



## Zandra Rhodes on Southwark

Two years ago, legendary fashion designer Zandra Rhodes – who rose to fame in the 1970s for her colourful creations and equally colourful hair – realised a lifelong dream with the opening of the Fashion and Textile Museum in Bermondsey, dedicated to showcasing contemporary fashion design. It recently presented the first major British retrospective of her work, 'Zandra Rhodes: a lifelong love affair with textiles'. Here, the amiable Rhodes discusses her battle to establish the museum, her views on Southwark and her advice for mayor Ken Livingstone.

**You struggled for years to create – and especially secure funding for – the Fashion and Textile Museum; did you ever consider giving up?**  
We haven't really had financing. We've received no public money at all, which is terribly sad. We were turned down for Lottery funding at the very start and then three times for Arts Council funding. I've used my own money and that of my partner [US businessman Salah Hassanein] who trusted my vision. I'm not the sort of person who gives up. Once you have done something like sell your own house to fund a building, you really have to stand by the idea.

**Why did you persevere?**  
I haven't known anything other than struggle so I don't know what to say to that. It was always a dream to represent British fashion and promote the work of our designers. There are so many British designers such as Bill Gibb and Jean Muir who could easily be sidelined and forgotten if no one set out to remember them.

**Why did you choose to locate the museum in Bermondsey?**  
Southwark is a fab place to be. I had a lot of artist friends in Bermondsey and at that time it was very economical. It has a



Sweeney Todd feel to it. The Victorians built the railway overground and that sealed the area and, to a certain extent, protected it.

**You are working with Southwark Council's tourism department to attract more visitors to the area; what can be done to achieve this?**  
There is always lots of dialogue, but dialogue doesn't always lead to the next level: action. I believe the more people who take note the better, which is why I do publicity all over the world from the USA to Russia to promote the museum.

**As a sometime resident of Southwark, what do you think of plans for the borough's regeneration?**  
Places like More London and the South Bank look fabulous. Also, the local community in Southwark hasn't been destroyed. I do think the mayor [of London Ken Livingstone] should walk around the area. I think he's got palsy, he's never walked down my street and I've asked him [to the museum] several times. It's only a few minutes away.

**What part do you think museums can play in the regeneration process?**  
Well, we contribute in the sense that people are coming into the area to visit the museum – cafes and shops spring up around it. There is also the fact that it is a lovely building. Local residents have told me how much they love the museum, so it boosts local pride too.

**Is engaging with the local community important? How can it be achieved?**  
We've managed to involve local schools and people. The museum runs after-school children's projects like the Curation Club and the Fashion Club. There have been a number of very successful schemes. Last year, local

schoolchildren created tapestries for London Underground and they were displayed in Borough High Street.

**What do you miss most about the area when you are in the United States?**  
Walking around Southwark. I conducted a walking tour for Visit London in July. [Did they give you a guide of what to say?] No, they got Zandra Rhodes' historical facts!

**How was your recent retrospective exhibition received?**  
Very well.

**Who is the most beautiful woman you have dressed?**  
Lots – Lauren Bacall, Princess Diana, Diana Ross...

**What fashion advice do women most frequently ignore?**  
Women should look at what is in fashion and edit it to suit them. For instance, if you are middle aged and fat don't have bits of skin bulging out of your clothes. That said, I don't think people should ever give up experimenting.

**Advice for a Fashion and Textile Museum curator of the distant future: how Zandra Rhodes would like to be remembered...**  
As an original designer with something to give the world. But the world will be the judge of that. And, of course, leaving behind the monument of the Fashion and Textile Museum.