

# CALIFORNIA ApparelNews

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## Leading the Los Angeles Fashion District in a New Era

By Deborah Belgum *Senior Editor*

Every day, seven tons of trash are collected in the **Los Angeles Fashion District**, up from six tons a day last year.

More trash on the streets is just one of the challenges that Rena Masten Leddy has had to encounter since becoming the new executive director last summer of the **Los Angeles Fashion District Business Improvement District**.

Other problems include the homeless who camp out on the streets and sidewalks every night and addressing crime in the district.

"Providing clean and safe services is 80 percent of our business," said Leddy, who took over from Kent Smith, who stepped down as the executive director after heading up the BID for 17 years. When Smith first came on board, the district encompassed 56 blocks and had 300 business owners. Now it covers 100 blocks and has 1,000 business owners, who con-

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## The Leverage Makes Millions From Overlooked Market

By Andrew Asch *Retail Editor*

During a time when conventional wisdom says that retailers are not making big merchandise orders, **The Leverage** fashion house reported making millions of dollars from an overlooked boutique market.

Leverage, headquartered in Irvine, Calif., started business in 2014 selling men's denim tailored to urban markets. People living in these markets may live a long drive away from a mall and fast-fashion stores such as **Zara** and **Forever 21**.

Chris Ngo, the co-owner of Leverage, said his company made \$20 million in revenue in 2016. He forecast that it would make \$24 million in revenue in 2017 on a business founded on serving independent boutiques in minority neighborhoods, a market that is ignored and often misun-

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# SF STYLE

California College of the Arts hosted its annual runway show—called the 2017 Fashion Experience—on the back lot of the college's San Francisco campus. For more from the show, see page 8.

Saba Bagherzadeh Matanagh



# Reformation Brings Eco, Tech Store Concept to LA

**Reformation** made fashion headlines in Northern California this year when it opened an eco-friendly boutique that featured retail tech such as touchscreens. The women's fashion line recently announced that it will bring its new store concept to its hometown of Los Angeles.

On May 30, it is scheduled to open a 2,140-square-foot boutique to the **Platform** boutique center in Culver City, nine miles west of downtown Los Angeles.

On June 6, the company is scheduled to open a 3,275-square-foot boutique at 8000 Melrose Ave. near the cross street of Fairfax Avenue. When the Melrose store opens, Reformation will run a chain of six stores. Reformation's current Los Angeles store, located at 8253 Mel-



PHOTO BY MATTHEW MILLMAN

**REFORMATION ECO:** In February, Reformation opened an eco-friendly, tech-informed boutique in San Francisco, pictured above. Photo by Matthew Millman

rose Ave. by a landmark pink building that houses the **Paul Smith** flagship, will remain a Reformation store. But it will sell vintage clothes from Reformation, according to a brand representative.

Like the San Francisco store, the new Los Angeles-area stores will feature touchscreens in the dressing rooms and throughout the stores. The screens will keep track of garments and items in the store and also help customers in dressing rooms. Someone trying on clothes in a dressing room could choose a garment style from the screen and the styles will be brought to the dressing room.

Each fitting room is equipped with a "magic wardrobe." It will be stocked with garments selected by the consumer trying on clothes in the fitting room. The consumer can request additional garments be placed in the magic wardrobe by

tapping the screen. The shopper also can tap the screen to inform sales staff that she will make a purchase. A sales associate will prepare purchases for a sale.

Dressing rooms are also outfitted with customizable lighting and headphone jacks so shoppers can bring their own music.

The stores will aim to provide ecologically sustainable services by offering reusable totes and hangers made from recycled materials.

Walls will be coated with ecologically friendly, low-VOC paints, or paints that release few chemicals into the atmosphere compared to higher-VOC paints.

In November 2016, Reformation opened a 120,000-square-foot sustainable factory in Vernon, a short drive south of downtown Los Angeles. The Reformation facility employs 300 people, including some former **American Apparel** sewers and staff, according to a Reformation statement. In 2017, the brand introduced two new categories, swim and children's clothing.—*Andrew Asch*

## Funko Acquires SoCal-based Fashion Accessories Company Loungefly

Pop-culture consumer products company **Funko LLC** has acquired **Loungefly**, a Southern California-based contemporary fashion accessories company that produces products under licensed brands such as **Disney**, **Marvel**, **Star Wars**, **Sanrio** and **Pokémon**.

