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Miami's fashion industry to get Miami Dade College institute

HIGHLIGHTS

Miami Dade College will soon open a Miami Fashion Institute

The college will offer a degree program in fashion design and merchandising

High-profile designers Naeem Khan and Rene Ruiz believe the program could provide the infrastructure for the industry to flourish



BY NANCY DAHLBERG

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The weather, the colors, the light, the culture, not to mention proximity to New York — these are all reasons why celebrity fashion designer Naeem Khan announced in late 2014 that he would be moving all his production from New York and Asia to Miami, in a new facility on the Miami River.

“I set out to build a very simple cool place, but now it is turning out to be an art project and I’m loving it,” said Khan about progress on his facility, which received generous terms from the county. The facility is on schedule to open in late 2018 and employ 70 initially with a goal of at least 200 in years to come, he said.

A new industry program at Miami Dade College may give more designers a reason to set up shop in Miami and help firms already here grow their labor pools.

Several years in the making, Miami Dade College will soon open the Miami Fashion Institute at its downtown Wolfson campus; a two-year associate’s degree program in fashion design and merchandising will launch in the fall. The goal is to better position Miami as an international fashion hub by creating an ecosystem that supports industry growth and provides the education to develop a skilled workforce, said Marimar Molinary, director of Academic Program Development at Miami Dade College.

“It’s the right time for the program and the industry,” said Molinary, noting that “eyes are on Miami” with the increase in fashion houses and the rise of the Design District. “We have heard time and time again from designers, manufacturers and the retailing industry that in order to grow their businesses, they need a skilled workforce.”

Rene Ruiz has high hopes for the new program. The high-profile designer, based in the Miami area for 25 years, believes South Florida lost its way in the last few decades and could have done more to encourage a robust fashion industry here. “I totally believe in manufacturing here and creating jobs here. I love Miami. I have been here all my adult life, and it is amazing all the talent and opportunities we have lost through the years because we haven’t been able to [develop] the industry.

“Hopefully, [the program] will train students not only to be designers but also for the trades, which unfortunately we have lost in the United States over the last 20 years.”

He’ll get his wish. MFI’s new Fashion Design & Merchandising degree program will focus on fashion design and retail merchandising. Students in the program will develop skills in creative design, apparel evaluation and production and gain command of the technical skills in pattern making and garment construction. They will also study retail merchandising while gaining a comprehensive foundation in textiles, merchandising strategies, product development, marketing, fashion research and forecasting and global merchandising. Once the program gets going, the institute will expand with other programs and resources that the industry needs, Molinary said.

Ruiz opened a factory in Hialeah about three years ago — “we brought a factory back from the dead,” he said — and it now employs 55 craftspeople, many of them in their 30s and 40s with families. “They would love to make this the trade of their lives,” he said. “I’ve been in business in Miami for 25 years and I have always been very proud that I have been able to manufacture all my products in South Florida.” He’d like to expand but finding workers, he says, has been “very challenging.”

The institute could form an important leg of an ecosystem, as Ruiz sees it, that will also lure more designers from Latin America who want to set up shop. “This program will give the infrastructure,” he said. Recently he visited Los Angeles and was impressed how the city and state have been able to keep factory jobs as well as the designer scene. “It made me think about moving some of my production there. It is very costly for a business like ours to train people.”

Hopefully, he won’t have to. To design the program, MDC has consulted with Ruiz, Khan and other Miami designers as well as some of the world’s best fashion schools, including the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. It also has formed an international advisory board of local designers, manufacturers and retailers.

MFI will join other MDC programs such as the IDEA Center for entrepreneurship, MAGIC for gaming and film, ETCOTA for technology and the Miami Culinary Institute, all aimed at matching programming with workforce needs.

Locally, Miami International University of Art & Design, part of the Arts Institutes, offers associate’s and bachelor’s degree programs in fashion design and fashion marketing, but at a higher cost. MFI is the only facility of its kind at a public higher education institution in Florida and one of only a handful nationally, Miami Dade College says.

“Opportunity changes everything. By providing the affordable and accessible program, it will open doors for the industry and for students who have had the strong desire to work in the fashion industry for a long time,” Molinary said.

To be sure, Miami’s fashion industry is fledgling, but Khan believes “there is an amazing opportunity here” to evolve into a hub for high-end designers, if the region is able to develop with the right skilled workers. That would include designers, artists, technicians, pattern makers and tailors, and involve schools, government and industry working together.

Other efforts are in the works as well. The Beacon Council’s One Community One Goal initiative announced a fashion incubator in partnership with Macy’s two years ago, but no opening date has been set yet. That incubator, aimed at helping startup fashion companies, is still in the works with backing from Perry Ellis International, said Beacon Council President and CEO Larry K. Williams.

“What [the MDC project] will do is an indication on how far we are coming in the fashion industry,” Williams said. “It will provide a great resource to develop new talent within the design sector and continue to help people not only learn the crafts and skills of design but also the business behind fashion.

It all supports Miami's global position in the arts, as well as fashion and design and how those talents and skills start to weave together."



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This is all very exciting and I wish them well BUT unless you can find garment workers, i.e., those who labor in factories to make the clothes, good luck. Perhaps Miami-Dade County Schools can get involved by setting up a magnet program at a shutdown factory in Hialeah. Not everyone is post-high school material and some teenagers might actually aspire to making a living behind a sewing machine, provided they aren't paid sweat shop wages in order to compete with their 3rd World counterparts.

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