

[Matt] Empires don't come to their end in a loud crescendo. They fall silently into the night. Only leaving ruins and an echo of the lives lived.

As I approached a once great fort, I still see some signs of life outside. The mark of decay is much more prevalent.

I'm walking through a palace of concrete and tile floors. I see remnants of its former glory, locked behind iron gates.

This whole building spans 788 thousand square feet. Yet I'm probably one of seven people inside.

If it wasn't obvious, I'm talking about a mall. This one specifically was the Enfield Square Mall in Enfield CT, which is planning to shut its doors by the end of May.

Welcome to Americana, I'm your host Matt Pezzino. And today we're going to look back on one of America's greatest cultural centers, and consumer havens. Today we're talking about the death of malls across America.

[Music]

[Matt] The American mall filled a niche for the white flight to the suburbs in the mid to late 50s. It filled in for downtown shopping centers. It made it so a suburbanite didn't have to drive downtown for boots, then make their way to another building to get their nails done and then rush to a bank because they forgot to bring cash to tip. They gave consumers the ability to dive to one location, walk around, and have the task of shopping fulfilled.

Malls offered more than just shopping. To keep shoppers inside and buying, malls were family focused. They had food courts, play areas for kids, movie theaters, special events like photo shoots with American holiday icons like Santa and The Easter Bunny and even concerts. I found out today actually that Justin Bieber was pretty well known for doing concerts at malls.

Malls ended up being one large third place for Americans. Third places are a place of leisure that isn't your house or work environment. They're somewhere you go to spend long periods of time usually looking for social interactions. By being designed to save consumers time and be a one stop shop for everything, malls were also able to sell social interactions as part of the appeal for the time you spent on getting to them.

Malls were designed with two to four large "anchor stores" that were your average department store like JC Penny, Dicks, Sears, and Macys. These would cover the opposite ends of the mall, and sometimes have different storefronts dedicated to different

departments. The middle parts of the mall were smaller chains and local spots that didn't work well without the foot traffic artificially created by the anchors.

Malls spawned and fostered their own teen subcultures. They were mainly alternative groups that I, as a nerdy white man from a rural town, had little experience with growing up. The few interactions I had with my school's small alt population were always pleasant so I don't want to speak for, or mix-up, the emos, goths, scene kids and punks but I can say that Mall exclusive stores like spencers and hot topic were important to the growth of those cultures.

Malls mainly relied on teenage labor, and food service jobs are packed tightly next to each other making it a great location for people who needed an entry level position, and who could possibly rotate through jobs fast.

Malls were everything the 60s to early 2010s consumer could want. You no longer had to go all over town to get what you needed for the day, and you could spend a lot of your free time just hanging out and window shopping. For a rural kid like me, my local mall was pretty much the only thing to do on the weekends if you weren't in sports, so a 20 minute drive for me to see friends while my parents went and did their own thing was an amazing deal for childcare + shopping.

But this one stop shop killed the old mom and pop stores and the idea of a downtown.

They say time is money, and Malls won the very limited time of Americans. Plus, Auntie anne's pretzels are awesome

And this is an important reason why Malls are dying now. Because the same reasons that malls took over America are the same reasons that are killing them in droves now.

Convenience and price are being stolen by online retailers.

Online retailers, like amazon, have been known to be the malls killer. Catalog ordering was a thing from the department stores housed in malls, but it would take a long time to get to the consumer. Online shopping for the longest time took a few weeks. And for a lot of places shipping still takes a long time. I'd much rather go to my local card shop and pick up the packs I want on the day of set release instead of waiting for a week.

Immediacy is the ability to have the item you want, as soon as you want it. This concept is the mall's last sticking point today. And online re has been doing everything in its power to take that away from malls.

With amazon's same day delivery, Malls have severely lost the edge in this war.

Most of what I've just said is probably basic stuff that you don't need much research to know. To look deeper into why malls are losing the battle for consumer attention, I sat down, ironically enough online, with UConn Marketing Professor Dr. Joseph Pancras, who specialized in research in the retailing industry for the past two decades, and who works with quantitative marketing techniques.

[Dr. Pancras] "Any physical retailer would like to stock products that sell a lot. It's what makes sense for them. But online, since that constraint is removed, people can actually search for and find products that not many other people are looking for."

