

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Alexandra Lange

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. It's Jonathan Van Ness. I am so excited for our episode today and I know that I always say that, but I'm, like, I just I guess my excitement for Getting Curious is always on twelve! But a few months ago we were scrolling through Twitter, honey, and we saw a question posed by our past guest Kim Kelly, and she asked, "What's the best writing you've read about American mall culture?" And it hit me like my love for Bridget Jones's Diary. We realized that we were curious about American mall culture, too. And thankfully, the Twitter comments led us to this week's guest: Alexandra Lange is a design and architecture critic. Her newest book, *Meet Me by The Fountain*, explores the social and cultural significance of American malls. It's a story about the smell of Mrs. Fields cookies, teenage quote "mall rats," and candy-colored rows of gap sweatshirts. It's also a story about American suburbanization and consumerism and race, class, and gender. So I think that a lot of our listeners when they think about malls, they may think of a certain song by the Olsen twins who are just, you know, icons. We love the Olsen twins around here. We're huge fans. But I think of this song from our local mall in Quincy, Illinois. It was the jingle for the Quincy Mall, and it was called, "At Quincy Mall, We've Got It All." And it had an increasing tempo. So it started, like:

[SINGING]

*At Quincy Mall, we've got it all
At Quincy Mall, we've got it all
The finest food and cuisine*

And then my friend Emily would always go, "Hey, everybody, let's go to Diamond Dave's," which was this, like, kind of good Tex—actually, I can't talk shit about Diamond Dave's. It was amazing. The chimichanga was out of this world. It was really like it really was super tasty. But then we also had an Auntie Anne's, which was a huge deal when we Auntie Anne's in our hometown like that really was like the whole situation. Sam Goody, like, I remember, like, buying, like, Alanis Morissette, Jagged Little Pill after literally berating my mom, like, 24 seven, like waking her up out of a cold sleep at 3 a.m. "We've got to get a Jagged Little Pill!" I mean, the mall is just like a really huge deal for me. I also think about I'm sorry for the rhetorical fireworks that won't stop, but I just have to say the cute little old ladies at the mall when they would walk at the mall, like, for their exercise and they would wear the cutest skinny minnie, like, eyebrows, like, drawn-on pencil, eyebrows that were, like, almost in their hair line. So cute!

And the photo booth? Like, we would, like, always go to the photo booth because it was such a big deal. Ah, I love malls! And we're really excited to talk about them. So, Mary-Kate and Ashley's Mall Party is set at the Mall of America in 1997. Mall of America, I lived in Minneapolis. I actually worked at the Mall of America at a Glamor Shots for, like, three weeks,

when I moved there to go to hair school, it's true. I did, but I didn't like their sales practices. I felt like they were predatory. And so then I had to leave. So I only lasted for three weeks, and then I ended up whatever. Then I ended up at Applebee's. It's a long story. We don't need to talk about it. But they had a laser tag place at the Mall of America that was, like, really fierce. But what's the cultural significance of this place and time and mall culture in 1997?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:03:16] First of all, I feel like you just threw out, like, 17 different things that I want to respond to. But I will actually answer your question. So what is the significance? So the Mall of America opened in 1992. So in 1997, it was still very new. And when it opened, it was the largest mall in the USA and it was the first mall to be really centered on an amusement park and include an aquarium. The Mall of America was designed by Jon Jerde, who's one of the mall innovators that I really highlight in my book. And he was the one who said, "Let's make shopping beside the point." So the mall, to him, was this entertainment vehicle, and the Mall of America really put that front and center with what was originally Camp Snoopy, with the giant Snoopy in the middle. So Mary-Kate and Ashley going to the Mall of America was sort of saying, like, "This is the most fun place for a tween to go in America today."

JVN [00:04:14] And I would say, "Fuck yeah, it was." We had to go on a family vacation there, like, they took us there. And I think it was, like, '99. I got paged on the intercom system because I purposely got myself lost in Bath & Body Works because my grandparents, like, gave all of us, like, 50 bucks to go spend at the Mall of America. And I hauled ass to Bath & Body Works, and I got my Juniper Breeze, honey, I got my shea butter moisturizer. I got this face mask that you applied on, and then it dried and then you peeled it off. And my mom was so mad because they were, like, "Jack Van Ness, like, report to security." I didn't go to security. I was in the middle of buying myself a Bath & Body Works. So then my mom, eventually they figured it out and they came to Bath & Body Works because I was like, "Oh, that's me on the intercom. Will you call them? Like, I'm in the middle of my purchase still." And then my mom almost came unglued at the sales lady. She was, like, "You just sold like a nine year old, like \$50 of, like..." And I was, like, "Mom, I was fully in control and, like, wanted, like, I would never have spent my money anywhere else. Like, this is what I want." And then we played laser tag. But it was amazing. And that Camp Snoopy in the middle. I actually have chills on my triceps. Like, as a kid, it was like—that was, like, the best three days of my life. That trip.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:05:29] It's so interesting to try to explain to people how major the Mall of America was. Like, the idea that there were direct flights to Minneapolis from foreign capitals so that people could go to the Mall of America for the weekend. The idea that this was kind of, like, the pinnacle of what you could do on your family vacation during spring break at that time. I think today we've just become much more inured to the "call of the mall," shall we say. But at that time, it was a huge deal and yeah, people would go to the Mall of America and spend their entire time indoors, you know, going through the passageways between the hotel and the pool and the mall and back again.

