

## The Un-Mall on Bleecker Street

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN  
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Do not call it a bazaar or a flea market. Nor is it really a mall or a department store. The best description might be "collection of mini-boutiques."

The creator of the retailing concept behind Emerge NYC, a newly opened shopping space on Bleecker Street in NoHo, calls it "the future of retail." Whether that turns out to be true - it has been open only since the beginning of August - remains to be seen. But it is clear that Nicholas Petrou, who came up with the idea for Emerge NYC, has created a distinctive approach to retailing.



Heidi O'Donnell, a clothing designer, has set up shop at Emerge NYC in NoHo. Retail spaces there range from about 50 to 150 square feet.

Photo: Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Displayed in 3,500 square feet are 26 tiny open-fronted boutiques lining the walls and another 26 glass counter spaces that form a center island. Emerging designers - who run the shops themselves - sell upscale handmade clothes, bags, jewelry, accessories and even some fine art directly to customers.

Like curators at a gallery, Mr. Petrou and his manager, Alex Pabon, selected the designers to maintain a balance of products and an interesting aesthetic mix aimed at appealing to shoppers who want to buy unique pieces.

"It's a department store for young designers," Mr. Petrou said, when asked to describe his creation. "Customers get to meet the designers, find out about their inspiration, and the designers get feedback from customers on prices and craftsmanship. Sometimes, you can even see the designers working."

This, needless to say, does not sound very much like a department store, and some retail specialists say this is probably a good thing.

"We're seeing a long-term change in America, not just in large cities, with the integration of retail into the community after 50 years of purposely separating it," said Michael D. Beyard, co-author of "Ten Principles for Rethinking the Mall," which will be released in

December by the Urban Land Institute. "Convenience, accessibility and a sense of community are driving the retail market now."

Mr. Beyard, a senior fellow at the institute, a nonprofit research and educational organization with a focus on real estate development, said he had not come across this retailing concept before, but he is not surprised. "Designers and store owners want to move closer to customers," he said. "It sounds like that is exactly what this is trying to achieve."

The concept grew out of Market NYC, another of Mr. Petrou's brainstormings. It is a more impermanent indoor shopping bazaar, which has operated successfully in a gymnasium on Mulberry Street in NoLIta since 2002.

A designer himself, Mr. Petrou understood the difficulty that young talents face in getting their creations in front of potential customers. But Market NYC is much like a flea market; it is open only on weekends and designers display their wares on foldout tables.

So Mr. Petrou recruited designers from Market NYC to join him at Emerge NYC, which turned out to be an easy sell. He said that he had a long waiting list of designers who wanted space, which ranges from about 50 to 150 square feet, and rents for \$1,400 to \$2,500 a month. The counter spaces rent for \$450 to \$640 a month. The retailers take the spaces month by month, with most informally committed through the end of the year.

Emerge operates something like a business incubator, which provides small blocks of office, laboratory or production space for start-up companies. In return for a fairly hefty rent payment - more than \$300 a square foot annually - designers get a permanent presence here in a very busy section of downtown [Manhattan](#) without the bother of having to sign a lease, pay utilities or deal with all the myriad obstacles to opening an independently owned store.

Compared with Market NYC, Emerge NYC is not only permanent, it is also much more upscale. It is housed at 65 Bleecker Street between Lafayette Street and Broadway, in a 13-story white terra-cotta office building, completed in 1899, that is the only structure in [New York City](#) designed by the famed Chicago architect Louis Sullivan. Emerge NYC occupies the first floor, which had been vacant for several years and previously housed a photo lab.

John Lindell, an independent architect who specializes in store interiors, said designing an open and airy space that also accommodates intimate boutiques was a new challenge. "Having so many different vendors with some ability to personalize each space was the key," Mr. Lindell said. "It was important to keep the rents affordable and to provide the backup for the designers to build out their own identity."

Mr. Lindell designs store interiors all over the country, and said he was not aware of a retailing concept quite like this in the United States, although similar mini-boutique malls do exist in Hong Kong and South Africa. "Having the separate boutiques, that's really

unique to Emerge, especially to have it look as nice as it does," he continued. "It's a great concept and easy to manage, so it's surprising you don't see it more often. And in New York City, there's certainly a lot of young talent."

Mr. Petrou and Mr. Pabon said they hoped to brand their mini-boutique model and were already looking for a second space, particularly on the Upper West Side.

Some of the merchants say that although midsummer was not an ideal time to open a store in Manhattan, they are encouraged by business so far.

"I've had several customers say they don't want to go back to shopping at department stores after they've been here," said Lauren Wimmer, a jewelry designer who has a counter space at Emerge NYC. "Department stores are owned by a few big companies, and they don't take risks anymore. Here, they really encourage creativity."