JACOB R. MOORE —

Lost to Pleasure in the American Dream

The Dream Wheel turns slowly. Overlooking the scrubby half-paved, half-marsh strips of land that separate the distant Hudson River from the East Coast's own Inland Empire, passengers in the glass-enclosed cabs floating above the food court of the American Dream are given plenty of time to think. Perhaps they reflect on the ride's $30 price tag, maybe they plan the route to their next stop in the sprawling building below, or it's possible they're too busy navigating an awkward conversation with their fellow travelers to do either. But even when their turn is complete, the slow-moving machine never stops; bored attendants offer their hired hands to steady the departure and to hold the door open for the cab's next occupants. Once safely on their way, visitors' lasting impression is without a doubt one of accomplishment: pictures taken, feet rested, journeys validated.

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Looking northeast from the Dream Wheel and in its reflection, too. Photograph by the author.

The boondoggle that is the American Dream took a long time to come into being. Originally planned as "Meadowlands Xanadu" in 1996, the 3-million-square-foot Gensler-designed complex "mixing fashion, fun and food in a family-friendly, weather-controlled environment" opened nearly a quarter of a century later, in the spring of 2020, right as COVID-19 was shutting everything else down.[1]

[1] Jennifer Goodman, "On Site: How the $6B American Dream was Built," Industry Dive, December 19, 2019, link. `

Just over one year later, on a bright summer Friday afternoon, the mall was bustling. Or at least parts of it were. The passageways connecting numerous themed "courts," ski slopes, and roller coasters are so wide that it's difficult to imagine them full. Nonetheless, many small and large families wandered comfortably, soaking up the sheer spectacle of it all with relative calm. Never mind that at least a third of the storefronts had yet to be occupied; the plush seating throughout (with outlets for the inevitable recharge) invited the impression that simply being there, passing time, was purpose enough. [2] Far and away the most crowded area—both in terms of occupiable tenant and visitor space—was "Coca-Cola Eats," aka Court 3, offering a plethora of globally inflected fast fare. In spite of its adjacency to an ice-skating rink, this food court was also the most familiar of the mall's spaces, further belying the ostensible accessibility of the possibilities presented everywhere else—where price points all inevitably rose above $9.99.

[2] One exception to this low buzz of activity was "The Avenue," the highest-end luxury area of the complex, which was particularly devoid of life. `

With more well-known predecessors like the Mall of America and West Edmonton Mall having long occupied the popular megamall imagination, the American Dream's late arrival was notable. And somehow, coming as it did after a protracted period of development and during the height of pandemic uncertainty and anxiety, the mall's ill-timed debut felt appropriate. Even when taking in the Nickelodeon Universe's impressively hued roller coasters, dedicated birthday spaces, and cheery merry-go-rounds from an elevated viewing platform, the "Fantasy, Fashion, Food, Family, and Fun" on offer throughout the complex lacked luster.[3] The experience economy has been in full swing for decades, and as with so many other late-capitalist attempts at innovation, the American Dream's escape rooms and choose-your-own-topping pretzel bars strain under the weight of their always almost already passé status. New fantasies are on short order.

[3] See the top Google search results for "American Dream mall," link. `

This looming anxiety regarding retail's demise made material in the American Dream seems to at once memorialize, mock, and modify what it means, or has meant, to shop together.[4] Public life is made private in its surveilled gathering spaces and echoing, corporate corridors; private life is made public in its desperate performative amenities and social mediations. And in none of it is much offered in terms of meaningfully new spaces of engagement, née experience. According to critic Alexandra Lange, the American Dream is "a no-place, connected to no community… too complex and diffused to be contained in a single gray shell."[5] Maybe that's the appeal of the Dream Wheel: a break; apprehending the mess from outside.

