



Temple students have used today's technology to capture the yesterdays of Philadelphia's storied Fabric Row.

Weaving a history

By Dianna Marder
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

More than time and space separate Shirley Wilk from Bill Hickey. She's 75 and in business as B. Wilk Fabrics for 53 years, while Hickey is 39 and opened the nearby Red Hook Coffee and Tea two years ago.

But as merchants on Philadelphia's Fabric Row — a stretch of South Fourth Street from Bainbridge to Christian Street — their interests are

more shared than separate.

Both want to keep the street bustling with shops and customers. But Wilk, Hickey and their fellow shopkeepers know they have something more valuable, more elusive, to preserve: the sense of place that Fabric Row has acquired through the generations.

Place is a quality many a modern designer would kill to capture. It shows itself on sunny afternoons through dusty shop windows and it

See **FABRIC ROW** on E9

RACHEL DYE / "Cross/Walks"



JULIET SHEN / "Cross/Walks"



JULIET SHEN / "Cross/Walks"



JULIET SHEN / "Cross/Walks"

Fabric Row images, from far left: Remik Lawrence at Jack B Fabrics; an antique sewing machine in a nostalgic window display; Shirley Wilk, in business 53 years as B. Wilk Fabrics.

Weaving a history of Fabric Row

FABRIC ROW from E1 rests in the weathered marble of storefront steps. It is people, more than the passage of time, that establish a sense of place: men who walk arm in arm as they might have in the old country, young women in capri pants buying organza for their wedding gowns, guys in oversized Ts and low-slung jeans working alongside wrinkled women who "need to sit for a minute."

Now Fabric Row, a dry-goods haven since the 1800s, is the focus of an multimedia portrait captured in audio accessed by cell phone and in photographs displayed at the Gershman Y, at Broad and Pine Streets. There's even a segment where visitors can add their own remembrances via cell phone or online.

The project, *Cross/Walks: Weaving Fabric Row*, is the work of Temple University students enrolled in Neighborhood Narratives, a new course developed by artist Hana Iverson.

A native of the Chicago suburbs who had become a New Yorker, Iverson came to Temple in 2004 to create a concentration in Interdisciplinary New Media within the university's School of Communications and Theater.

The curriculum calls on students to understand the significance of oral history and develop the skills to record it in myriad ways; in addition to audio and videotape, they shoot photos and work with cell phone technology and global positioning systems as artistic media.

For both teacher and students, defining and working with "new media" is a race against change. Just as 8-track tapes gave way to cassettes and VCRs to DVDs, the technology used to create today's cell phone tours could be eclipsed in short order. That leaves Iverson and other artists contemplating ways to create an archive of such art.

"We're used to the notion of an artifact," she says, "We know that it is the tangible quality, in part, that gives it value. But art that is interfaced with technology takes on an ephemeral quality."

