

Hong Kong's fashion awakening: Building bridges between East and West



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The newly erected Henderson building in Hong Kong has rapidly established itself as a landmark of architectural and commercial significance, epitomising the city's ambitious urban transformation. Its genesis on a former car park—now the world's most expensive plot, acquired for a staggering 3 billion dollars — symbolises Hong Kong's relentless pursuit of architectural and economic innovation. The building's penthouse, characterised by 3.5-meter ceiling heights and a panoramic glass facade, became an emblematic venue for the Hong Kong Fashion Designers Association's inaugural haute couture showcase.

*The event, dubbed *Virtuose: The Artistry of Couture*, inaugurated a week of fashion industry events during the rebranded Hong Kong Fashion Fest. The carefully curated presentation featured a multinational cohort of designers—Charles de Vilmorin from Paris, Cheney Chan from mainland China, Mohamed Benchellal from the Netherlands, and Kay Kwok from Hong Kong—each presenting a capsule collection that articulated a beautiful and nuanced dialogue of global design perspectives.*

While a single fashion show represents a modest initial foray, it signals a more profound strategic ambition. Hong Kong, historically a retail nexus and mainland China a global manufacturing powerhouse responsible for the largest percentage of garment production worldwide, has paradoxically lagged in international fashion week relevance. The city's strategic positioning at the confluence of Eastern and Western cultural currents presents a unique opportunity for repositioning.

(Re)starting the fashion conversation

Hong Kong is carving out a distinctive role in the global fashion ecosystem as a cultural aggregator and conversation starter, bridging the creative sensibilities of East and West. Unlike

Seoul, which thrives on technological innovation, or Tokyo, renowned for its retail sophistication, Hong Kong's strength is its unique ability to bridge cultures. It serves as a crossroads of creative exchange between East and West. The global fashion scene, mostly dominated by European luxury groups with deeply entrenched domestic ecosystems, increasingly relies on Hong Kong and the broader Asian market as a vital economic driver. While these luxury houses often operate within selective international strategies or insular networks, their dependence on Hong Kong's retail and consumer base underscores the city's untapped potential—not only as a market but as a platform for global fashion dialogue and innovation.

This potential has awakened Hong Kong's government and industry stakeholders to recognise the potential economic and cultural dividends of nurturing a robust fashion and design industry. The Cultural and Creative Industries Development Agency (CCIDA) under Commissioner Victor Tsang, is executing a five-year strategic plan designed to transform Hong Kong from a mere shopping destination to a pivotal cultural bridge between East and West. This holistic approach anticipates significant multiplier effects across hospitality, tourism, retail, and cultural sentiment.

Where East meets West

Hong Kong faces the exciting challenge of crafting a distinctive narrative that redefines its role in the global fashion arena. To rise above the conventions of traditional fashion weeks, the city has the opportunity to position itself as more than a retail haven or a hub for China's fast fashion production. By focusing on cultural exchange, fostering innovative design dialogue, and offering a nuanced perspective on a truly global creative landscape, Hong Kong can solidify its standing as a cultural and creative bridge between East and West.

The inaugural Fashion Fest, the result of two years of planning, exemplified the city's remarkable commitment to this vision. It showcased the strategic collaboration of a diverse array of stakeholders, reflecting a clear ambition to elevate Hong Kong as a gateway to global fashion. Key organisations including the CCIDA, the Hong Kong Fashion Council (HKFC), and the Textile Council of Hong Kong were instrumental in orchestrating this success. Their efforts culminated in a compelling demonstration of how the city's fashion and creative industries can generate both economic and cultural dividends.

Shaping the future

A particularly striking highlight was a round-table discussion and luncheon moderated by Colleen Yu, which brought together Hong Kong's fashion leaders across various sectors. This forum underscored the determination of industry and government leaders to harness fashion as a driving force for cultural enrichment and economic vitality. It also signaled an encouraging alignment of vision and strategy, positioning Hong Kong not just as a participant in global fashion but as a dynamic influencer shaping its future direction.

While the ambition and potential were palpable to participants and observers alike, goodwill alone cannot sustain a burgeoning fashion ecosystem. It will be critical for the Fashion Fest organisers to align under a unified, compelling vision that transcends local limitations. Ironically, for a city known as a retail mecca, Hong Kong's commercial fashion sector was notably absent from this industry-defining event. Some of the city's most influential cultural tastemakers—from gallery directors to fashion buyers—remained bewilderingly uninformed about the week's overarching purpose.

Challenges

The commitment to showcasing a multicultural range of designers was exemplified brilliantly at the Virtuose couture event. However, this promise faltered during a subsequent international fashion show summit held at the city's former airport, where the designers' calibre would struggle to meet the rigorous standards of established fashion weeks. This disparity illuminates a fundamental challenge.

Identifying, nurturing, and retaining creative talent is a nuanced, long-term endeavour—particularly for Hong Kong's aspiration to elevate Chinese design and celebrate local heroes. Curation, no matter how well-intentioned, must be anchored in international relevance if playing on the same stage, and cannot emerge from a myopic perspective.

Investing in tomorrow's tastemakers

One of Hong Kong's most promising assets in redefining its role as a global fashion hub is the Polytechnic University's School of Fashion and Textiles, established in 2022 under the leadership of Erin Cho, former dean of Parsons School of Design. With its diverse and forward-thinking curriculum, the school is well-positioned to rival the world's most prestigious design institutions. This academic powerhouse holds the key to nurturing the next generation of creative talent, a critical step for Hong Kong to transition from a retail-centric fashion destination to a true incubator of innovative design.

However, as one designer candidly noted, Hong Kong's strength remains its retail landscape, while its fashion and creative industries still lag behind global leaders like London, Paris, and Tokyo. The challenge lies in leveraging tomorrow's design leaders to foster world-class talent and creativity—ensuring that the city not only matches but exceeds the creative potential of its global counterparts.

Leveraging strengths

In summary, Hong Kong must strategically leverage its inherent strengths: its robust retail infrastructure, sophisticated textile and manufacturing sectors, and the remarkable diversity of its business landscape and population. The city's fashion future lies not in imitation, but in innovative interpretation—bridging local creativity with international relevance.

*The inaugural Fashion Fest should be viewed not as a culmination, but as a promising first step. If anything, the week's *Vogue Loves Hong Kong* event depicted the city's vibrant landscape with a guest list of fashionistas, celebrities, tastemakers and leaders that all came together to celebrate Hong Kong's unique standing in the fashion world. With a little strategic refinement, collaborative spirit, and commitment to excellence, Hong Kong can truly position itself as a meaningful leader in the global fashion narrative.*

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