

# There will never be another store like Century 21

A fashion consultant laments the closing of the beloved New York retailer, as told to Brooklyn Based

BY REGINALD FERGUSON



A line outside of Century 21's flagship downtown for its going out of business blowout. Its 13 stores close on November 22. Photo: @rfilez

I'm a native New Yorker. I was born and raised in Manhattan most of my childhood. I also lived in the Bronx with my late grandparents. I'm one of five and I think I was singled out for fashion because I was the first boy. The first boy, first grandson. I literally remember my Mom saying to my grandparents (her parents) about dressing me up, "What are you doing? You're creating a monster!" I just always loved clothes. But I don't think I'm superficial with it. I don't think I'm excessive, but you heard my tone. I know my closet could help out two or three other guys.

I really feel that I've been fashionable ever since I came out of the womb. There's a shot of me on my website, literally as a toddler, and I've got this incredible outfit on. So it's my family's fault, and I'm happy for it. My late mom always stressed the importance of being fashionable, but my late grandparents, I felt, really laid the foundation for me.

My late grandfather, he used to always give this parable of, if there were two brothers and both of them had a day in court, and one was dressed well and one was dressed slovenly, the one who was dressed well would get a fair shake. My late grandmother also would echo, "Always keep up your appearance, always keep up your appearance."

They were fashionable people, they were stylish people. To me it all came naturally, it all came from them. This was nurture versus nature. I'm an extension of all them, and I never thought that my interests, and then I guess later on my expertise, would lead to me having a business. That was never a goal. The goal always was just to be well dressed.

Growing up, Macy's and Gimbels were major stores for me. I'll throw in another brand that didn't affect me but definitely the female members of my family, Loehmann's. Macy's, for me, was 34th Street with my grandma. We took a bus from the Bronx to the train—the old double fare zone, the bus to the train—go down to 34th, go to Macy's first, go to Gimbels second, go to Woolworth's third, and have lunch at Woolworth's. Those are cherished memories for me. Macy's is an incredible store when you're a kid. There is still nothing like that ground-level experience of Macy's. There really isn't.

But in terms of philosophies, with Macy's you're dealing with a behemoth. They're owned by Federated, They're not as nimble. Also you have to understand, it's about different types of specialization. Macy's specializes in scale, and Century specializes in cut rate. So they're going to all these vendors and they're moving their merch. And the good price. So the philosophies are entirely different. It's not about right or wrong, it's clearly and strictly about difference.

Obviously Macy's has deeper pockets, but I always felt that I was more effective going to Century in terms of selecting exactly what I wanted. The brands that I loved at Macy's growing up didn't serve me as well, as effectively, when I became a young adult. I would say that Macy's became bland for me, and Century had spice.

Reginald Ferguson decked out as a toddler: "I really feel that I've been fashionable ever since I came out of the womb."

Photo courtesy New York Fashion Geek.



Here's the thing: Could I go into Macy's now and kind of make it happen? Yeah, I could. But you hear the tone. You have to go through a lot of blah to find a hit. And I feel when you go to Century, it's just hit upon hit upon hit. That's really the difference.

Alan Genachowski introduced me to Century 21. I was a freshman at NYU, undergraduate at the time, Stern School of Business, and Allen was transferring from the School of the Arts to Stern. We would always see each other in the library at Bobst, and we became fast friends. And one day we're having a conversation in the study levels, in which we were talking more than studying, and I don't know how it happened, he said "Man, you've got to go to Century 21." And I was like "The real estate company?" Because that's always the setup when you say that to somebody. He's like "No, stupid." Typical obnoxious freshmen talking to each other. He said "It's a store." I was like "It's a store? What do you mean?" "It's a store downtown, it's not far away from school." I was like "Really?"

I didn't know anything about this place. Nothing. But he obviously did. And he is the reason that this started, so many decades ago. We never went together, but I started to go, and I guess I never looked back. I was hooked, I was turned on, it was so cool. It was a store downtown, not far away from school, like 10, 15 minutes away on the train, and it was a department store, but it was a department store that I had never seen before. I'm dating myself, when I started going they didn't have the big building, which is the old East River Savings Bank. I went into, at the time, a smaller footprint, and it became my place.

Sophomore year of college, another big time with me and Century, I had an internship at Dun and Bradstreet, and it was at what was then called the World Financial Center, which is now Brookfield Place. That essentially is across the street from Century.

So that summer I had an internship sophomore year, and I'm not lying, I'm not exaggerating, every day for that internship I went to Century. I did not buy every day, not at all, but I would go every day on my lunch break. Because I guess unbeknownst to me at the time, what I was doing was, I was casing the joint. Not in the way that people normally say it. I was just learning about brands. Just checking out stuff. And it really became another source of education for me.

So I was going to NYU and I was being nurtured in academia, but Century 21 was providing me an education which, decades later, would aid me in launching a business. I was looking, and redefining the taste that was established by my family into me, and I was expanding that. I was looking at shirts, I was looking at ties, coats, jackets. Every once in a while, certainly, throughout the internship, I would make purchases. But again, I went every day. And like my late grandfather would say, that was a college for me. He would usually say to me "Life's a college. You think you're so smart, life's a college. You'll see." Well yeah, he was right.

I was learning about brands. All these brands were coming to life: Giorgio Armani, one real solid example. But it wasn't just name dropping, it wasn't about big names, it was just about looking at various brands, sussing out quality, all the things that my family had taught me.