[4] Josh Sandburn, "Why the Death of Malls Is About More Than Shopping," *Time*, July 20, 2017, link; Matthew Schneier, "The Death Knell for the Bricks-and-Mortar Store? Not Yet," *New York Times*, November 13, 2017, link; Alex Shephard, "The Real Retail Killer," *New Republic*, March 28, 2018, link; Michael Fertik, "How to Avoid Being Victim to the Retail Apocalypse," *Forbes*, May 2, 2019, link. `

[5] Alexandra Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022) 12. `

Old Malls, New Dreams

The mall wasn't always this way.[6] As Lange documents in her recent book, *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall*, this quintessential US shopping type has long been a fixture—often a beloved one—in this country's urban life.[7] Chronicling the myriad ways that "the late twentieth-century United States doesn't make sense without the mall" and facing their oft-foretold death, Lange makes a compelling case for the serious consideration of malls as "neither a joke nor a den of zombies, but a resource."[8] In a country with approximately 24 square feet of retail space for every resident (as compared

[6] See also Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and David Smiley, *Sprawl and Public Space: Redressing the Mall* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2002). `

[7] When using the term 'urban' throughout, I mean to indicate the entire range of densities of human settlement, encompassing much of what might elsewhere be described as "suburban" or even "rural."

with 16.8 in Canada, 4.6 in the UK, and 2.8 in China) it would be hard to argue otherwise.[9] With an initial focus on famed mall architect Victor Gruen, Lange paints a picture of an evolving type where a certain kind of public space—one always circumscribed by the racialized and gendered strictures of private property[10]—was rehearsed and refined, in contexts that might not have otherwise allowed for it.

In the United States after World War II, as veterans returned, nuclear families exploded, and suburbs sprawled, shopping centers were increasingly divorced from city centers. With White flight raging, downtowns were drained of continued investment and lost much of their moneyed clientele. Gruen—alongside and followed by early collaborators and competitors such as Elsie Krummeck, Karl Van Leuven, Larry Smith, E. G. Hamilton, Kevin Roche, Eero Saarinen, Lawrence Halprin, and Frank Gehry; and with patrons like Oscar Webber, Raymond and Patsy Nasher, and Stanley Marcus, among many others—designed retail spaces that tracked this shift, appearing first as department stores that attended more assiduously to car culture. The eventual availability of cheap conditioned air and a gathering critical mass in suburban locales allowed for the agglomeration of many such stores, held together by shared circulation and amenity space. Lange lays out this early history in great detail and to great effect, richly staging the mall's amnesic return downtown in the 1970s with power players like James Rouse, as well as its eventual transformation by designers like Jon Jerde in the 1990s into a site for pure theater where shopping was "beside the point."[11]

Importantly, alongside this mainstream story of privileged consumers and their morphing desires, Lange pays particular attention to those whom the mall has tried to keep out. The past and present of the US mall, she shows, have always been exclusionary—especially with regard to race—causing lasting damage on the country's urban space with its elevation of the private automobile and associated lifestyles. Deeper dives describing the case law–driven allowance or disallowance of recent Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests within malls are particularly illustrative of the uneven, and unreliable, publicness of these ostensibly shared (often uniquely so) gathering spaces.[12]

While she does include closer-to-present-day scenes from siblings of the American Dream—BLM protests at the Mall of America; comparative cases from abroad, especially in the Philippines—Lange makes a distinction between these "very big malls" and the familiar-to-many, smaller buildings found in or near so many medium-sized towns across the United States.[13] In addition to simply reflecting the bigger, newer malls' relative rarity, this choice primarily allows her to focus on histories and sites geared toward the reuse of existing built fabric, rather than complicate the picture with less "classic" sites.[14] Beyond this general exclusion, she draws in contemporary examples of diversifying dining experiences, contemporary artistic responses to dead-mall discourses, and a limited number of other nascent, sometimes speculative programmatic shifts, all in support of her argument that these spaces deserve care rather than disdain.