JVN [00:06:13] But by the time I worked there in beauty school, which was 2005, maybe it's because I was older, and I was, like, 19 when I lived there, like, 19 and 20. Or maybe I was just jaded by my Glamor Shots experience. The food was still major, though. I remember the P.B. Loco, that peanut butter and jelly, like, restaurant. They had, like, the craziest peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Like, so many flavors. They had, like, bacon, onion, jalapeno, like, peanut butter sandwich. I know that you're look—you guys, I'm really getting an incredulous look right now from Alexandra. But actually, it was delish. I just got so distracted from having that much fun that I have to go back to what we're talking about. So, Mall of America, major. Do you mean to tell me that people don't understand, like, what a day at the mall would have looked like because it's just so foreign to people now that they don't know what a day at the mall was like?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:07:04] I think they know what a day at the mall is like, but they do not feel the excitement that we felt back then about the mall. I mean, the Mall of America is always going to be a special case, like, I refer to it in my book as one of a set of "VERY BIG MALLS," in all caps, because they're really another level. Wherever you live, you probably did not grow up with a "very big mall."

JVN [00:07:27] Right.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:07:28] But people, like, were excited. I, as a child of the eighties, was excited to go to the nicest mall in my area, which was Crabtree Valley Mall in Raleigh. And a lot of areas have that. Like, the nicest mall, the one that has Nordstrom. Or Saks. It has Williams-Sonoma. It's just somehow better. It had glamor.

JVN [00:07:49] Yes! Yes! And, like, the outdoor malls! Like, what about the outdoor malls? Like, I remember thinking that those were, like, fucking super amazing. Like, in the nineties, like, there was, like, a Chicago one.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:08:00] Yeah, well, the outdoor models are usually referred to as "lifestyle centers," and they were one way that malls—especially in the 2000s—new malls, tried to set themselves apart from older malls. They saw shoppers starting to lose interest and they were, like, "Oh, well, what if we take the lid off the mall and make it look more like a main street?" Because one of the really important things to understand about the mall is that unlike other forms of architecture, it's part of the consumer cycle. So the same way that stores have to constantly update their product, malls have to constantly update themselves. But of course, it's much bigger and more expensive because it is actually a piece of architecture.

JVN [00:08:44] That Century City Mall and like, West L.A., like, that's a really pretty, like, outdoor mall.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:08:49] I love Century City. I actually just went there in November and it was packed and it was very beautiful. They just did a total renovation.

JVN [00:08:56] Yeah, it's chic. And it was even chic before that renovation. But now it's, like, super chic. But let's back up a little, because I want to know more about you because I accidentally, like, lost my mind at the beginning of that, talking about the Mall of America, which makes sense for me. It checks out. But you're a literal design and architecture critic. Tell our listeners about, like, what you study and how you think about architecture and how you kind of, like, study your craft.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:09:19] Yeah, I have a Ph.D. in architecture history, and I've been working as an architecture critic for a long time, which means that I study both new and old buildings, new and old parks, new and old plans for cities, and then try to dive in and critique them and talk about who has the power. Like, is this a good design? What is this going to do to the city? How is it going to transform? Because I know enough about architecture and design to be able to kind of project the effects of, you know, how you build something, what these materials are going to do, what this space is going to be like. And also what I've found is that a lot of people don't notice the environment around them. I mean, maybe they'll notice it a little bit, but they don't think about the bigger picture and how there are actually people at work shaping that environment. And so, like, one of the things that I think criticism can do is unpack some of the ways that designers shape our environment and how they are doing a better and worse job in different places.

