

Down-and-out is in,



Models sport outfits from Duckie Brown's spring 2010 collection at New York Fashion Week on Thursday.

PHOTOS: AFP AND REUTERS

Call it vagabond chic: fashionistas have turned to the homeless for inspiration

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NEW YORK

The overused journalistic trope used to be that the zeitgeist whispered and fashion listened. These days no special auditory skills are required to gauge the spirit of the age. Lately the drumbeat of negativity is so loud that designers have put their hands over their ears.

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"I don't want to be Debbie Downer," said Daniel Silver, one of the two designers (Steven Cox is the other) of the menswear label Duckie Brown, before their Bryant Park show on Thursday. "But I feel like everyone's floundering. It's a floundering

season. But let's not focus on that."
Some of us prefer to think of
fashion as a charcoal filter that
indiscriminately sucks up whatever's
swirling around, rather than a big ear
that listens to what's going on in the
culture. Sometimes ideas become
clarified in fashion, and sometimes
they get stuck as gunk.

How else to account for a spate of references in fashion to homeless chic? A 28-page pictorial in this month's issue of *W* magazine, shot by the British photographer Craig McDean, repurposes shopping bags from labels like Chanel and Dior as makeshift dresses, and shows them worn with furs and pearls and designer bags.

The Russian model Sasha Pivovarova, listless but still ineffably glamorous, is seen slumping on a park bench or a mattress or a bed of Prada bags. Along

according to designers at least

with the hair and makeup people involved in the story, the stylist Alex White is credited at the end of the spread for having made the (cleverly constructed, it must be said) paper-bag clothes.

Were the *W* feature a one-off, it would hardly merit mention.

Fashion has been down this road before. John Galliano, to cite the most notorious example, was pilloried some years back for his "clochard" collection, which took as its inspiration the still increasing

ranks of tent dwellers (mainly
Polish immigrants) and others
in Paris with no roof over their
heads. The collection, of ripped
and shredded dresses, stockings
laddered with runs and holes,
and sooty top hats, sold well, as
it turned out, although nobody
seemed to pick up on the idea
of wearing a balloon hat.

Last week, Scott Schuman, in his popular Sartorialist blog, posted a picture of an unidentified man who, if he is not actually homeless, has a recognizable look.

"I don't usually shoot homeless people," Schuman said in a caption disclaimer. He added that he does not find homelessness "romantic" or "appealing," unlike "a lot of street photographers." It was just that the man's jeansshorts-over-sweat-pants look, his pale blue boots, with matching socks, gloves and glasses, suggested that he had not lost his need to "communicate and

express himself through style."
Even that observation was not
without precedent. Designers as unalike
as Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto
and even Marc Jacobs have spoken
admiringly of the improvisatory and,
naturally, desperate way some people
without a permanent place to live
compose themselves.

"Sometimes they're wearing everything they own at the same time because they have no choice," said the designer Keanan Duffty, who sometimes plays a game on the street that he refers to as "Fashion Stylist or Homeless Person?" "It is not intended as a lack of respect for people with no homes and no means," he said. "It's more a kind of admiration for improvisations people come up with in a dreadful circumstance."

As she prepared for her debut runway show at the tents on Friday, Erin Wasson, a model turned designer, seconded Duffty's view that the professionals could take some tips from the homeless. And she defended remarks she made last year in an interview with *Nylon* magazine. "The people with the best style for me are the people that are the poorest," Wasson said then, a remark that generated an online firestorm — and



a very funny video parody of her by the actress Julia Stiles.

"I'm not saying let's glamorize the homeless," said Wasson, who is often cited by fashion magazines as a style "icon" and a "muse" for Alexander Wang, a designer known for outfitting the kind of women who a couple of minutes ago were revered by fashion as "It" girls.

"It's not like I'm saying, 'Oh, God, that's so inspiring — you got your clothes from a garbage can," Wasson said. What is she saying then? "When I moved down to Venice Beach, I found these people with this amazing mentality, this gypsy mentality — people that you couldn't label and put in a box," said the designer, perhaps forgetting that some of those very people live in one.

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"I got trashed for it," Wasson said.