

# Shirley Willett

Her life was planned to become an excellent fashion designer: from a first business at age 14 making doll's clothes for gift shops and fairs; to learning production stitching in 1940s factories; to exploring the depths of her creative mind for very unique, yet classical and marketable ideas; and to studying great designers' workmanship firsthand to become an excellent designer and a superior pattern engineer.

In the 1960s Ms. Willett was named Boston's number one custom designer by *Women's Wear Daily*. She single-handedly set up her own manufacturing plant, taught all her stitchers, and sold to Neiman Marcus, Bonwit Teller, Bullocks Wilshire and Saks Fifth Avenue, among many other top designer retailers. Her financial success for 20 years is owed to the design uniqueness, consumer orientation, and mostly to efficient engineering and production. She sold the business to a men's wear manufacturer in the early 1980s to work in fashion education and research.

During the 1990s she received a series of engineering design grants from the National Science Foundation for her Stylometrics pattern technology. 1988: "Apparel/Textile Codification and Image Communication Technology", 1991: "A Computational 3-D / 2-D Model for Apparel Pattern Design and Expert System", and 1992: "A 3-D/4-D Computerized Model for Human-Machine Integration in Apparel Manufacturing Engineering". She was asked to evaluate proposals for Manufacturing Technology Centers by the National Research Council in 1992. Representing the American fashion industry, she did a workshop at MIT in 2004, comparing design practices between industries. The paper is available on her web site.

The Boston Design Laboratory (BDL) was founded in 2007, adding to her individual consulting, to dedicate her time and expertise in guiding young designers and dressmakers, and to research solutions to problems they and their customers face today. In September, 2007, Ms. Willett through BDL presented the Premiere fashion show for Boston Fashion Week - a half-century of her own vintage clothing with some of her young design protégés. The Fashion Group International – Boston awarded her a Ladder Award for her work in helping these young entrepreneurs.

Ms. Willett's dream is for Boston to once again be known as an international center for design and production technology and to encourage hundreds of emerging designers and dressmakers to stay in Boston and build successful businesses here.



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