JVN [00:10:27] I am so obsessed right now, I can't take it. So if anyone's listening, has seen our Netflix series, we got to do an episode on skyscrapers and we got to talk to a historian who's studies—like, she's, like, obsessed with skyscrapers. Is it malls that kind of like, spoke to you, and, like, parks? Like is that what your kind of, like, passion was or is?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:10:48] My passion is really for, "How is the architecture serving the public?" So that ends up manifesting in different ways. So my current book is about shopping malls, and it grew out of both being a child of the eighties and trying to figure out what is architecture that everybody has been to but they don't really know about? And malls seemed like the perfect thing. But my, my book before this was called *The Design of Childhood*, and it was all about how objects and buildings and public space shape our lives as children. And it was kind of the same thing. Like, we've all been to a playground. If you're a parent, you've spent many boring hours watching your kid play at the playground. But, like, who made that playground? Why are some playgrounds better? And so on? And I feel like the questions about the mall that I have were really similar. And there's also a nice continuity in that my book on childhood really ends when kids are about 12. But, like, as you've already demonstrated, malls are really a place for teenagers. And I think it's important to talk about what kinds of public spaces we have for teenagers in the US today.

JVN [00:12:00] Yes, but they should also be for adults, like, we also want to shop. Like—I'm not getting sidetracked because I have so many fucking questions!

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:12:08] We do all just want to shop! That is, like, the larger thing. I think, you know, there's so much talk about online shopping today, but I don't think we want to shop online. I think we want to shop in-person with our friends and then have lunch. And that is what the mall is for.

JVN [00:12:24] I'm like a "both and." I love both. But so one thing that we learned about in our episode of Getting Curious was, like, zoning laws came up a lot around, like, how skyscrapers could be built and, like, the evolution around zoning laws and then also, like, gentrification. So I would love to hear about, like, the history of malls and when they first kind of became a concept and when do we start to see malls. Was it, like, a sixties thing?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:12:50] So it's a fifties thing.

JVN [00:12:51] Ah!

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:12:52] The father of the mall is generally considered to be Victor Gruen who was an Austrian emigre architect, came to the US in 1938, fleeing the Nazis and began designing very advanced, stylish shops, first in New York City and then for a bunch of smaller department store companies. So he was really knowledgeable about the department store industry and he noticed that there were all these new single family homes being built in the suburbs. There were all of these highways going out to the suburbs, but nobody was building downtown in the suburbs, there was nowhere to shop in the suburbs. So he realized—he saw this, like, need in the market—for a place for people to go and gather. And he thought, "Well, people are not going back to downtown to shop at department stores. So the department store owners needed to go where their customers were." But they wanted it to be nicer than just a store stuck in the middle of a parking lot. So he created the concept of a shopping center and then an indoor mall to give those department stores a neighborhood, to give that sense of, like, a main street or a town square, even in these sprawling suburbs.

JVN [00:14:06] Did the word "mall," like, come from something else or did it mean something else in the fifties or something? Or was it just, like, was a mall, like, "plaza" or something? Like, where the fuck did mall come from?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:14:18] Yeah. Mall is actually a term that comes from landscape architecture. So that's why we call the National Mall in DC Mall. So it's a term for landscape architecture, kind of like "plaza" and it just refers to a long, narrow landscaped strip, sort of in the middle of buildings. And the first use of it is actually "Pall Mall" in London which has that kind of architectural form. So it was taken up as a word for an indoor shopping center because the early malls had that same form, like, this long landscaped indoor strip between the boutiques with then a department store at either end.

JVN [00:15:04] I know this is going to be, like, an out-of-left-field question, but just stick with me. You already have done a really good job so far. Did you see Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:15:11] I did not see that movie. I mean, I know what it's about.

JVN [00:15:15] Fucking amazing, I think you might like it. I was obsessed with it. But in that movie, like, Dior is going through this, like, kind of corporate shift because they're trying to figure out, like, how do they go from being this, like, haute couture boutique that, like, a very small scale operation to go into more, like, mass scale? And I was just thinking, like, it takes place in like, I think it's like '67 or '69, but, like, malls, I guess by that point, like, if they're started in the fifties and they're kind of more serving, like, the suburbs and stuff, like, malls really kind of shaped the cultural landscape of retail, don't they? Because they make, like, really cute things more widely accessible type, more spaces in the U.S. Like before. Wouldn't it have been more like New York, Chicago, like, bigger city centers where you would have gotten cute stuff, but now all of a sudden, like, you have, like, Saks and Nordstrom's and, like, cute little places, like, in more areas?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:16:06] You know, somewhat but actually in the early part of the 20th century, department stores basically sold cute things in a lot of places. Almost every, like, first and second tier city in the US had a fairly high end department store with buyers who would go to Paris and bring things back from the couture houses, etc. So, like, in Pittsburgh, the big department store was called Kaufmann's and the Kaufmann family is the same family that hired Frank Lloyd Wright to design Fallingwater and were on the board of the Museum of Modern Art. So they were a Pittsburgh family, like, not what we would necessarily consider a center of fashion, but they knew everything. They knew everybody. And there are a lot of other cities that had the same thing with their department stores. I mean, Neiman Marcus at that time was really just headquartered in Texas, and their Dallas store was the major store. So the department stores were the way that regular people would find out about fashion, and they, you know, had very educated buyers. It was a place, actually, where a lot of women could rise through the ranks because they would start as shop girls. And if they were smart and they wanted to keep working, they would become buyers and move up the hierarchy. So malls are actually capitalizing on the kind of fashion and retail knowledge of these department stores. But the department stores needed people like Victor Gruen to say, "Hey, you can move out to the suburbs, but you won't lose your cachet because I'll create this beautiful environment around your store."