[Matt] The ability to find almost anything your heart can conjure online, and then have it shipped directly to you has really exasperated the fast fashion trends we see here in America. And trends like that really hurt mall based retailers. Pancras said that stores are just not able to keep up with online trends the way online retailers can. He also said that these trends have exploded way worse than originally thought. The original thought was that with the internet allowing for variability and allowing stores to not be constricted by the confines of their shelves, that trends would get smaller and more niche. However, with more people online, blockbusters, or trends, have only gotten bigger, and more impactful.

We see this with how short form social media is able to push fast trends. While the idea of keeping up with the jones is dead, we're just trying to keep up with the Kardashians now. That was a terrible pun, and I'm sorry, but it is true. We're more obsessed with celebrities and influencers than ever.

[start archive TikTok compilation underneath]

[Matt] Everyone on TikTok shop has to buy the new viral dress the new viral water bottle, hell the new viral vapes that cycle each year.

[end archive TikTok compilation underneath]

[Matt] What I'm getting at is the point that super cheap online retailers with fast shipping are not just good at stealing away consumer attention, they're able to create cycle of trends that make sure they stay relied upon.

Marketing is an arms race. And Online re has been able to use the same tactics that American malls used against them. But online re has one more thing that the long tale probably couldn't predict.

It's ability to adapt to recessions.

Like all retrospective media about anything related to American culture that has been released since 2020, were going to talk quickly about how the pandemic was a catalyst for the fall of the mall, and for the rise of online retail.

Dr. Pancras brought this point up so I'll let him explain it better than I could,

[Dr. Pancras] In hard economic times. There are, people will go without certain things and one of the things that people will go without is going to be what is very nice to have which is physical experience of shopping in a store. It will increasingly become a luxury. Maybe a luxury that will be available to many people, most people, but it's still a luxury. So, it's going to become a niche.

[Matt] In these hard economic times, like 2008, 2020, and hopefully not the very near future recession everyone keeps talking about, people will give up what they have to, and as Dr. Pancras said, grit their teeth. All brick and mortar stores took a huge hit during the pandemic, customers were barred from shopping in person for a while, and when they did go back to shopping, they were too broke to buy much more than what they needed. And the idea of an indoor social hangout was almost treasonous. Malls were hit hard on every front that they advertised for.

There are two items left that online retailers haven't won over yet, and it's not for a lack of trying. The first is nice clothes. People want to see what the clothes look like on them in person in the store, they want to hold the handbag up to a mirror. Online has Advanced Reality cameras for bags and glasses, but you'll never feel exactly how the dress fits around your specific body from a picture online. The second is big expensive items that you don't trust buying online. However, most malls aren't invested in the lawn care industry, so they haven't been moving many mowers off shelves.

Dr. Pancras discussed the idea of showrooms, a lot of retailers have a hybrid online and physical model where you can go in person and view what you want, while the store only carries a select few options so you can have it ordered by an associate or you can go home and finalize the purchase. Besides that, there's really not much hope left for America's concrete palaces.

So, what do we do with these giant parking lots and empty store fronts? Well, the Enfield square mall just received ten million dollars in a revitalization fund and the town of Enfield promised 16 million in tax concessions if the redevelopment goes through.

The redevelopment plan includes keeping the old target anchor store, adding new restaurants, a few shops, but most importantly more than 400 low income housing units.

And a lot of other dead malls are being eyed by their local governments for redevelopment too. All that empty space can be reclaimed for other potential third places, like parks or concert halls, other towns have converted malls into schools. Hopefully, as we move fully online, we don't let the malls go unused. Let's not make the same mistake that we did with downtowns and leave rows of "for lease" signs up in windows. Let's make use of the space we're leaving behind and create something better with it.

[Music]

That's it for this week's episode, thanks for listening all semester long. I want to give a special thank you to Dr. Pancras one more time, this time on air, for all the great information he gave me in our interview. This project wouldn't have been able to come together without him. And I want to thank you the listener for making it to the end. I hope you enjoyed it. I've been your Host Matt Pezzino, and this has been, Americana.

[Outro music rise and fade]

## Research

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