But most of the book's content remains in a nostalgic register, lauding malls and their designers for attending to a real-world need with a dose of serious modern public-mindedness that eluded other more academic, downtown- or private residence–focused practices throughout the decades

See Jacob R. Moore, "It Took a Village: Fifth Avenue's *Countryside*," *Avery Review*, no. 47 (May 2020), link. `

[8] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 4, 231. See also *Retail Apocalypse*, Canadian Centre for Architecture, link. `

[9] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 223. `

[10] "By 1994, the number of private security personnel nationwide outstripped that of public law enforcement, as new-built malls hired new-badged mall cops." Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 169–170. `

[11] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, Chap. 4, "Make Shopping Beside the Point." `

[12] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 142–146. `

[13] The American Dream appears mainly in the book's introduction. The examination of the Philippines in the book's concluding chapter draws from Diana Martinez, "An Archipelago of Interiors: The Philippine Supermall as Infrastructure of Diaspora," *Avery Review*, no. 49 (October 2020), link. `

[14] Hudson Yards in New York City appears throughout the book but undergoes a more thorough examination alongside other urban malls in her earlier piece, "New York City Is a Mall." One notable quote previews the sacrifices required for sociable pleasure: "Crossing the street, opening doors, remembering which block that shop was on—these things take you out of the social space. The urban mall is an edit." *Curbed*, June 26, 2019, link. `

in question. Commercially commissioned art, prioritization of physical comfort and accessibility over highbrow design appeal, and the joy of finding that perfect gift are here finally, implicitly, given their due. In the shadow of a worsening childcare crisis, Lange takes readers back to the glory days of babysitting-by-drop-off.[15] With healthcare costs rising and social security threatened, the Muzak-filled culture of mall walkers is fondly remembered.[16] Orange Julius, anyone?

[15] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 155.

[16] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 162–163.

What is known as the "Gruen transfer" is given special attention throughout the book. Named after the designer of some of the earliest mall experiences and referring to their eponymous moments of transfer—waiting by the fountain for family members between errands, slowing down while smelling the Mrs. Fields cookies—Lange makes it clear that this label doesn't describe the redirection of dizzy consumers, casino-style, toward the next cash register, as it has often been portrayed. "The Gruen transfer isn't about losing yourself to confusion, but about losing yourself to pleasure. The pleasure of looking, the pleasure of touching, increasingly the pleasure of tasting."[17] And for Lange, there's something to this pleasure that's worth preserving.

[17] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 220. The dizzying effect, perhaps akin to what one might feel in a casino or fairgrounds, is closer to what was later dubbed the "Jerde Transfer," named after the designer of many "very big malls." See Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 126–127.

Effectively arguing that the baby of carefully calibrated, extant, protected-from-the-elements gathering space ought not be thrown out with the bathwater of racially coded, securitized, commodified design protocols, Lange asks her readers to allow for new possibilities inside these old buildings.[18] In a society that is everywhere in dire need of more truly affordable housing and more truly public space, she proffers pragmatism as a way forward with these needs in mind that eschews both the irresponsibility of demolition and the naiveté of less incrementalist approaches to progress.

[18] She closes the book, on page 263, this way: "The next time you see a picture of a dead mall looking like a lonely sculpture, look again. Imagine the return to the grove it was named after, or the growth of housing into the parking lot from the surrounding neighborhoods. Imagine the department store reborn as a spa or a rec center, community college classrooms cheek by jowl with Forever 21 and a branch library. Imagine the mall being as physically embedded in place as it already is in culture."

> MALLS HAVE BEEN DYING FOR THE PAST FORTY YEARS. EVERY DECADE REWRITES THE OBITUARY IN ITS OWN TERMS, BUT THE APOCALYPTIC SCALE, THE LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY OF CIVILIZATIONAL COLLAPSE, KEEP REAPPEARING. THESE NARRATIVES SUGGEST AN INEVITABILITY. AND YET, THE MAJORITY OF MALLS SURVIVE. AND YET, PEOPLE KEEP SHOPPING. THE URBAN AND SUBURBAN LANDSCAPES IN WHICH PEOPLE LIVE DON'T CHANGE THAT RAPIDLY. NEITHER DOES HUMAN NATURE.[19]

[19] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 185.