JVN [00:17:42] So basically, malls and department stores had, like, a symbiotic relationship.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:17:46] Yes.

JVN [00:17:47] Like, the department stores weren't threatened by the success of the malls. Like, it was a good thing for everyone.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:17:53] In fact, the mall couldn't exist without the department store, the definition of symbiotic relationship, because when we call a department store, an "anchor store" for a mall, that's not just a metaphor. You actually had to have buy-in from at least one, if not two department stores to get the financing to build a mall.

JVN [00:18:12] Yeah, 'cause ours had, like, Bergners. It had, like, Bergner's, J.C. Penney's and, like, Sears. And those are three department stores in, like, the Quincy Mall.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:18:23] Yeah. And I'm guessing, I'm not familiar with Bergner's, but I'm guessing—

JVN [00:18:27] How dare you! It was a great regional department store! And its logo was like these, like, red circles that made the "B." And it was, it was nice. I mean, it wasn't the *nicest*, but it was—it was, "At Quincy Mall, we've got it all, at—" I'm just kidding.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:18:42] I was about to guess that it was, like, a middle to high end department store because Sears and J.C. Penney were the lower end versions. And that's something that if people who are listening are thinking about their mall, like, malls generally had 1 to 3 department stores and they would try to have one at every price point so that anyone who went to the mall, you know, would be able to do their kind of day-to-day clothes shopping.

JVN [00:19:07] So what are the types of stores in malls, like, so the anchor store is more, like, the department stores, right?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:19:12] Yeah, the anchor stores will be the department stores and those will be at either end, and maybe in the middle, and they'll have their own separate entrance off the parking lot. Then the rest of the stores are boutiques and there's generally a range of price points of the boutiques. Typically, the higher end boutiques will be located outside the higher end department store. Malls tend to groove "like with like" because the person who is shopping at Nordstrom will then also want to go to the Apple store and then want to go to, I don't know what—the Tory Burch. Whereas at the other end of the mall you might have a Macy's and outside the Macy's you might have, like, a frozen yogurt shop and an Abercrombie. Because that's more where, like, the 20 something teen shopping is going to happen.

JVN [00:20:07] A lot of times I feel like there was, like, pretzels or cookies, like, around entrances, like, there was like, like, some good ass food around entrances.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:20:15] Yes. Well, the food courts are typically on the second story off the atrium. So when you walk in, you know where it is when you need it. And people in the food court can look out and see people coming in and out. But it's not necessarily the super

prime real estate of being on the first floor. But then, yes, there were often individual food kiosks or stores like Mrs. Fields, Cinnabon, Auntie Anne's, that were basically calling you with their smell.

JVN [00:21:46] Yes. They've still got me in a chokehold. I love.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:20:50] Right, and then one of the things that I thought was interesting was you have the kind of national Muzak playlist playing in the body of the mall, and then individual stores have their own soundtracks and how it really is this multi-sensory experience. So that, like, the brand experience is about the music and the smell and the clothes. Basically the Muzak company was invented to clear the music, right, so that it could be played in public and the mall owners would not have to pay for each individual song to be played. So that's how you get these national playlists at the mall.

JVN [00:21:32] Ah! That really resonates for like a child of the nineties who, like, I just got all of that, like—Bath & Body Works, Buckle. like, it really was, like, of all of your senses. Okay. So I'm just, like, so obsessed with this. I don't think I've ever, like, this is just, like, such a low key, obsessive episode. Like, who knew that we were also obsessed with malls? So by the sixties, like, malls are doing real good, like, seventies they're doing good, Maybe there's that little, like, you know, market reset of the, like, you know, late seventies, early eighties. Like, but whatever, like, you know, malls were still a fun thing. Then I wrote down, like, "performances eighties." Like, you had, like, Tiffany, and you had, like, a lot of really famous people ended up doing like those mall tours, right?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:22:17] Yeah! I had several fun days researching this book, but the day when I realized I had to actually figure out what was up with those mall tours was—because I feel like I was maybe a little bit old for the Tiffany heyday. So I don't remember paying so much attention to her at the time, but I knew in the background, "Oh yeah, there's Tiffany, there's Debbie Gibson, and then eventually there's Britney Spears giving these mall tours, and they're all sponsored by cosmetic companies."

JVN [00:22:45] Ooooh!