From the day that Alan Genachowski gave me that knowledge, I was off and running. And I've been going there ever since. That's my spot. Everyone knows that is my spot.

Why not? Because under one roof you have so many options. You can literally be adorned from head to toe. It's an amazing setup. I remember he would tell me about the spots out on Long Island, I never got to go. I have gone to the original one at Bay Ridge. That's okay. But my heart obviously is [devoted to] the Wall Street one.

I found an old photo of Alan, and this old photo of him is kind of like Trading Places, he's on the commodities floor. I remember he did that internship-wise. He said, "You know what the guys do?" and I was like, "What?" He was like, "Some of the guys, they go to Century before the bell rings, and they buy shirts." I was like, "Whoa, that's cool. I want to do that, too." And I did, I would go sometimes and buy stuff. Not necessarily shirts. But I would do that too. So much so that when 9/11 happened, as you probably recall if you were here, phone service was really patchy from a cellular standpoint, and I remember it took days, or even a week [to get through], and someone would get in touch with me and they were like, "Man I was thinking about you, because I know you go to Century in the morning." And I didn't that day, and I'm glad that I didn't.

The author in his frequent haunt and shopping mecca a few years ago.

Photo courtesy New York Fashion Geek

Because I was known to go in the morning, once Alan planted that seed. And though I was not a finance major, and I had no interest in being on the floor—I was a marketing major—I just thought it was the coolest thing. It was about emulation. If [you] really know me, you can't disassociate Century 21 and myself. I've always gone.

My tie collection, I would say easily 50% of the ties or more, [come from] Century 21. My shirts, my dress shirts, half of them, Century 21. When I was growing up, they were really known as a place for men's shoes, and then they fell off. They've kind of crawled back a little bit. I'm trying to think, do I have any ... Not so much Century 21 for the shoes anymore. Oh, my unmentionables, all Century 21. Underwear, briefs, wife-beaters, Tshirts, socks that's all Century 21.

They're known for certain things. I think what's great about the store, the store to me was like a retail omnibus, because you really could outfit yourself, or in my instance as well, outfit a client, from head to toe in the one store. That's why I think it hits me so hard.

I had heard throughout school, and my younger adult and corporate life, about personal shoppers, but I wasn't really interested in personal shopping. That's why, even now, I don't consider myself a stylist, and that's out of respect for stylists. I'm a fashion consultant. That probably speaks to my Stern background, my business background. I feel that it's an advisory, it's a consultative type of role that I play. It started with New York Fashion Geek. Play on words, New York Fashion Week, I like a pun. And then we have a line extension, The Groom's Man. ("The groomsmen," "The Groom's Man.")

When you're at a place like Century, in a way it's one-stop shopping. So literally, my last client that I took to Century, we started at sport jackets and we ended up in shoes, and we did everything in between. We got this cool Helly Hansen jacket for him. So he spent \$1,600, all at Century. One could argue that maybe the tab would be close to double [somewhere else]. You certainly can't get all those deals apples to apples at other places.

The other thing too, I think is important to mention, is if you had to go to other places, you may not be able to do this all in one day. Because you have to get on the train, or maybe get in the cab, and bounce around and bounce around. And I'm here to tell you, if I'm doing that with a client, I'm concerned about their fatigue level. I can tell you, moving forward it's going to be trickier, it's going to be harder.

Also the longevity... I've seen the store literally grow. I remember when that big building was East River Savings Bank. And then they acquired it. I remember when 9/11 happened, and all the glass was blown out, and all of us were wondering, would they come back? When they came back that was really a great symbol of New York City. That was like exhibit A for resilience. Century came back? People were waiting. And when they reopened people supported it.

That's what makes this so difficult, that the same insurers who supported them for 9/11 have now left them holding the bag, so to speak, they have left them bereft. There's \$175 million that 11 insurers should be giving Century, and they won't. And now they're going to leave because of that? Obviously it speaks to the power of this pandemic, there's no question about that. But I think we all felt that, if this place could survive 9/11, it could survive this. But again, obviously it's not comparable, the tragedies that have happened because of COVID versus 9/11. And who would've thought that we would ever have to say that.

So it's sad. November 22nd is the last day. I don't think there's any turning back. When I zipped through the PATH train at the World Trade Center [recently], there was a little part of me that wanted to go inside. And I tried to, and I found out there's only one entrance. They'll let people out, but they don't want to let people in all the different doorways. When I went around the corner on Church, oh my gosh, it was a line. Which was great, but I was like "Wow, I'm not going to get on the line." But also for me, I really want to remember Century 21 at its strength. And it's not like that now. From what I've heard it's like a closeout shop now, because the only thing they're doing is going through inventory. And not even all the floors are open because of the consolidation.

I don't want to see the place like that. That's like seeing an old friend that you grew up with, and then that friend got hit with hard times and you see them later. They're still your friend, but they're not the same.

I'm going to miss a dear friend. I don't like to think about it that way. I did in the beginning, and I'm doing it a little bit now. It's a little bit maudlin for me, I'm a little bit sad.

It's no question. You don't want to be dramatic about it, but I don't think we'll ever have a store like this again. I just don't.

Hear Reginald Ferguson's podcast, The Fashion Geeks, episode 44, devoted to the legacy of Century 21.

**You can listen to the episode [here](#).**