Some of the thoughts for this essay were written on one of these pale yellow chairs. Photograph by the author.

But departing from Lange in a kind of through-the-looking-glass demonstration case, a palpable tension can nonetheless be felt in the American Dream's enormous half-filled corridors—an at once urgent and latent gap between the world it was initially imagined for and one that is yet to come. No matter the degree of spectacle achieved with the indoor ski slope or the conspicuously shiny luxury storefronts, their function as supplements or patches for a project that has already passed by is already evident. Less apparent is the future, or fantasy, embedded within them. And though some of its pieces are certainly surfaced in *Meet Me by the Fountain*'s narratives concerning adaptive reuse, programmatic shifts, and preservation-worthy design acumen, the rose-colored glasses through which Lange asks her readers to see the mall's overlooked past and potential futures never seem to come off all the way.[20]

[20] "When I say 'mall,' you see a place in time, one shopping trip, one amazing afternoon. But even in my lifetime, the mall has changed and changed again. It's an architecture born to be malleable, and in that malleability lies its future." Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 7. `

In particular, Lange gives short shrift to the operative role of the "middle class" in these pasts, presents, and futures. This ambiguous, aspirational concept—arguably the engine of the American Dream—was in many ways codified together with the shopping mall as an iconic, ideal type in the postwar US. And while Lange attends to the Whiteness of the mall in some detail, as well as its imbrications with gender, the ways in which those divisions have been woven together with those constitutive of class are left mostly implied.[21] This is a discursive passivity that is not at all unique to *Meet Me by the Fountain*; an unquestionable, seemingly natural goodness has been baked into the middle class, and this country's public imagination, from the moment the White two-parent, two-child, two-gender family could afford a house in Levittown. It's something everyone is supposed to want to be a part of, even though by definition not everyone can. And there's nothing more middle-class than an efficient, enjoyable trip to the mall.

[21] Though the concept is mentioned at several points throughout the book, often as a part of the formulation "middle-age, middle-class," what it means and how it works is left for readers to find between the lines. `

Absent more critical attention, the stratifications that middle-class identifications demand will undoubtedly make their way into any new architectures that the existing spaces of the mall are able to support. Even if the food court adds more locally inflected fare and a DMV is slotted in between the Express and the Kirkland's, working-class solidarities don't automatically program themselves into these upwardly mobile consumerist spaces as a result.

The fantasy of the "American Dream," rooted in the idea of family, property, and profit embodied in the mall, is a pernicious and enormously productive concept, but one whose permanence isn't inevitable.[22]

[22] It doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to transpose the American Dream mall's "fantasy, fashion, family, food, and fun" into the more concise "family, property, and profit" built into the American Dream concept. `