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:22:46] And there's actually a really interesting interview with Tiffany at the time done for The L.A. Times that basically explains that one of her A&R reps had teenagers and was kind of wandering around the mall one day with his daughter thinking, "How are we going to sell this singer who is a teenager to other teenagers? They can't go to clubs, they don't have the money for concerts." And he's looking at the mall, looking at the atrium and thinks, "Oh, we just bring her here, to where the teenagers already are." So the mall concerts were actually capitalizing on the popularity of the malls because malls are still going strong at that point and bringing the singers that needed a teen audience to the mall. Also in a way, like, merchandizing at the mall because, you know, like, the Debbie Gibson's

jean jacket or the rubber bracelets of Madonna, like all of these things are things that you would then go to the mall to buy.

JVN [00:23:45] And I mean, I think—I don't think in the—or maybe people came to Quincy, I'm not sure, but I definitely, like. Oh my God, Jonathan, focus! So architecturally, from, like, the inception of the mall in the fifties to, let's say, the nineties, like, is there any malls that are still standing, like, from the fifties or sixties that, like, I think of, like, the Saint Louis Galleria. I'm just trying to think of malls that I, like, went to. I think of, like, I guess all those outdoor ones were, like, more 2000. So those probably weren't around back then, is there any examples of, like, mall architecture from the fifties or sixties that's still around?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:24:18] There isn't a lot. A lot of malls have been renovated, you know, over and over and over again, so it's hard to find parts of them that are still, as they were. One of the malls that I do talk about in the book, that half of it is still pretty much as it was when it was built in 1965 is NorthPark Mall in Dallas, which was built by the Nasher family and is still owned by the daughter of the original developers.

JVN [00:24:44] Ah, cute!

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:24:48] So that's a very beautiful, high-end mall. Have you ever been there?

JVN [00:24:49] No, but I just like that the daughter of, like—that's cool.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:24:52] Yes, it's very cool. The family ended up going heavily into art collecting. So they also are the donors for the Nasher Sculpture Center in downtown Dallas. And they actually display a large portion of their art collection at the mall. So the mall is literally a museum piece and has museum quality art. And it's interesting because the design of the mall, which is by an architect named E.G. Hamilton, is what we would today call minimalist. It has white brick on the outside and polished concrete floors and this very cute detail where in the frames around each store there's a little cast stone flower in the corner. Which is the mall logo. So the mall logo is very subtly incorporated into the architecture everywhere. So it's very plain but also very beautiful, and it's actually completely withstood the test of time.

JVN [00:25:46] So the first malls are kind of, like, classic, giving minimalist. Does that mean they're kind of more, like, squarish and, like, rectangular shaped?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:25:54] Yeah, they're very plain on the outside. They're—everything is very stripped down. Like maybe you have a line of planters down the center and you'll have clear story windows. You know, those narrow windows at the top that let in daylight, but they're not really grand. It's really in the seventies that you start to get the Galleria style malls that are imitating places like the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan, and the European—

JVN [00:26:23] Oh fuck, that's what that thing's supposed to be?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:26:26] Yeah.

JVN [00:26:26] Oh, God. I don't know how much they nailed it in St. Louis, at least.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:26:31] Right, there are some that are kind of sad. I always talk about when I'm talking about, like, the Galleria style is the Houston Galleria, which is four stories, had the first indoor ice skating rink, had a running track.

JVN [00:26:42] [GASPS] Is it still there? Cause there's this, like, ice skating rink in Dallas that, like, Amber Glen and all these other people skate at.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:26:47] It is still there. And so the Houston Galleria opened in 1970 and the Dallas Galleria, same developer, opened, I think in 1972. So, yes, they have very large ice rinks that you basically can look down from all the tiers of the mall at the skaters and it really activates the space.

JVN [00:27:08] I love that. I think my hometown mall is, like, can't remember if it has, like, flat ceilings. It is definitely like multiple levels. I need to Google, like, when my mall, I have to know this. I'm so sorry. "When was Quincy Mall built?" 1978.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:27:24] Okay.

JVN [00:27:25] So it's giving, like, yeah, it's not that cute. So the seventies, eighties, like, they become more, like, multilayered and, like, escalators become more of a thing?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:27:36] Yeah. The fifties and sixties models tended to be one story, maybe two stories. But starting in the early 1970s, you get, you know, two stories, three stories. Typically you'll enter and there'll be a big atrium with a skylight on top and then criss-crossing escalators. Sometimes you even get a glass enclosed elevator.

JVN [00:28:59] Ooooooh! I love those. I know what you're talking about.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:28:03] Well, it basically is this space in the center of all these, you know, windowless stores that has natural lights, that has a fountain, that has plants. And it's really the place to see and be seen. That's where they would have had the Tiffany concerts. But I think also for many of us, it was the place where you would go and know that you would run into other kids from school. If you've got a new outfit, you maybe wanted to go up and down the escalators a few times. In my book, I talk about that great scene in Clueless where Cher goes shopping with Christian, and there's a shot where they come up, kind of onto the

top floor of the mall on the escalator, and it's really like they are the mall royalty and they're just perfectly framed by the architecture.