"We have long admired Loungefly and the company's unique and differentiated collection of accessories and are excited to welcome them to the Funko family," said

Brian Mariotti, chief executive officer of Funko, in a statement. "As we continue to extend our business into new and existing categories, this transaction provides us with key capabilities in the accessories and handbag category. We see tremendous opportunities to combine their creative design process with our speed-to-market capabilities, expanded distribution channels and broad license portfolio to deliver accessories to our loyal fans featuring their favorite pop-

culture icons and characters."

Based in Everett, Wash., Funko designs, sources and distributes collectible products. The company recently acquired certain assets of London-based **Underground Toys Limited**, which manufactures licensed products for film and TV properties such as

"Doctor Who" "Ghostbusters," "Peppa Pig" and "Game of Thrones."

Founded in 1998, Loungefly is based in Chatsworth, Calif. The company produces handbags and other accessories that are sold nationwide in specialty stores, boutiques and department stores.—*Alison A. Nieder*

### EVENTS

## Wolk Morais Shows Collection 5

To make a **Wolk Morais** runway show, you need a few main ingredients.

A basic ingredient is a classic Hollywood backdrop. For its May 22 show, the independent design label headed to **Yamashiro**, a veteran Hollywood restaurant, to host the fifth Wolk Morais collection since the brand moved to Los Angeles. The 100-year-old Japanese restaurant is nestled in the Hollywood Hills, offering commanding views of Los Angeles.

Similar to its past col-



GETTY IMAGES FOR WOLK MORAIS



lection, which took a bow in November 2016, Wolk Morais' new line took inspiration from classic Hollywood styles. Also continued from the past collection are a few pieces bearing the Wolk Morais monogram logo, which featured an art deco-like treatment of the letters "M" and "W."

Looks included outfits with evergreen striped trousers and gold-link suspenders. Another look was a tangerine crepe double-breasted suit and monogram blue denim overalls.

There was also a bit of 1930s-era Hollywood DNA in styles such as a raspberry striped pajama suit and a dove-gray double-breasted crepe dress suit. Another look with some Busby Berkeley-era inspiration was an ostrich-feather dressing gown. Florals also made an appearance in Collection 5. There was a floral print shirt and a floral silk double-breasted suit.—*A.A.*

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## Tukatech Introduces New Cloud-based Solutions for Design Community

Los Angeles-based technology and software company **Tukatech** is increasing its offerings for the design community. At the recent **Texprocess** technology trade show in Frankfurt, Germany, Tukatech introduced a new suite of applications, including several patent-pending applications and processes the company says will eliminate sketching and any “misinterpretations” that occur as a result.

The software uses existing 3-D garments, real-scale prints, **Pantone** colors and pattern repeats.

**Tuka3D Designer Edition** is a visualization application that allows designers to show their concepts virtually without the need for a pattern. The patent-pending program allows users to virtually build a garment from a library of virtual assets. Users can see print repeats and placements in true scale on the garment body and the final-concept visuals can be presented in a design meeting, used in a tech pack or sent to a vendor for visual reference.

**TUKAstudio** is a suite of print-development applications that can be used with other graphic-design software programs. Users can create and preview repeat patterns, check and

change colorways, and separate colors for print screens. There are fabric-texturing modules to create enhanced digital fabrics. Users can create yarn-dye weave patterns and knits, which can be viewed on a design flat or on a virtual garment.

An **Adobe Illustrator Plug-In** allows users to add placement prints to graded patterns that can then be sent to **Tukamark**, Tukatech’s marker-making software, which configures efficient marker layouts.

Tukatech’s **Tukacloud** operates as a “Web-based digital sample room,” allowing designers and merchandisers to work directly with vendors and manufacturers. In the cloud, users can access all data exported from Tuka3D and other systems in a central platform. Digital files are stored in a protected platform that allows users to access information from anywhere in the world.

The **Tukabank** is a library of PDF patterns or 3-D virtual style files available for download.

Subscriptions for Tuka3D Designer Edition start at \$29 per month. For more about Tukatech’s virtual product-development technologies, visit [www.tukatech.com](http://www.tukatech.com) or email [tukateam@tukatech.com](mailto:tukateam@tukatech.com).—Alison A. Nieder

## Centric Launches Visual Innovation Platform to Share Information Visually Across Company Departments in Real Time

Campbell, Calif.-based technology solutions provider **Centric Software** has launched the **Centric Visual Innovation Platform**, a collection of digital boards for mobile devices such as the **iPad** and the **iPhone**, as well as large-scale, touch-screen televisions.

