

Grit and Glamour: Designer Patricia Field's Lower East Side

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Tobi Elkin

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Pat Field with dogs Puti and Sultana on the Lower East Side. Photo by Alex M. Smith.

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It's the flaming fuchsia hair you see first. Then the eyes, outlined in sparkly baby blue kohl eyeliner. Long, thin legs are propped up on a desk, her lithe frame folded into a chair. Poodles Puti and Sultana hover nearby. In the cavernous basement office of her eponymous shop at 306 Bowery, Patricia Field is quiet, but her mind is hardly idle.

"I'd love to see my online business grow big," she says after a drag on an American Spirit.

A small army of young employees toils nearby, attending to Field's vigorous web presence that includes her thriving online store. Two set up a photo shoot in a corner of the office. Others style mannequins with quirky leopard prints, patent leather and pink boas; they tag shoes, check order statuses and wait on customers upstairs. Field, 73, keeps an eye on the shoot, occasionally offering suggestions.

A prolific stylist and designer, whose creative vision earned her an Oscar nomination for "The Devil Wears Prada," multiple Emmy nominations and a win for costume design for her work on the TV series "Sex and The City," Field is writing a new chapter on the Lower East Side.

Until two years ago, Field lived in an annex of the building that houses her boutique on the Bowery. She transformed it into an exotic Shangri-la, throwing numerous backyard barbecues and parties. The house featured a bathroom with an indoor garden. "I loved it because it was totally private." She stayed there for eight years. But when she had the chance to buy the property that borders hers, Field decided to make a change in order to create more retail space. "My business comes first" she says of her now more than 3,000-square-foot shop.

However, the decision meant she needed to move. "And I'm like, OK, where am I going? What is my life? What can I do that I haven't done before to get me excited?" She didn't end up going very far, migrating below Delancey Street to the Seward Park Co-op after hearing from a friend whose father had lived there. She downsized, did a gut-renovation on a one-bedroom

apartment on Grand Street that faces the East River and couldn't be happier. She's frequently spotted strolling around the neighborhood with her dogs, picking up groceries at Fine Fare on Clinton Street.

"I travel a lot and live in a lot of hotels so I wanted a hotel suite-type space," Field says. She created what she calls a "hotel suite in the sky." When she leaves the city for a break, she goes to her apartment in South Beach, Fla., or to visit family and friends in Greece.

Of the neighborhood she says, "I love everything about it... the view of the river, the quiet and peace. I can walk to work and I can walk home. I love walking outside and seeing birds and squirrels and trees."

Field has been a quintessential downtown girl since the '60s. A New Yorker, she was born in Manhattan's Yorkville neighborhood to a Greek mother who ran a dry cleaning business, and an Armenian father. Raised largely in Whitestone, Queens, her Greek grandmother lived in Astoria and was a major influence—her dog Sultana is named after her.

Ironically, Field's quirky downtown aesthetic runs counter to films she's designed costumes for—"The Devil Wears Prada" and "Confessions of a Shopaholic," for example—and TV shows like "Ugly Betty" and "Hope and Faith." Field describes her own fashion persona as "sporty chic, modern with a soft edge." Her everyday style is jeans and a T-shirt with a twist, but, she says: "I can doll up. I doll up good."

Field's work in film and TV began in the mid-1980s on a thriller called "Lady Beware" starring Diane Lane. The association that would catapult her into global recognition didn't occur until 1994 when she met Sarah Jessica Parker, who was on a movie called "Miami Rhapsody" at the time. Her friendship with Parker led her to "Sex and The City" creator Darren Star in 1998.

"It was just something that happened to me kind of at the perfect time and I loved it. I had the store and this was a job where I would go and dress a few people and they pay you really good money. Money that I wasn't used to making. And I was like 'wow, I like this' but I never wanted to give up my store."

"Sex and the City," known in some circles as the most fashionable show in television history, remains the TV and film franchise that Field is most associated with. To this day, Field says when she's depressed, she does something women do the world over, she locks herself into a room for a SATC marathon.

"It's like a global club of a billion women that sing the same song," she says.

But her true passion is her boutique, a fashion landmark for nearly 50 years that now includes clothing from her own label.

Field says her greatest achievement came in 1966 when at 24, she opened her first store. "That was a highlight for me. Because at the time, that was an accomplishment—it had a scariness about it because you never know," she recalls. The store, on Washington Place on the New York University campus, became a hit. After five years, she moved the store to 10 E.

Eighth St. where it thrived for 30 years. Field lived in the loft atop the store. There was also a location in Soho in the 1990s. Field moved to her current Bowery location, just above Houston, in 2003, working and living there after adding onto the back of the building. "My home became part of my store enlargement." Shortly after she bought the front part of the building, it was designated as a landmark.

Field has observed enormous changes on the Bowery: "I really don't know what's going on. I see stores open and close, open and close. I see fancy stores trying to anchor here and I don't know what's going on."

Of the changes in her "new" LES neighborhood, she says she's "happy sad": "You're not going to stop progress so you may as well latch onto the positive side of it and let the past go. That's the 'sad' because I love the neighborhood, I love that it's a mix of people. It's what I call a real New York mix. I really don't care to live in a building with all old-fashioned people or artsy people. I don't like that. I like normal. I'm a New York person, I come from a middle-class world and I'm comfortable in that environment."

Clearly, Field isn't planning on slowing down anytime soon. Along with creating buzz for her store and shopping events she's working as costume consultant on Darren Star's latest sitcom, *Younger*, which got picked up and debuts on TV Land this winter. The show stars Sutton Foster as a recently divorced 40-year-old mom struggling to find a job; she stages a makeover to age down to her mid-20s and lands a gig as an assistant. Yet another ideal mashup and more fertile ground for Field's hyperactive imagination, where visionary curation and design takes on a life of its own.