JVN [00:28:52] I know exactly the scene that you're talking about. So then I also remember, like Sam Goody was a huge deal, Like, the photo booth was a big deal. Like, I loved a good food court, I loved a good department store. Like, so the mall's really still, like, kind of kicking ass in the nineties because, like, Britney performed there, right? So, like, when do the malls start to, like, be, like, "Oh, fuck," was that the Internet or what?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:29:18] It was not the Internet. I think the U.S. got what they call "overmalled" in the 1990s. So the US has just many, many more square feet of shopping per person than it needs and many, many more than other kind of "first world" nations. So in the nineties, it was kind of peak mall. We had probably 2000 indoor malls in the US. And it was just too many. Like, there were not enough people spending enough money at all of those malls. Then internet shopping starts to rise. Initially, it's really only, like, 15% of retail sales. It was never as high as people thought it was, but that takes a chunk out of it. And then I think the real dooming event was the 2007 recession, because that just created the real income inequality that we're still dealing with. That's when a lot of the department stores started to struggle. And we mentioned earlier the symbiotic relationship of the department store and the mall. So when your department store is struggling or your department store goes bankrupt or leaves your mall, it really is very hard for the mall to survive unless they put something else equally spectacular in that space.

JVN [00:30:37] Did anyone start to see the writing on the wall and they start to do, like, smaller malls or like, or, like, did architecture change in the nineties from the seventies or do we still pretty much stay in that similar, like, Galleria-style escalator atrium?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:30:51] The architecture didn't change that much. What changed more was the focus on entertainment rather than shopping. Mall of America is, like, this big example. But other malls also added multi-screen movie theaters, added laser tag, added mini golf. You know, it didn't have to be as huge as Camp Snoopy, but the idea that the mall was a place for family entertainment and not just for shopping was one way that they tried to pivot and get people to keep coming back.

JVN [00:31:21] Yeah, and, like, the water tower in, like, Chicago's not outdoor—like, it's indoor, but, like, I remember it has like this, like amazing, like, food thing on the top floor. Like, it's, like, just got, like, food booths from, like all over the place and it's, like, amazing shopping. And you could spend all day there and feel like, "Ah, that was fun." Like, and I remember being a teenager going on vacation to Chicago and like, I mean, like, "Wow, water tower." And that would have been, like, the early aughts. My mom just took my niece to New York City for the first time. She's, like, 13. And I was, like, "You have to take her to Bergdorf's, maybe get her makeup done or like, just do something fun. Like, it doesn't have to be makeup," because she's, like, "She doesn't really like shopping." And I was like, "I don't give

a fuck. She's 13 and, like, Bergdorf's is a fucking icon and what if it's not there in ten—like, we don't know where it's like, I mean, if you would have told me ten years ago that Barneys wasn't going to be there, you know, or five years ago, the department stores and it's a symbiotic relationship. And it is! It's, like, it's Mrs. Maisel, like, I love a department store. Like—it's just, like, such a cute little thing. And now I feel like I go to Bergdorf's, I feel like I'm on the Gilded Age or something. Like, it feels like it's, like, this relic of the past.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:32:28] Bergdorf's is still, like, such a special case, like with their shoppers, with the shoe salon, all of that. I mean, with, like, their gorgeous Christmas windows.

JVN [00:32:38] Ah, and the shoe salon! I also say for what is such a transphobic industry because, like, seriously, like, you just can't get a big fucking shoe, like, for our people with big feet that want to wear, like, heels. It can be a melee, like, cause sometimes there's only one and it can come to blows and you don't want to have, like, violence within our community. But like, I have, like, gotten into it with, like, a queen at, like, Bergdorf's. Like, there's one pair of 40 twos and, like, "Bitch, they're mine," like, I was. And then you're like, "No, but like, we're on the same team. But I love you. But like, you have to get off these shoes." But they always have, like, multiple pairs of 40 to the birdbath. Can I just say it's true? If you need a bigger shoe like Bergdorf, like they really come up with that bigger gal shoe size, and I just appreciate them for always looking out for, like, having 42s.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:33:23] Well, see, I think what then shows is that Bergdorf's is still a highly curated and responsive store. And that is one of the things that the classic department stores really had going for them. They understood their market. They had people who understood individual shoppers. And I think the same was true for the people that ran the malls before there was a huge consolidation in the industry in the late nineties and 2000. So part of the reason that Northpark in Dallas is still successful is that Nancy Nasher, who's the daughter of the original owners, basically, like, rules it with an iron hand. Like she understands shopping and marketing and retail. I got to go around the mall with her and just all of her little offhand comments about—like, how, "This store doesn't have enough merchandise or that store has bad lighting. Nobody's going to buy makeup in there" were just so to the point. And I feel like that's what you get when you're in a really, like, curated, thoughtful, responsive retail environment. And that's what gets lost when everything consolidates. And it's all being run, you know, by some people in an office in Los Angeles.