This new platform is aimed at both executives who need strategic overview information as well as users who need drill-down capabilities and mass automation of executive decision making.

Centric VIP’s digital boards include mood boards and material and style boards to help with allocation and merchandising. There are sales boards to ensure accurate information can be shared in real time. The platform is geared for a wide range of positions from executives to the creative, merchandising, product development and sourcing teams.

“Centric VIP was conceived in close, on-site partnerships with the world’s leading brands and retailers and is a fully market-driven, game-changing innovation,” said Humberto Roa, Centric’s vice president of innovation, in a statement.

The new platform focuses on three areas: collaboration, decision making and execution of decisions. Information can be projected on a giant touchscreen television as well as directly to individual devices, where users can drill down into details.

The platform can pull information from first-level line plans, track changes and incorporate feedback before finalizing unit commitments. Changes are updated automatically and approvals and tasks are sent to the appropriate executives and teams.

“Centric VIP is a dramatic innovation that transforms our customers’ business by collapsing their time to market, delivering massive streamlining and speeding their execution. It is truly a game-changing innovation,” said Chris Groves, Centric president and chief executive officer.

In June and July, Centric Software will hold a series of seminars to demonstrate the platform in person. For more information, visit [www.centricssoftware.com](http://www.centricssoftware.com) or email [centricevents@centricssoftware.com](mailto:centricevents@centricssoftware.com).—A.A.N.

## REAL ESTATE

### Fashion District *Continued from page 1*

tribute funds for safety enforcement and cleanup crews as well as other services.

But as the district is transitioning into a hip area with 24-story apartment buildings replacing parking lots, artist lofts filling old garment manufacturing sites, and sophisticated restaurants and hotels moving in, the district is taking on a new feel that is shifting away from its fashion roots.

“There has been a lot of conversation around the vision for the next five, 10 and 20 years. How does the BID interact or help to create that new vision?” Leddy said.

Five years ago, no one would have thought there would be a high-end boutique hotel in the Fashion District. But the 2014 opening of the trendy **Ace Hotel** on Broadway in the historic **United Artists Building** led the way for others.

Soon to follow was the **Tuck Hotel**, a 14-room boutique hotel that opened late last year in a long-vacated building that once was a warehouse and brothel at 820 S. Spring St. in the heart of the Fashion District. Three new hotels are being built around 11th Street and Broadway: the **Downtown LA Proper Hotel** with 148 rooms at 1106 S. Broadway; the **Hoxton Hotel** with 164 rooms in the former **Los Angeles Railway Building** at 1060 S. Broadway; and a new 377-room hotel being developed by the **Onni Group**, which in 2016 purchased the 1920s-era **Western Pacific Building** at 1031 S. Broadway from Steve Needleman for \$56 million.

The list of new apartment buildings going up is staggering as is the number of old structures getting a new lease on life and being converted into living spaces.

In 2015, the Fashion District had 2,000 residential units. By 2018, another 3,500 will be added, and by 2020 there will be some 7,500 units in the 100-block area called the Fashion District BID, which started in 1996 as the first business improvement district in Los Angeles. There are now more than 950 property owners in the BID, who pay fees to support the district’s annual \$4.5 million budget.

Small, hip and independent stores are quickly popping up too. Everyone is flocking to **Little Damage**, a soft-serve ice cream store at 700 S. Spring St. that constantly changes

its unique flavors and has been written up in *Teen Vogue*, *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*. **Pop Obscure Records** at 735 S. Los Angeles St. is generating buzz for its collection of used records. And an art gallery is going up soon between Eighth and Ninth streets on Los Angeles street.

Reflecting the rise of the Fashion District, Los Angeles Street between Seventh Street and Olympic Boulevard is getting a \$1.77 million streetscape makeover with 26 new trees, sidewalk improvements, curb bump-outs and lighting at bus stops.

As the demand for traditional showroom and retail space declines, the BID and its property owners will have to figure out how to fit in with the changes. “There is a lot of stuff on our plate besides clean and safe,” said Mark Chatoff, one of the founding members of the BID and president of the **California Flower Mall**.

