



Millennium Park, home to Chicago Fashion Week.

Land of Opportunity

By Beth Wilson

JASON GALLEN, VICE PRESIDENT OF RETAIL FOR ORIGINAL PENGUIN, IS ONE of the lucky ones.

His 2,300-square-foot store at the corner of Delaware and Rush streets in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood has been seemingly exempt from any retail lull during this economic crisis.

In fact, his Chicago store, which opened this summer, has become the sportswear company's best-performing location, exceeding sales expectations by 25 percent each month.

"It's our number-one store, out of the six stores we have open," said Gallen. The company also operates locations in New York, Miami and Dallas.

And while Gallen's story may be rare because the local retail climate is undeniably difficult, more retailers are eyeing Chicago as an untapped market, entering the city with gusto and at times scouting and opening more than one location. For example:

- Looking to make the most of property available in these tough times, Vancouver-based Aritzia, which caters to affluent 15- to 35-year-old women seeking designer labels, opened its largest U.S. location at 4,300 square feet in the city's Water Tower Place this summer, followed by a second, smaller location in Northbrook Court this fall.

- DNA 2050, a multibrand denim-based concept for women and men, also launched a Windy City location on Lincoln Park's Halsted Street this summer while continuing to scout a second downtown site.

- Club Monaco, meanwhile, renovated its Michigan Avenue store, added a Damen Avenue address to its three Chicagoland stores this summer and spied space along State Street for a possible fifth store.

- Fast-fashion retailer Zara came to the area with its first store at the Old Orchard shopping center in suburban Skokie, and with the Spanish company looking to venture within city limits with potential sites on Michigan Avenue and at State and Randolph Streets as part of the Block 37 project.

- Los Angeles-based premium denim brand Joe's Jeans chose Damen Avenue to launch its first retail concept, unveiling its modern, nearly 2,000-square-foot shop last week.

For Iraklis Karabassis, whose company IK Retail Group owns DNA 2050, skimping in Chicago, troubled economy or not, is short-sighted.

Karabassis said his aim was to look for two store locations in each of his target cities — Chicago, New York, Boston and Washington. "The economy is stressful all over the U.S. at the moment, but time will tell that we have made the correct decisions. We plan to stick to our expansion plan."

Melissa Gamble, the city's director of fashion arts and events, said Chicago remains one of the most valuable retail marketplaces. "It's a matter of retailers surviving through a tough economy," she said. "There's just no way around it — it's rough out there."

And while the mad rush to grab retail space along trendy Damen Avenue may be slowing, State Street is enjoying a resurgence of activity. Rents are up and vacancies are down along the historic thoroughfare that once emptied when the estimated daily 650,000 workers in Chicago's Loop returned home each night.

Now, nightlife thrives with a number of theaters housing such productions as "Wicked" and "Jersey Boys," and many of the once-vacant office buildings were replaced with residential developments or are being utilized by colleges offering classes in the area, said Ty Tabing, executive director of the Chicago Loop Alliance. Construction of nearby Millennium Park and progress on the much-maligned Block 37 project, one of the most prominent vacant lots in the country, has further boosted interest in the area, which is home to Nordstrom Rack, Loehmann's, Macy's and H&M, he noted.

In the meantime, Ulta is slated to open its largest — and its first urban — location in a three-level, 18,000-square-foot space along State Street this month while Crocs and Aerosoles recently unveiled stores nearby, Tabing said.

Tabing predicts about 20 new retailers will bow along State Street or in the East Loop neighborhood by summer of 2009.

 For more, see WWD.com.

SCENE

BOWLED OVER: Windy City foodies are all abuzz about the latest venture by Graham Elliot Bowles, a James Beard Foundation award nominee and former chef at Avenues in the Peninsula Hotel. Bowles' indie vibe is found throughout his solo effort called Graham Elliot, from the denim and Chuck Taylor sneaker-clad waitstaff to the River North restaurant's music with Bowles' iPod playlist for the day, including tracks by American Football, an alt-rock band from Urbana, Ill., to Cake and the Cure as well as Bowles himself on acoustic guitar. The food is equally delightful, including a foie gras parfait with Rice Krispies, cranberry compote, herbs and yogurt sorbet.

QUICK FIX: Frenzied frugal fashion queens have a new trick to tame their tresses. Blo.dri, a new hair finishing salon on North Clark Street that opened last month, specializes in blowouts, updos and other styles done in 30 minutes or less. Better still are the prices: Blowouts are just \$25 to \$35.