The Hegemony of Repair

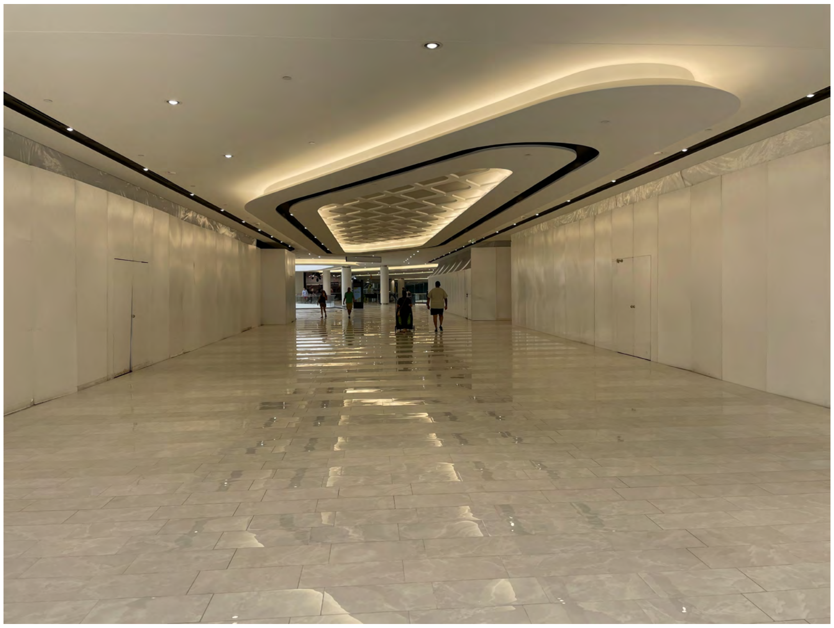
And so, if the mall is to remain, maybe there are some parts of its fantasy that are not worth maintaining. In her 2021 book, The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique, Patricia Stuelke insists that the relatively recent focus in some discursive and activist circles on care and its associated practices risks not only crowding out other forms of critique, but also actively undermining them.[23] Stuelke constructs a history of this "turn," placing it in league with geopolitical forces that, on their surface, many of its practitioners are typically understood to be in opposition to, and argues instead for a resuscitation of a public, visionary, radical critique that speaks of dramatic change in more strident terms.[24]

[23] Lange includes a brief introduction to the shift toward maintenance, as well as its gendered causes and effects, on page 71. `

[24] For example, she tracks, following the critical reception of Joan Didion's writings on the 1980s civil war in El Salvador, "a growing consensus among North American intellectuals and activists: that the best way to mobilize solidarity with Central Americans was not through critical projects of exposure… but rather through the exercise of more reparative methods, including sentimental pedagogy." This turn was reflected in a wave of works by activists over the decade that nonetheless "did not, as Michael Hardt recalls a Salvadoran student asking him to do, give up their 'sweet' attempts to help in Central America and go home instead to make revolution in the United States." Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 109. Of note is this example Stuelke uses regarding Didion's topic and tone, which sparked such a negative response in the first place: "While she attempts to capture the bizarre banality of the intertwined systems of capitalist and repressive state violence—she describes, for instance, the Metrocenter, 'the shopping center that embodied the future for which El Salvador was presumably being saved,' where soldiers patted down customers on their way to buy 'big beach towels printed with maps of Manhattan that featured Bloomingdale's'—Didion is pessimistic that such minutiae will enlighten her US readers." Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, 107. `

> THE WIDESPREAD COMMITMENT TO THE REPARATIVE—OFTEN RECOGNIZABLE BY WAY OF ITS EARNEST COMMITMENT TO MAKING ROOM FOR PLEASURE AND AMELIORATION, IN ITS CELEBRATION OF SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AND COPING MECHANISMS AS BEAUTIFUL SEEDS OF THAT WHICH MIGHT ONE DAY, IN THE FUTURE, SAVE THE WORLD—CAN SOMETIMES SEEM TO STAVE OFF THE DIFFICULT WORK OF IMAGINING POSSIBLE WORLDS THAT BREAK DEFINITIVELY WITH THIS ONE; INSTEAD, ALLEGIANCE TO METHODS PEOPLE USE TO SURVIVE THINGS AS THEY ARE BECOMES A FORM OF SOLIDARITY. FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, RACIAL CAPITALISM, SETTLER COLONIALISM, AND EMPIRE OFTEN EMERGE AS STRUCTURES ONLY IN NEED OF REPAIR AND REMEDIATION, RATHER THAN AS EVER-SHIFTING VIOLENT STRUCTURES WHOSE NUANCES MUST BE PERPETUALLY, COLLECTIVELY APPREHENDED IF THEY ARE EVER TO BE DESTROYED.[25]

[25] Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, 17. `



On the way to the rink, I think. Photograph by the author. A long, wide, empty hallway extends ahead, with some people visible in the distance and light yellow lighting nestled in a rounded, decorative structure hanging from the ceiling. A white tile floor shines.