That is one of the reasons Leddy was selected to lead the Fashion District BID. Over the past decades, she has worked on business improvement districts in Stamford, Conn.; New Haven, Conn.; and Portland, Maine; and worked as a BID consultant on projects that took her to Grand Rapids, Mich.; San Antonio, Texas; Sheboygan, Wis.; and Paia, Hawaii.

Marketing and event planning were some of her duties working with other BIDs. She organized a helium-balloon parade when she worked in Stamford. It is still being held every year right after Thanksgiving and is one of the largest helium-balloon parades in the United States.

When she worked in New Haven, a BID property owner who had converted a long-vacant building into housing had to put in a grocery store on the ground floor as part of the city’s approval process. “The developer went everywhere to recruit grocery stores with no success,” she said.

So she and the building owner created a food co-op that had the feel of a small **Whole Foods** market. “We created the board, the membership and watched it being built and got the people who were the vendors,” she said.

**Elm City Market** opened in 2011 with 536 members.

For the Los Angeles Fashion District, urban

## NEWS

## Aussie Retailer Showpo to LA

When Sydney entrepreneur Jane Lu started posting pictures of fast-fashion styles on social-media sites for her Australian e-commerce label, **Showpo**, she was surprised that she got interest from California.

When Showpo’s denim, swim and maxi dresses started to sell in the U.S. in 2012, she found herself going to her local post office to send product to California. Fast forward to the present and Showpo makes 30 million in Australian dollars. By 2020, Lu forecasts the business could earn nearly AU\$100 million, and 50 percent of that sum could come from business from California and the rest of the United States.

Lu hopes to strengthen her bid for California business. By the end of this year, she intends to hire five people, a team that would include a buyer, in the Los Angeles area. Since Australia and California are located in different hemispheres and have



Jane Lu

different seasons, a Los Angeles team is needed to shape a merchandising program that would be on trend and in season for California and the United States. However, Lu noted that beach and casual styles are at the forefront of fashion in Los Angeles and her hometown of Sydney. She forecast that the company would remain an e-commerce company and not invest in bricks-and-mortar retail.

Along with casual clothes, Showpo makes women’s offwear. Core price points for her clothes are \$40 to \$60 in American dollars. The label also makes prom dresses and has made a big splash in the “festival” category. In April she and some friends attended the **Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival**, one of the top events in America’s music festivals. “We saw a lot of Showpo clothes at Coachella,” she said.—Andrew Asch

renewal is happening in waves. While most of the major urban renewal and changes have evolved on the western edge of the district, the grittier eastern side is slowly being transformed into a sleek urban mecca.

Where a centuries-old wholesale produce market once stood on San Pedro and 11th streets, there is now a bustling project called **City Market South**, where 8-year-old warehouse buildings have been transformed into cool spaces. Italian eatery **Rossoblu** just opened and **The Slanted Door** of San Francisco fame is another restaurant coming to the complex, which is being filled with bars, creative office spaces and an event location covering 2.5 acres. Another 10 acres is still being redeveloped. “It is a catalytic project for that area because it is so huge,” Leddy said.

Leddy was on the top of the list of finalists for the executive director job. She worked as

the No. 2 person at the Fashion District BID as the managing director and had a feel for the district and its problems.

“She was trained under Kent and had a lot of experience with other BIDs around the country,” said Brad Luster, a Fashion District board member and president of **Major Properties**, which owns a few buildings in the Fashion District.

Others like the new perspective she has brought to the job. “She has brought fresh energy to the board and to the BID with new ideas,” said Chatoff of the California Flower Mall.

Leddy has been delegating more jobs to the board and organizing committees to tackle the various problems of homelessness and street vendors. “She is very forward looking for the district,” said Mark Levy, a BID board member and president of **City Market South**. “She sees a future vision.” ●



# Will Google Assistant Become Retail’s Next Big Thing?

Technology company **Google** recently announced new angles to its **Google Assistant**. With a voice command, Google Assistant can offer help with a number of tasks, such as making phone calls, playing music and looking up information, similar to **Apple’s Siri** and **Amazon’s Echo**.

New apps for Google’s voice assistant will give app developers the opportunity to push the voice assistant in directions it had not approached before, such as shopping for clothes or ordering food off of a menu, according to a blog posted by Brad Abrams, product manager for Google Assistant.

For those using the app for commerce, the apps could transmit payments and also track and modify an order.

Executives for physical and e-commerce boutiques said that commerce coming from voice-based assistants has not been a conversation topic or something for which they are actively planning, according to informal interviews with a handful of retail chiefs. The rapid pace of business trends over the past decade has proved that today’s little-known technology can become tomorrow’s new moneymaker.

