

Where Local Businesses Can Hatch and Then Grow



Sarah Morgan in front of her bags and belts

Sarah Morgan has a good thing going. Her self-styled eenamaria leather handbags, belts and cuffs, all accessories with a New York attitude, are sold at nearly a dozen hip Manhattan and Brooklyn boutiques, and she's getting orders from around the country.

The 31-year-old entrepreneur is set to expand her 2-year-old business — she has plans for her bags to take Japan by storm next year — so she signed on as one of the first tenants in NY Designs, the world's largest incubator for designers.

With its 12-foot-high ceilings, glass walls and enormous windows, the 34,000-square loft-like space at LaGuardia Community College, she says, is the perfect place for her and her dreams. "The rent — \$550 per month — is negligibly cheap, and I'm not just paying for floor space, I have access to three beautiful conference rooms, and this will help with the image I want to project, and I can't wait to use the workroom. But it's more than just the rent. It's the psychological impact of being here. As a designer, you often exist in a vacuum, and here I have quick access to other designers and other resources."

Jeff Goodman of jGoodDesign, a 7-year-old lighting design company that sells to designers and architects, knows exactly what she means. "There is a sense of community and the encouragement to collaborate," he says. "Just today I ran into one of my co-tenants and heard about a great idea."

And that synergy, NY Designs director Mary Howard says, is what the incubator is all about. "In one place, designers get important services — the chance to develop business skills through adult-education classes in everything from model making to green design, shared facilities like the conference rooms and prototype workshop and access to a list of hard-to-find professionals like accountants and trademark lawyers they may want to hire," she says.

The \$6.1-million center, which officially opened in October and has 19 studios that rent for \$260 to \$1,500 per month, is funded by state and federal grants — \$5 million from Restore New York, \$1 million from the U.S. Department of Commerce and \$150,000 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The project was sponsored by the CUNY Economic Development Corp. in cooperation with the College.

New York Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, who was instrumental in the Assembly's allocation of funding for the center, said, "NY Designs is providing the critical support services and access to capital resources necessary to accelerate the growth of promising young companies, building community and jobs for New Yorkers."

NY Designs has been in the works since 2002, when the Assembly set aside a \$7.5-million grant to begin the initial phase of the incubator network. "NY Designs is a critical part of CUNY's outreach to the community," Chancellor Matthew Goldstein said. "It's an opportunity for CUNY to become a vital part of the local economy by offering training to designers and their prospective employees. We are deeply appreciative of the efforts of Speaker Silver and Rep. Catherine Nolan of the 37th District and the New York State Assembly, who have made this all possible."

NY Designs is LaGuardia's latest link to the local business community. The LaGuardia Urban Center for Economic Development provides professional training and business support programs to businesses in western Queens and its Small Business Development Center offers free business technical assistance to startup and established entrepreneurs. "Chancellor Goldstein has established a vision for the City University of New York that uses the intellectual capital present in our colleges to support economic development and job creation," says CUNY President Gail Mellow. "This is terrific for our students, our faculty and our community."

It also is terrific for Morgan, Goodman and the other design tenants who have taken up residence in NY Designs. An enthusiastic Morgan says, "I intend to make eenamaria a lifestyle brand. I'm going to introduce chandeliers next. What I really need now are investors."