HOMEcoming: After its debut at The Museum at

the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York last fall, "Chic Chicago: Couture Treasures from the Chicago History Museum," including one of the most notable dresses in fashion, has come home. Running through July 26 at the Chicago History Museum, the exhibition features a Paul Poiret 1913 Sorbet gown, the first dress created for an uncorseted figure once worn by Windy City socialite Anita Carolyn Blair.

"That gave way to modern fashion," said curator Timothy Long.

It's one of more than 50 pieces worn by Chicago women, from Gilded Age gowns by Worth and Pingat to modern looks from Chanel and Versace, including a Chanel dress worn by Chicago's own Oprah Winfrey.

Sparking most interest is a black-and-white wool and cotton convertible dress from Comme des Garçons.

"Many women are disturbed by the dress," Long said. "It's loose in shape and crude in fabric. Even the staff was asking why do we have that piece. People are saying it's ugly; it's weird."

A dress by Jeanne Lanvin from 1927 at the Chicago History Museum.



VITAL STATS

Population: 2.9 million (2007)
Local unemployment rate: 7.1 percent (2008)
National unemployment rate: 6.1 percent (2008)
Median home sales price: \$257,600 (May 2008, second quarter)
Foreclosure rate in Chicago: 35th highest in country, with 21,488 in the second quarter.
Median household income: \$43,223 (2006)
Percent of residents living below poverty level: 21.2 percent (2006)
Average price of four-star hotel in Chicago: \$202 per night (2006)
Most expensive hotel room in Chicago: \$6,500, the Peninsula Suite at The Peninsula Chicago (2006)
World Series Wins: The Chicago Cubs won in 1907 and 1908. The Chicago White Sox won in 1906 (defeating cross-town rival the Cubs), 1917 and 2005.

SOURCES: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS, REALTYTRAC, FORBES.COM, PRICELINE.COM, CITY-DATA.COM, BASEBALL_ALMANAC.COM



Fashion at the Park

THE TANKING STOCK MARKET and vice presidential debates did little to deter local fashion lovers from flocking to Chicago's fourth annual fashion week. Fashion Focus Chicago, which kicked off last week to its largest crowds ever.

The week's first all-student show featuring styles from students attending the city's four design schools attracted 1,500 people Friday, with showgoers filling all 850 seats in the white tent at Millennium Park and standing two-people thick around the perimeter. The spillover crowd of more than 400 watched the show via a live-feed large-screen TV in the tent's reception area.

Two runway shows spotlighting some of the city's veteran design-

ers and serving as the week's fashion finale Monday and Tuesday were expected to draw even larger crowds, with 2,000 people registered to attend, said Melissa Gamble, the city's director of fashion arts and events.

Gamble attributes the jump to several factors, namely an increased awareness surrounding Fashion Focus, which ran Oct. 1 to 8, and a general rise in respect for Chicago's place in the fashion community.

When Fashion Focus began four years ago, the city's fashion week was received with a dose of cynicism, Gamble admitted.

"It was more of a surprise," she said, as in, "Oh, there's fashion there?"

"Now in our fourth fall, people are starting to look for it and look to us for what's going on in fashion in Chicago," noted Gamble, a former attorney appointed to her post in 2006, when Mayor Richard Daley created a Mayor's Fashion Council and introduced a series of initiatives designed to promote Chicago's fashion industry.

Since then, Fashion Focus slowly has grown in scope and sophistication, with organizers recently becoming more adept at ways of generating more buzz.

They rolled out the red carpet for Fall Out Boy bassist and designer Pete Wentz, who grew up in suburban Wilmette. He helped launch the festivities Oct. 1, introducing the week's inaugural show, Gen Art's Fresh Faces, which highlighted six of the city's emerging apparel designers.

Decked out in a black Dior tuxedo, white Dolce & Gabbana shirt and his wife Ashlee Simpson-Wentz's black, white and red scarf artfully tucked in his jacket pocket, Wentz quipped, "I have to thank Gen Art. A guy who's 5-foot-6 couldn't get on a runway otherwise."

Fresh Faces, meanwhile, was followed by Thursday's World Fashion Chicago runway show, a collection of looks representing Chicago's 27 sister cities, that drew designers from Paris and Mexico City. Friday's Dress Code fashion show presented work from 20 top student designers from the School of the Art Institute, Columbia College, Illinois Institute of Art and the International Academy of Design and Technology.

— B.W.



Here and left: Chicago's Dress Code fashion show featured styles by student designers.