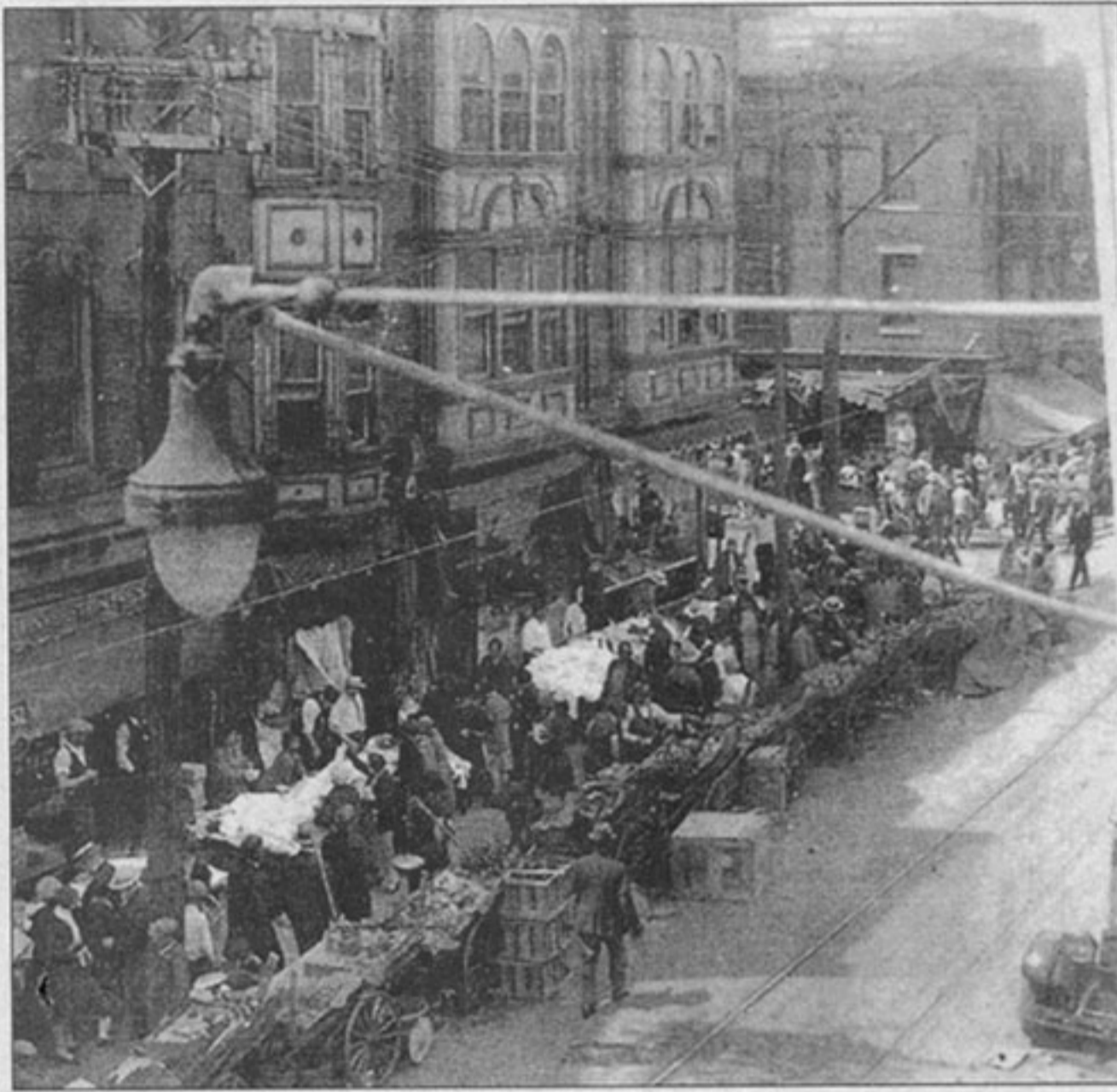
Cross/Walks demonstrates that both the art and the subject are in transition. In an era of online shopping and big-box stores, small shops that offer face-to-face transactions are increasingly rare. So the newer places on Fabric Row could be as much at risk of extinction as the older ones.

Shirley and Bernie Wilk



MARIKO KOSAKO / "Cross/Walks"

Issidore Hufferman, a fabric supplier, above, and a vintage photograph of Fabric Row, right, the strip of South Fourth Street between Bainbridge and Christian Streets. That area has been a dry-goods center since the 1800s. Today, fabric stores are interspersed with newcomers such as nail salons.



Fabric Row Tour

The cell phone tour "Cross/Walks: Weaving Fabric Row" can be accessed by calling 215-525-3208, even from a landline. Additional information on the tour is on the Web site www.cross-walks.org.

