story that has been treated with increasing depth in a number of publications and exhibitions over the past two decades. From their narrowly proscribed roles in the medieval European schmutter trade (Tushish for “rags”), Jews developed networks, skills and a taste for entrepreneurship that flourished during the age of industrialization through to the present era. In pre-Nazi Germany, Jews owned and operated more than half of the country’s clothing businesses, while in the United States of America, Jews have been an integral part of the clothing industry at every level from pieceworkers, to global brands and celebrity designers. The Australian experience was different. However, it was not until the arrival of refugees in the 1930s, and particularly post-war immigration, that Jews would replicate a similar scale of achievement in the Antipodes to that of their counterparts in the northern hemisphere. In this concise and lively book, curator Roslyn Sugarman and historian Peter McNeill capture the spirit of entrepreneurial drive and ingenuity that characterizes the thousands of Jewish émigrés who settled in Sydney and established thriving businesses at every level of the industry.

In Australia, published research on the subject has hitherto focused on the Melbourne garment trade. This includes an exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Australia,1 a subsequent article by its curator Anna Epstein,2 and a book by Lesley Sharon Rosenthal focusing on the epicentre of the city’s garment industry.3 While Melbourne had long been considered the hub of the Australian fashion industry, Sydney was by no means the poor cousin. In its heyday the inner-city district of Sunny Hills alone housed hundreds of thriving clothing and textile firms, many of which were owned by Jews.

Apart from the odd company history, several articles in the Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal and research on three figures in an essay discussing Sydney’s most exclusive dressmakers and milliners,4 the Jewish contribution to the Sydney trade had been biding its time until the exhibition and publication Dressing Sydney: The Jewish Fashion Story. Both drew extensively on 100 plus interviews conducted for the project, in addition to memories, letters and what must have been a mountain of photographs pulled from personal albums and company archives. The book encompasses three approaches, a combination of two essays and a succession of corresponding and independent images which flawlessly interweave the texts.

Roslyn Sugarman, curator of the exhibition, charts the progress of the many people from arrival to establishment and, in some cases, through to the second and third-generations. Her essay, ‘The Power of the Spoken Word’, reflects the exhibition’s use of recorded voice and printed quotations, to highlight common themes of working life and relationships with workers and clients, assimilation, business ethics and philosophy, and the implicit custom of Jewish values (family education and hard work). Sugarman’s privileging of oral history via quotations and paraphrasing captures the mood, character and the vivaciousness of the subjects. Two notable accounts are the story of Edward Elias Weisssberger, the German peddler who arrived in Sydney in 1909 whose family established Whitmon [1], one of the largest shirt makers in the country (p. 36). Another is that of Anita and Joseph Weinbeech of Rainbow Blouses. Anita honed her skills in a Polish state labour camp sewing German uniforms alongside her mother, Franka Bael (p. 38).

Shortly after arriving in Sydney, Anita and her husband identified the dearth of colourful blouses in the post-war market, bought some fabric and took the bedroom door off its hinges to cut their first samples (p. 38).

Peter McNeill’s essay ‘The Beauty of the Everyday’ knits together multiple narratives that locate the Jewish fashion story in Sydney within a shifting framework of national and global transformation. From the cast of Australian fashion culture at the turn of the century to the impact of changing economic and immigration policies that supported a boom in local manufacturing well into the 1970s, one of the most highly protected industries in the world, McNeill’s essay大厦ively navigates these and other related issues. One of McNeill’s most salient points is that in the post-war period, many Australian-born entrepreneurs were leaving the sector due to the depressed state of the industry (p. 126). Thus, as in the Middle Ages when Jews found opportunities by trading schmutter, through ingenuity, hard work and extensive international networks, they succeeded by occupying the vacuum in Australia.

The book terms with illustrations, over sixty in colour alone, and a good number of impressive double-page spreads. The images stand on their own as a single narrative forming a photo-essay of an almost vanished world when countries like Australia used to manufacture most of what they consumed. At times the images are drawn from glossy marketing brochures. But the most precious are the informal snapshots that capture the ‘sweat and the sweat’ of factory life and the overriding flavour of European-ness within the context of an emerging multiculturalism. This is a book grounded in fact and filled with humanity.

Notes
5 Epstein, op. cit., pp. 95–9.
BOOK REVIEW

Dressing Sydney: The Jewish Fashion Story, Exhibition catalogue with essays by Peter McNeil and Edith Kranz-Rogol Sugerman (2011)

Reviewed by Danielle Sprecher, University of Leeds

In my early years of fashion history, in Austria, the time they arrived in Sydney in 1947 from Shanghai, it was certainly not easy. With no tertiary qualifications, they turned to the business world, and the admiral industry in particular. They had no money either, but we were among the first Jews under the Munk-Haas and the South-Eastern Empire. With the income for the business to do this, the sydney fashion business.

On the one hand, the book explores the significance of Jewish fashion designers, and their work to the Sydney Jewish industry within the context of post-Holocaust immigration. It addresses the relative lack of knowledge about the Jewish fashion industry. Initially established as a subordinate business throughout the book. McNeil's essay The Beauty of the Everyday (pp. 2–16) makes it the story that, ordinary people, and particularly those who trim their work with the Jewish story of the Holocaust.

The other reason is that Jew TEXT (p. 16) - McNeil draws on a model provided by the construction of the fashionable, and the desire to dress in society. The image or model which emerged throughout the 19th century following the Industrial Revolution and the urbanization of society. This essay is about a fashion subculture that McNeil uses to explain the fashion of Jewish fashion designers.

The essay argues that the fashion industries were not independent entities. They were often part of a larger social and cultural context. The Jewish fashion industry was not only about dressing, but also about creating a sense of identity and belonging within the larger society. It was a way for the Jewish community to express their cultural heritage and history.

The book also explores the role of Jewish fashion designers in the fashion industry of Sydney. Many of these designers were not only successful in their own right, but also contributed to the development of the fashion industry in Australia as a whole. The book provides examples of how the Jewish fashion industry was able to adapt and change with the times, and how it was able to create new trends and styles.

The book is well-researched and provides a wealth of information about the Jewish fashion industry in Sydney. It is an important contribution to the study of fashion history and Jewish culture. It is highly recommended for anyone interested in fashion history or Jewish history.
Supporting evidence

Supporting evidence


2. Acknowledgement of collaboration between the University of Technology Sydney and the Sydney Jewish Museum

3. UTS News story by Melinda Ham as circulated in The Sydney Morning Herald, February 2013