Apprehending hegemony in cultures of everyday life is, by definition, difficult. While a concept such as the middle class, or a quip such as "and yet, people keep shopping," might register as "common sense," both their commonness and sensibleness, like the spaces to which they refer, are constructed over time. In addition to drawing the attention of interested members of the public to events, spaces, or phenomena—like the mall—wherein those cultural constructions occur, critics would do well to also focus attention on the less-than-obvious pressure points of those constructions—like the shifting identities that populate them—and the possible outcomes should they give way.

Though it is crucial that designers and developers retain and reform as many mall buildings as possible, and though it likely takes the kind of deft storytelling Lange offers in *Meet Me by the Fountain* to remind many of the architectural and urban riches that surround them, if the reuse of problematic buildings isn't accompanied by meaningful shifts in the status quos that brought them into being, what's the point? Ideally malls are filled with free community colleges, surrounded by new public housing, fed by robust networks of public transit, and rewired for carbon-free energy generated on-site. But for those ideals to be made reality, public policy has to encourage them. And for that to happen, for hegemonies to shift, critics must stimulate not only memories but also imaginations. In other words: What are the effects of waxing nostalgic about the free childcare of yesteryear's mall without discussing the crisis of childcare today?[26] Or of praising mall walkers' self-styled healthy living in 1992 without addressing the dramatic dearth of adequately paid home healthcare workers for the elderly in 2022?[27]

Because cracks in status quos—even ones as firmly entrenched as family, property, and profit—*do* appear, and sometimes they widen just enough to be wrenched apart completely, rather than sutured shut. And the palpable but hard to grasp, missed-its-moment anxiety at the American Dream might signal the presence of just such a moment now. Epochal ecopolitical shifts are underway that reverberate in every corner of daily life, if one looks for them.

[26] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 155. `

[27] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 162–163. `

With the right tools, the end of empire can be intimately felt. And depending on the modes of apprehension proffered to the public, new visions for the future—completely remade, rather than reformed, American Dreams—might actually emerge.

Working Class [28]

Because is the "good life" once represented by the mall even possible, much less desirable, today? Normative middle-class families, conjoined with the architecture housing them (one "single family" at a time) and the stable, well-paid, head-of-household careers supporting them, feel even more fantastical than the oversize plastic mushrooms populating the American Dream's Garden Court. Though the desire for stability, comfort, and love that the concept contains is of course widely shared, the meritocracy the middle class claims to represent has long passed from fantasy to farce. How might the precarious socioeconomic stratifications it demands begin to be replaced by an embrace of alternative cultural differences? Attempting to better apprehend class—in history, in the present, in ourselves, in the mall—might be one necessary first step toward these new visions, and toward the architectures that accompany them.

This is not to imply that class can or should be stripped from US identities completely, but rather simply that the default zero-sum aspirations for the upwardly mobile "good life" might be recalibrated around a different set of priorities, solidarities, and maybe even spaces. As one possible methodological model, in his posthumously completed *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System*, Christopher Chitty offers a revisionist apprehension of major shifts in Western culture from the fifteenth century to the present day by looking at the intersection of political economy and sexuality.[29] Leaning heavily on the work of economic sociologist Giovanni Arrighi, Chitty argues that the cultural construction that's come to be known as "gay" has much more to do with successive periods of class struggle than it does with accumulated socio-psychological ones, such as repression or fear. And by extension, that future changes in the identitarian cultural sphere might productively, radically, be linked with shifts in the (heretofore imagined as separate) political-economic one.