Tom Caporaso of New York-based **Clarus Commerce** said that voice-based assistants have a good chance of becoming the next big thing.

“Voice-based assistants are now integrated into many facets of our lives, including our cell phones, cars and devices like **Google Home** and **Amazon Echo**,” Caporaso said. “So people are quite familiar with the value and convenience that the technology brings. Amazon, especially, has seen early rewards from Echo users, who are spending 10 per-

cent more and making 6 percent more purchases than they were before owning the device. Amazon sold an estimated 9 million devices alone during the 2016 holiday season, which just proves that there is a market and a significant interest surrounding voice-based technology.”

Caporaso is chief executive officer of **Clarus Commerce**, which owns and operates **FreeShipping.com** and **ShopSmarter** and works in the field of e-commerce, subscription commerce and premium loyalty solutions.

Still, commerce from voice-based assistants may not be right around the corner, Caporaso said. Since consumers currently cannot view a product with a voice-based assistant, commerce from the app might be limited to reorders of items they know and have purchased before.

In the past decade or so, many new technologies have been introduced—and not all of them succeeded. Along with forecasting new fashion trends, retailers now must predict which technologies are going to take hold. Brooke Taylor Corcia, founder and chief executive officer of **The Dreslyn**, a downtown Los Angeles-based e-commerce business, said that retailers should ask a few questions about a new technology before getting involved with it.

“Is there a need for it in the market as a solution? Or is it just an interesting feature that can lose interest over time? What are the costs to introduce the feature versus the benefit gained? It seems the things that stick add value. [They] are easy to implement or affordable to purchase and are simple to use,” she said.—*Andrew Asch*



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## Calendar

### June 3

**Black & White Ball, benefiting National Jewish Health**  
The Langham Huntington  
Pasadena, Calif.

### June 5

**LA Fashion Market**  
California Market Center  
Cooper Design Space  
The New Mart  
Gerry Building  
824 Building  
Lady Liberty Building  
Primrose Design Building  
Academy Awards Building  
Los Angeles  
Through June 8

**Designers and Agents**  
The New Mart  
Los Angeles  
Through June 7

**ALT  
Emerge  
Select  
Transit**  
California Market Center  
Los Angeles

Through June 7

**LA Kids’ Market**  
California Market Center  
Los Angeles  
Through June 8

### June 7

**Atlanta Apparel**  
AmericasMart  
Atlanta  
Through June 10

### June 11

**Trend Seattle**  
Hangar 30  
Seattle  
Through June 13

### June 14

**Dallas Apparel & Accessories Market**  
Dallas Market Center  
Dallas  
Through June 17

**FIG**  
Fashion Industry Gallery  
Dallas  
Through June 16

### June 20

**CALA**  
Fort Mason Center  
San Francisco  
Through June 21

**Techtextil USA**  
McCormick Place  
Chicago  
Through June 22

**OC•Mix**  
Z Supply  
Irvine, Calif.  
Through June 21

### June 22

**Coast**  
The Seagate Hotel & Spa  
Delray Beach, Fla.  
Through June 23

There’s more  
on [ApparelNews.net](http://ApparelNews.net).

For calendar details and contact information, visit [ApparelNews.net/calendar](http://ApparelNews.net/calendar).

Submissions to the calendar should be faxed to the Calendar Editor at (213) 623-5707. Please include the event’s name, date, time, location, admission price and contact information. The deadline for calendar submissions is the Tuesday prior to Friday publication. Inclusion in the calendar is subject to available space and the judgment of the editorial staff.

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# S.M.N. Plans To Offer the ‘Real’ Premium

By Andrew Asch *Retail Editor*

**S.M.N. Studio** sells men’s denim that retails from \$200 to \$600, but the pricing is not a repeat of the go-go days of Los Angeles’ premium-denim business from a decade ago when denim labels typically asked consumers to pay hundreds of dollars for a pair of jeans, according to Jazmin Kim, cofounder of S.M.N.

Kim says that her brand, headquartered in Vernon, an industrial city a short drive away from downtown Los Angeles,

It is built around quality control. A staff of 15 people works at the 20,000-square-foot plant. It’s small enough where Kim can overlook the details of the operation and oversee production, said Mark Tourgeman, an S.M.N. brand strategist and a denim business veteran who has been working in the field since the 1980s.