JVN [00:34:37] Okay. So I want to talk about that. And then I also was, like, biting, not saying this one comment that would derail me again, but I have to. Now, the other thing but I'm going to go to the question—the other thing—but I'm not going to look at you while I say it, so I make sure I don't get distracted. The other thing they understood was a good fucking lunch. Whatever, it's just so much fun. So malls are, like, kind of their own, like, cities square, like, reflection of, like, a main street but in the suburbs—like, bringing city centers, like, into

different spaces. So what's the deal with, like, protest in malls? And, like, what did the Supreme Court say about that? What's that story?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:35:09] Oh, yeah. So malls are not public space. We often think of malls like public space. We often use malls as we would other types of public space, like public libraries or public parks. But malls are private. They're privately owned. The land is privately owned. So there has been a debate in the courts since the late 1960s about whether people could protest at malls, whether the right to free speech superseded the private ownership of malls. And initially, in '68, the Supreme Court said, "Yes, you know, people should be allowed to protest at malls." The majority opinion was actually written by Thurgood Marshall, and he said that malls were the new Main Street and it was important for democracy for people to be able to protest where there were people to see the protest. You know, protests have to be publicized, in a sense. But the Supreme Court, as we know, has become increasingly conservative. And so at a certain point in the eighties, the Supreme Court declared that whether or not malls were public space was a matter for state courts. So now it's actually state by state whether you can have a protest at a mall. And as you might expect, it tends to be the liberal states, like, I think California, Colorado, Massachusetts, where you *can* protest at a mall. But in most states, you cannot protest at a mall. You know, you can be arrested, you can be kicked out. And we saw this actually at the Mall of America when Black Lives Matter protesters protested there and were arrested.

JVN [00:36:47] And Minnesota's actually considered a pretty liberal state. But I think that's really interesting on a wider scale that, like, conservative lawmakers consistently use the idea of states' rights to suppress dissent and, like, suppress, like, any sort of thing that's outside of, like, a cis-het patriarchy. I think the other thing that I wanted to ask about in your research and you mentioned it before, that, like, malls are one of the few places where women could, like, work their way up through, like, hierarchies in business. But one thing we've learned on *Getting Curious* is that, like, all of America has been, like, you know, born and bred on, like, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, misogyny. And it touches, like, every area of our culture. It seems like malls probably wouldn't have been as accessible geographically to, like, different races and also lower class people. Or were they? Like, what have you learned about race from studying mall architecture in America?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:37:44] Yeah. Okay. So malls are absolutely part of that story. I was doing a talk recently for a book club and the book club said they had recently read Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law*, which is all about redlining. And I was, like, "Well, yes," because redlining made those—ensured that—the new single family houses built in suburbs after World War Two would be only accessible to white people. And who were the people who were the ideal shoppers for these malls? Who were these malls being built for? The women and children who were at home in those houses, which meant that they were white. So it was very much a de facto segregated system where the assumption was that almost all the clientele at these malls would be white because the neighborhoods immediately around them were all white. Also, the malls were typically built off highways, which meant that they were very easy to

access if you had a car. But if you were lower income and had to take the bus. Generally speaking, the mall owners didn't want to have a bus stop on the property or they would request that the bus stop be across the highway. So people taking the bus had to cross a lot of lanes of traffic. And just from like the basic layout of the mall, with the mall in the middle of a giant parking lot. If you're trying to access the mall on foot, the mall is clearly not for you. Like, everything about the architecture says, like, "Oh, we don't really want you here, but if you're willing to hop in across the giant parking lot, okay, I guess you can come in." So that also meant the lower income people, it was very hard for them to get to the mall. And that often affected the people who were working at the mall. Right. Like, if you're working at a not very well-paid job as a sales clerk at the mall, you might also be living in a remote location and have to take the bus. So it was also alienating to employees.