In The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times, Arrighi paints a picture of the history of capitalism with "three hegemonies": successive Dutch, British, and US–dominated world systems, each with their own logics and socioeconomic "common sense."[30] Starting there, Chitty uncovers ways that the leveraging of sexual attraction between men was integrated into the plot of each of these periods—"sexual hegemonies"—and the transformations between them.[31] Over and over again, bourgeois actors in each of these systems used sexuality as a way to antagonistically define others—working classes as well as upper classes—and shore up their own political standing.[32] In other words, as class constructions were more clearly defined, cordoning off understandings of sexuality from their political-economic context inevitably limited sexuality's potential impact on political economy.[33]

[28] For this formulation I'm indebted to Ife Vanable and the editorial work done with her on her *Avery Review* Issue 30 piece, "Working the Middle: Harlem River Park Towers and Waterside Plaza," link. And of course we're all indebted to Aaliyah, link." `

[29] Christopher Chitty, with Max Fox, ed., *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). `

[30] Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 2010 [1994]), 28. For his formulation, Arrighi in turn leans on the work of many others, including Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Fernand Braudel, and David Harvey. `

[31] Chitty and his editors acknowledge the limited focus on men who have sex with men in his research, pointing toward and calling attention to the impactful differences that would be held in a broader history of same-gender or otherwise non-normative sexualities as they relate to capitalist world systems. `

[32] Professionally opportunistic homosexual relationships in fifteenth-century Florence (where "exclusion from the reproductive community enabled

inclusion in the civic body," [52]), disproportionately aggressive prosecutions of "sodomy" in seventeenth-century Dutch colonies (101), and bourgeois sexual morality established in opposition to both the ancien régime and the lower classes in eighteenth-century revolutionary France (111) are just some of the examples he details. The emergence of what could eventually be considered a kind of "middle class" constituted key turning points. Or, in the introductory words of Christopher Nealon, "Homosexuality in its forms as a recognizable identity are inseparable from processes of proletarianization that redounded even to the styles of homosexuality practiced by elites." Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony*, 8. `

[33] Chitty writes: "My argument seeks to unsettle a commonplace that creeps into histories and theories of sexuality: that moral or religious ideologies are at the core of sexual intolerance and oppression, which, in the final analysis, boil down to a kind of irrational superstition or phobia awaiting the right conditions to break out. This kind of ideology critique frequently winds up renaturalizing the very cultural phenomena it was meant to explain." Chitty, Sexual Hegemony, 27. `

Poodles and pearls, under construction on level 2. Photograph by the author. A temporary storefront decorated in oranges and pinks with long strings of enormous pearls and a perched poodle is shown underneath a glass ceiling, with blue sky and white clouds beyond.

For marginalized subjects, apprehension of this kind of disempowering separation of course begs the question of the system's legitimacy as well as its viability.[34] Indeed, for Chitty and many others, the common sense of US-style capitalism is no longer common nor sensible, if it ever was.[35] Especially following the 2008 global financial crisis, and now amplified by the disastrous political-economic conflagration of the unfolding decade, hegemonic shifts are overdue, if not already underway.

Might one locate these shifts in the mall, by the fountain? With what tools? Given Lange's poignant articulation of the ways "the mall reproduces the same [gendered] structure of labor as the suburban home," among other lingering midcentury magnifications in need of confrontation, it would seem as though the ground is fertile for the type of apprehension called for by Stuelke—the first step toward such living legacies' destruction.[36] How to make the middle class, which so comfortably found its identity there and continues to seek spaces for its stabilization, a thing of the past, rather than something to be maintained?

[34] And this separation had real results: by the late twentieth century—the peak of US mall culture—the intensifying integration of Chitty's historical subjects into the otherwise largely unquestioned, normative political-economic systems was at odds with the subjects' ostensible potential set by those systems' terms. "Gays and lesbians got a shot at dreams of the good life [read: the middle class] in the period of American hegemony precisely at the moment of its political-economic liquidation" (173). That is to say: a system that shaped them, and that they might have in turn helped *re*shape, instead began to crumble the minute any potential benefit began to accrue. And though race and more expansive notions of gender, to a fault, fall by the wayside of Chitty's analysis in his focus on men who have sex with men, an extension of this conclusion holds—that until the goalposts are moved, marginalized subjects of all kinds are held at arm's length from the "success" for which they are pushed to strive. `