“I have not worked with a company that is hands-on “A to Z.” We handle sampling, development, washes, fit, pattern. It’s practically a product from a tailor,” he said.

Kim’s alternative brand started more than a year ago.

are no details on the back pockets of the jeans, Kim said. A leather patch on the back of the jeans bears the imprint of S.M.N. in plain letters, which blend with the color of the patch.

Denim veteran Vince Gonzales said that the label “premium” might have been used too loosely during the premium-denim heyday, a time that ended during the Great Recession of 2008.

“They were using ‘better’ fabrics, not ‘premium’ fabrics, typically from Europe and Japan,” he said. “A real premium



**S.M.N. STYLES:** From left, a Ron Herman store window for S.M.N.; jeans from S.M.N.; at their Vernon factory, Jazmin Kim, left, and Mark Tourgeman; and a Ron Herman table with S.M.N. clothes

is an alternative and offers a different value proposition.

“A decade ago, it was all about branding,” she said. “You wanted to show that you owned the brand. It was a luxury statement,” she said of denim and consumer attitudes during the administration of George W. Bush.

Post Great Recession, post premium-denim gold rush, Kim said she has a denim line that sidesteps hype and offers minimal branding and labeling. The S.M.N. line stands for Simple, Modern, Nonpareil. It provides what Kim says is a garment that can be correctly defined as a premium jean. The premium value is rooted in the label’s production plan.

S.M.N. produces men’s jeans and some other categories such as sweatshirts bearing the word “denim.”

The line offers three core fits. There’s “The Finn,” a tapered slim fit with a 13.5-inch leg opening. There’s “The Hunter,” a standard slim fit with a 14.5-inch leg opening, and “The Bond,” a slim straight fit with a 15.5-inch leg opening. S.M.N. offers eight core washes and 15 seasonal washes for its Made in USA collection. S.M.N. also produces a small collection made in Japan, which represents 1 percent of the brand’s collection.

S.M.N.’s premium-denim fabric is made in Japan. There

jean has a lot of treatments to it.” Many jeans offer a basic wash or simple finishing and treatments. Gonzales is a brand consultant to Japanese denim company **Edwin** and has been in the denim biz for more than 25 years.

There is a robust future for premium denim, which retails at high price points, Kim said, even in an era of fast-fashion jeans, which can range from \$9.99 to \$39.99 at prominent fast-fashion retailer **H&M Hennes & Mauritz**. According to trend forecasters **WGSN**, American consumers typically pay \$50 to \$75 for a pair of jeans. Even in an age when con-

➡ **S.M.N.** page 7

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S.M.N. *Continued from previous page*

sumers say that they want to spend less, Kim believes that some will pay more for the right product.

“Our customers are getting more knowledgeable about clothes. They are denim-smart customers who are not getting what they are looking for,” Kim said.

She contends that this customer has always been on the hunt for premium denim. High-end boutique retailer **Ron Herman** must agree. S.M.N. launched its first season, Fall/Winter '16, in the **Ron Herman** boutiques. A year later, one-third of the jeans that S.M.N. sells in Ron Herman offer washes exclusive to the retailer. The line also has sold at high-end New York-area shops such as **Blue In Green**, **Brooklyn Denim Co.**, **Oak**, **Martin Patrick 3** in Minneapolis and **Fred Segal** in Tokyo.

The sales come during a time when sales for premium denim have stepped back, Gonzales said. The standard-bearing boutiques for premium denim have closed. Think New York shops **Atrium** and **Scoop** and **Lisa Kline** in Los Angeles. “Hard-core denim heads never stopped buying it,” Gonzales said of premium denim. “It’s coming back. Not at the velocity of 10 years ago. It’s a cycle. People are coming back to denim.”

Dio Kurazawa, WGSN’s director of denim, also believes the future is bright for premium denim. But it comes at the expense of suits and office clothes. “The greater acceptance of casual dress in the workplace allows for better choices to be made with relation to brand and trend. Those suits being replaced by premium designer jeans is a major benefit for the premium-denim market,” Kurazawa asserts. ●

Leverage *Continued from page 1*

derstood, Ngo said.

“When Magic Johnson started doing business, like putting a **Starbucks** in the ‘hood, no one understood it,” Ngo said of the former **Los Angeles Lakers** star opening a Starbucks location in South Los Angeles in 2006. “But there is a lot of money out there, and people want to keep it there.” Residents of urban neighborhoods are loyal to their independent boutiques, he said.