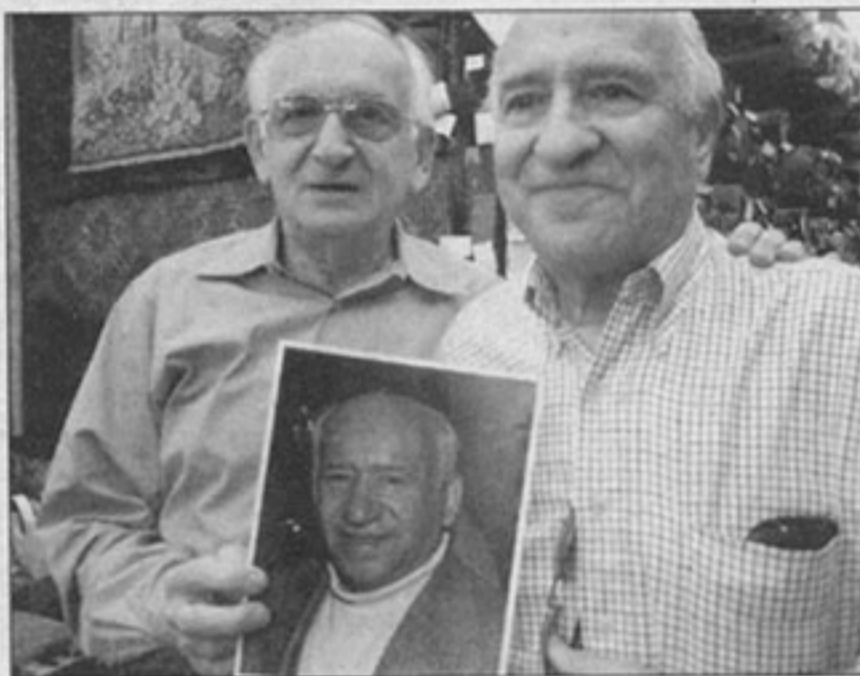
An accompanying display of photographs and audio is at the Gershman Y, 401 S. Broad St., now through Aug. 13. Hours are Sunday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free.

were married in November 1953, and a month later he shipped out to serve with the U.S. Army in Germany. When he returned a year later, Bernie defied his father's wishes by opening a small fabric shop with Shirley on Fourth Street.

"My father-in-law had his business in the Italian Market and he wanted us to work there," Shirley Wilk says, "but he sold *shmatas*" — Yiddish for rags, or anything worthless.

The young couple wanted something classier.

"My husband had a truck and we went together to fabric mills and we bought," Wilk



JULIET SHEN / "Cross/Walks"

Sam and Lou Brood of A. Brood & Sons. Their neighborhood is the focus of a multimedia portrait by Temple students.

says. "We bought so much we still have some of that original inventory."

In time B. Wilk expanded to two storefronts on Fourth Street. One contains lighter fabrics; the other sells upholstery and houses Wilk's fabrication workroom.

Bernie died nine years ago, but Shirley keeps the business going with her daughter Michele and son-in-law William Berson.

Bill Berson modernized the layout a bit and put up a Web site for user-friendly online shopping, but there are older constants here set like concrete. One is the focus on cus-

tomers service; the other is Shirley Wilk, who works five days a week, including Saturdays, with only Thursdays off to get her hair done.

Sure, the street has changed.

"Now we have body-piercing stores," she says. "We never had that before."

In 2005, Bill Hickey came to Philadelphia from Brooklyn on a Greyhound bus, for a one-day tour of potential real-estate investment sites. Fourth Street wasn't on his radar — Hickey saw it by chance because he was spending the night with friends in Queen Village. In a matter of



The Philadelphia Inquirer

membered when it was a dress shop," Hickey says. "I really love that aspect of connecting to the past."

There's more to come from Hana Iverson, who is in Rome now, teaching a Temple summer class in Neighborhood Narrative.

The class is creating a cell phone tour to show how transportation evolved over time in Trastevere, one of Rome's most vibrant residential neighborhoods. And at the same time, Temple students enrolled in Neighborhood Narrative in Tokyo are engaged in an identical project.

Ultimately, the two will converge with an online map and accompanying stories from the two cities.

Like *Cross/Walks*, the international project will have an online component accessible by anyone interested — even folks on Fabric Row.

months, he had opened Red Hook, a cafe selling fair-traded coffee and tea from independent growers.

"It didn't take me long to integrate myself into the neighborhood," says Hickey.

He's active in the three-month-old Fourth Street subcommittee of the South Street/Head House Square Business District, a group of old and new merchants who want to promote the street and preserve their face-to-face way of doing business.

"The other day some older Jewish women came into the store, and they said they re-

Contact staff writer Dianna Marder at 215-854-4211 or dmarder@phillynews.com. Read her recent work at <http://go.philly.com/diannamarder>.

FORMAN MILLS
DESIGNER FASHIONS
KILLER PRICES
1-800-994-MILLS