[35] "As developmentalist states encouraged and promoted middle-class nuclear-family norms in order to facilitate working populations' adjustment to more demanding labor processes, it's not so surprising that this hegemony should break apart during a period of flexible employment, declining real wages, debt-fueled consumption, and successive asset bubbles." Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony*, 23. `

[36] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 73; Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, 16. `

A Long, Pleasurable Twenty-First Century

It can often feel like the sheer weight of today's manifold crises leaves no room to even see out from under them, let alone imagine what might possibly come next that's not a worse case.[37] In spite of (or because of?) its weirdness, the American Dream was far from empty on that sunny summer Friday. The bustling food court and meandering bodies were proof positive of a more-than-latent interest in being together, in public, in the Meadowlands. But surely this over-subsidized, commercially dependent, isolated social condenser isn't the only way. While its patrons are certainly not zombies, the architectural typology

[37] See Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022). `

and the cultural hegemony it represents might be. Critical analysis of this paradigm need not choose between respect for its participants (that is to say, all of us) and concern for them. Nor must it be optimistic to be generative.[38]

[38] See, among others, Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2021). `

As others have done, Chitty anchors his analytic approach in what he calls "the queer," or what one might simply call "camp": "The queer would then imply a contradictory process in which such norms are simultaneously denatured and renaturalized."[39] Queer or not, it's the embrace of an outside, while admitting to operating inside, that is key. A change of perspective. A widening of the frame. Lange, it would seem, takes the opposite tack. Her diagnosis of the ongoing elitist dismissal of the mall typology is sharp, and her contention that everyone's antennae ought to be up to the intellectual and material waste inherent to such perspectives resonates. But her approach to these conditions' apprehension is unnecessarily deferential.

[39] Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony*, 26. `

Insofar as it's made clear, the commitment in *Meet Me by the Fountain* seems to be the pleasure of practicality rather than to the more capacious, and potentially transformative, practicality of pleasure. It's a familiar and indeed "common sense" perspective, where comfortably accepting certain seemingly given limits at a project's outset allows for an efficient retraining of ambition toward more achievable critical ends. But Lange does a disservice to her readers by not taking the argument, and vision, one step further—even, or especially, if that step feels like a reach.

Following on adrienne maree brown's notion of "Pleasure Activism," fantastic opportunities exist in such reaches. And there are real risks in not reaching.[40] Camp, after all, is pleasurable. It's a knowing, serious pleasure, surfacing the artificiality of the "normal" and with it the implied—often instigated—possibility that a new and better, if still unstable, "normal" might be right around the corner. But for Lange, as it was for Victor Gruen, the promise of pleasure held by a well-designed mall is circumscribed by the possible, rather than informative of it. Or, in her words, "Private ownership is the price we pay for a bit of city that's a little easier to take, one that can serve as an on-ramp to the real deal: the tension between the comforts of the mall and what we give up to experience them has been baked into the mall from its start."[41]

[40] "What you pay attention to grows." See adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), 6. `

[41] Lange, *Meet Me by the Fountain*, 13. `

While she rightly makes no contention that the mall is the best a city can or should have to offer, Lange's topline message—that embedded in the fabric of malls are noble qualities worthy of nurturing as we move closer to "the real deal"—is nonetheless *disarmingly* pleasurable.[42] Á la Victor Gruen's architectural hand-holding, it asks visitors and readers to stay just a while longer—at the food court, by the fountain, inside the doors. The real deal can wait.

[42] "US empire remains the refuge for US subjects feeling the dislocation neoliberal racial capitalism has wrought." Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*, 217. `

But one way or the other, the mall as we know it is closing soon. What would it take to make finding a way out as pleasurable as losing ourselves inside?

Nickelodeon at sunset. Photograph by the author. End-of-day sunlight makes the orange, blue, and green metal of an empty roller coaster glow, inside a large space, itself enclosed in metal and foggy glass.