Manuel Jackson, a Los Angeles-based African-American entrepreneur, designer and founder of **The Gents Closet**, agreed that the urban market continues to be ignored more than a decade after Johnson’s initiative to bring more businesses to minority areas.

“If you go to trade shows and tell people that your store is in the ‘hood, people won’t sell to you. They think your demographic does not have money,” Jackson said. “But the African-American community spends a lot of money on fashion.”

In 2014, Leverage introduced **Embellish**, which Ngo described as a progressive denim line. With retail price points of \$100 to \$160, it offers looks such as motorcycle-style denim and jeans with treatments such as wax coating, acid wash, dip dyes and paint-splatter styling. It also offers a wide range of sizing. Many men’s brands don’t make pants for waists larger than a 38. Embellish offers waist sizes from 28 to 44. Because of the unique looks and wide variety of sizing, Ngo said that Embellish has been placed in retailers such as **Selfridges** in London. **NBA** stars such as Chris Paul, Isaiah Thomas and D’Angelo Russell have been spotted in Embellish jeans. Embellish

has a 45- to 60-day cycle from design to appearing on shop floors. The speed to market helps Leverage’s retail partners work at a fast-fashion pace.

Leverage also aims to serve other markets. In 2015, it introduced **Crysp**, a denim line for a younger man who shops at specialty shops. While Crysp shares some design DNA with Embellish, it retails for a lower price point, \$40 to \$70. It has been sold at retailers such

a 5,000-square-foot warehouse in Irvine to a 20,000-square-foot warehouse, also in Irvine. Ngo said the 40 people working at Leverage handle the company’s design, production, sales and logistics. Ngo and Leverage co-owner Lee Ramirez wanted to do everything on their own after being burned time and again as independent sales representatives.

In 2012, Ngo and Ramirez opened Leverage as a sales agency. “It was years of helping build brands, and once we got them to big doors and when the contract was up, [brands] wouldn’t renew,” Ngo said. “We’d always have to panic and look to the next brand, the next brand, and at the end of the day none of them were loyal. I get it. It’s business, and it is cutthroat. But my partner and I were over doing it.”

They learned to design and produce clothes while making their first collection for Embellish. Ngo said that they gained wisdom by making every mistake in the book. To learn about logistics and fulfillment, a consulting company helped guide the development of Leverage’s logistics section.

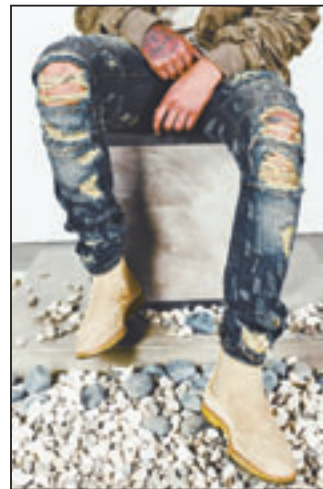
Leverage anticipates introducing a couple of new lines by the end of 2017. But the company doesn’t plan to seek a higher profile. “Orange County is overlooked. We’d be two times as big if we moved to LA.”

But Ngo said he will remain an Orange County guy. He grew up in Orange County, and all of his friends and family live there. ●

IMAGES COURTESY LEVERAGE



**LEVERAGE CHIEFS:** Chris Ngo, left, and Lee Ramirez at the Agenda trade show in February 2017 in Las Vegas. At right, an Embellish jean.



as **Zumiez** and **Jimmy Jazz**. Also in 2015, Leverage acquired men’s fashion line **Lifted Anchors**, which offers new looks every two weeks. Mostly shirts and jackets, the line’s retail focus is direct-to-consumer at [www.liftedanchors.com](http://www.liftedanchors.com), but it also has been sold at **Karmaloop**, the streetwear-focused e-commerce shop headquartered in Ontario, Calif., and at Australian boutique chain **Culture Kings**. Leverage’s other brands include boot collection **Foundation Footwear**, which it has sold at **Pacific Sunwear**, and **Haus of JR**, a line of high-end clothes for toddlers.

In 2016, Leverage also expanded from

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# California College of the Arts

California College of the Arts hosted its annual runway show—called the **2017 Fashion Experience**—on the back lot of the college's San Francisco campus. This was the first runway show under John Bauernfeind, who took over the chair of CCA's Fashion Design Program last fall.

The May 11 show featured 10 designers and a diverse mix of "street-cast" models against a diaphanous structure created by CCA architecture students.

On the runway, three of the fashion designers were from California, including Northern California natives Eliza Oakley and Camille Malland. Oakley took inspiration from skater style to create a collection that played with proportion and scale. Malland drew on her American and French roots to create a collection she described as "trashy," "classy" and individual. Southern Californian Yui Fukunaga used denim, wool and leather to create a collection inspired by the makeshift resourcefulness of the homeless people she saw on her daily commute.

Florida native Sterralda Osias took inspiration from her family, including her Haitian father and his interest in the solar system to create a menswear collection that blended aspects of the Mercury spacesuits with Western wear.

Aigne French found inspiration in the environment of her hometown, Philadelphia. She used embroidery and bright colors to emulate the graffiti and uplifting murals she saw in her childhood neighborhood.

Vipavee Kang is from Thailand but said memories of her grandmother in



Saba Bagherzadeh Matanagh



Aigne French



Ziqi Wang



Yui Fukunaga



Vipavee Kang

Singapore with her sewing machine inspired her to try to sew. Kang's collection featured wrapped and layered pieces that could be worn in a number of ways.

In creating her collection, Iranian-born Saba Bagherzadeh Matanagh envisioned a creative working woman who travels for business but wants to have fun at the same time. Her collection draws inspiration from Persian architecture and shades of turquoise and blue with pops of bright shades such as fuchsia.

Three of the students in the show—Hanyue Zang, Jiexin Li and Ziqi Wang—are from China.

Zang drew inspiration from men's shirts for her collection of womenswear, which featured crisp, striped shirting fabrics paired with polka dots and pops of red. Li envisioned an independent thinker as are her muse for her men's and women's collection of layered and draped pieces rendered in nearly all black. In contrast, Wang showed a collection of women's and



Hanyue Zang



Jiexin Li

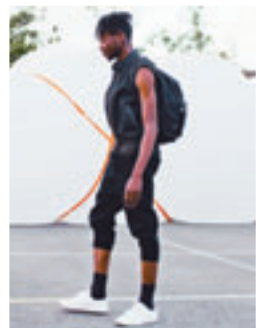


men's pieces entirely in white. She was inspired by doctors' and nurses' uniforms as well as the white sheets found in hospitals to create her collection of oversized, draped pieces.

CCA's Fashion Design Program was founded in 1996 to be a cross-disciplinary program driven by ideas and emphasizing design concepts and skill development. The program is one of 22 undergraduate and 12 graduate programs offered in art, design, architecture and writing by CCA, which was founded in 1907.—Alison A. Nieder



Eliza Oakley



Sterralda Osias

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# The Credit- and Debit-Card Business Is Booming

Credit, debit and prepaid cards in 2016 saw a purchase volume increase of 7 percent based on a year-over-year comparison, according to *The Nilson Report*, a Carpinteria, Calif.-based trade publication reporting on the payments industry. In America, credit, debit and prepaid cards' purchase volume reached \$5.648 trillion in 2016.

Nilson also recently announced a breakdown of how much retailers pay to accept cards. It is \$1.49 for every \$100 in card sales, David Robertson, publisher of *The Nilson Report*, said. American credit, debit and private-label cards generated \$5.936 trillion to pay for goods and services last year.

The most prominent card companies, **Visa**, **Mastercard** and **American Express**, as well as private-label cards—think store cards—comprised \$3.347 trillion in purchase volume, which amounted to 56.38 percent of all card spending.

Controversy on the fees merchants pay to use payment-card systems has been an issue for years. In 2010, the Durbin Amendment of the Dodd-Frank Financial Reform Act required the Federal Reserve to limit fees for debit-card processing.

Some merchant groups and bank-card issuers sued the Federal Reserve over the amount of merchant fees. In 2014,

a D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Federal Reserve had rolled out the Durbin Amendment reasonably. But it continues to be an issue in Congress. The Washington, D.C.-based **Retail Industry Leaders Association** released a statement in April stating that it opposed an announcement by Jeb Hensarling (R-Texas) of the House Financial Services Committee to repeal swipe-fee reform.

"Preserving swipe-fee reform is essential for the retail community and will remain our top priority in the debate over financial reform," Austen Jensen, vice president, government affairs for RILA, said.—*Andrew Asch*

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