JVN [00:39:42] Mhm. What about—and we briefly touched on this earlier, but like I always remember growing up, I went to the mall a lot. That was, like, a thing for us. Like, "Hey, you want to go to the mall?" I also noticed, like the fierce older ladies with their, like, gorgeous roller sets and very skinny eyebrows, like, power walking at the mall. But I think especially, with the decline of malls and the available-ness of them, like, what does that say for, like, alternative gathering spaces for teens, for seniors?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:40:11] There is a real crisis of space for both of those groups. During the pandemic, I read online, you know, like, a bunch of letters to the editor from people who had been part of mall walking group saying, like, "Why can't we walk at the mall with our masks on?" Or, like, "Oh, we can go to the mall at 9 a.m. There's never anyone there. It's just our group." Like, seniors really missed both the physical exercise and the social exercise of being part of those mall walking groups. And malls have always been better for those groups because malls are open and protected in all weathers. They have public bathrooms, they have benches, they have food and drink in a way that a lot of cities don't provide. So they're a much safer place for the older, older people, disabled people, anyone with any sort of infirmity to walk than most cities. And really the same thing for teenagers, like, teenagers need a space where they can kind of, like, try on identities and try on independence that's a little bit protected. And in the best case scenario, malls can be that because they don't have cars, because there's some amount of passive supervision from the shop owners. And you can find the shop that has the t-shirt that has the band that expresses who you want to be that week. And I think that's so important, just, like, that opportunity for identity formation.

JVN [00:41:38] I think the ADA accessibility is a huge issue, too. I mean, I think for disability and, like, wheelchair usage or, like, any sort of mobility, ADA usage is something that a lot of people just don't think about until it affects them. And especially in cities that, like, lack that accessibility and those resources, like, I would imagine malls would be a really good place to be like a flatter parking lot, a ramp to get up and, like, you know, elevators that are big enough to like, accommodate your wheelchair and like, be able to have the same experience that other people have. But if malls are closing and not available in as many places—and even

in the best of times—you said in the nineties when we got overmalled, there was, like, 2000 indoor malls in the US, you said? Right?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:42:22] Yes.

JVN [00:42:23] Was the consolidation in '07, is that when a lot started to close in that financial recession or—

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:42:30] Yes. That's when a lot started to close and more are still closing. But it's basically post-2007 recession that a number of department store chains went bankrupt, malls started to close. And that's actually when you see the rise of dead mall photography and some of these other kind of online groups being around dead malls, like, there's a subreddit, /dead malls. And on Instagram, I also follow a lot of people that go around taking photos of dead malls across the country.

JVN [00:43:01] So how many functioning indoor malls are there now? Or, like, how many are, like, up and running now, do we know?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:43:10] It's a little bit hard to get a—

JVN [00:43:11] Ballpark me, queen, please! If there are 2000—

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:43:12] 700. Ballpark, 700.

JVN [00:43:14] Ah! Ah! Ah! What?! I thought you would say more like, you know, maybe 1200 or 1500 based off of the 2000. But that's, like, a correction of over, like, 50 something percent.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:43:24] Yeah.

JVN [00:43:24] There's hella dead malls.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:43:25] There are a lot of dead malls. One of the things that I've had to contend with in talking about this book is some people want to say, "All the malls are dying." And some people want to put a happy face on it. But really, the truth is some malls are dying. Some malls are going to survive. There are going to be a lot less. Towards the end of my book, I start to talk about solutions, especially architectural solutions for the problem of all these dead malls. Like, what should the dead mall become? But it's true that even for those of us who love malls, like I can't lie and say they're all going to survive and everybody's going to get back out there and start shopping again.

JVN [00:44:10] Okay. So I was thinking about this the other day and, like, I graduated hair school in October of '06. I moved to Phoenix in October of '06. I built a really thriving clientele, got really busy, like, I mean, I worked really hard to do that. But I was at a good

salon. you know, and we were actually, like, largely fed by the Scottsdale Fashion Square Mall, like, we were two blocks away. So I used to go to that mall with, like, my business cards and I'd hang out at their Aveda Store, because it was an Aveda salon that I worked at. And I would, like, say, like, "Oh, like, free haircut with, like, your partial highlights." Like, I was just hustling clients there, and I got super busy off the mall. I remember we had the Super Bowl in Phoenix in, like, January of 2008. And on February 1st of 2008, it was like a curtain closed on, like, the city. Like, my books went from being, like, full of clients to, like, just people canceling last-minute. I didn't understand why. I had a few clients that, like, committed suicide around that time because they literally had like—and that was when I was, like, "Wait, this isn't normal. Like, this isn't." It really was a scary time, like, seeing people lose their lives, seeing people lose their whole jobs, realize that, like, their whole lives that they built something on like really quickly changed. And I do think that, like, income inequality and, like, that, we haven't really healed. I do think that if you were a young adult or, you know, an adult of any kind, it just really does still have, like, deep scars in our current, like, landscape.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:45:34] Definitely, I think that the income inequality spurred by that recession is still shaping the retail landscape today. I mean, one of the reasons that some malls are still doing well is because their anchor stores were the higher end department stores—like Neiman Marcus, Saks, Nordstrom. And those department stores are still doing well because many rich people actually have gotten richer over the past ten years, whereas the middle class has not gotten richer. And so people that used to shop at the mid-range department stores like Dillard's, Macy's, J.C. Penney started shopping at Target and Walmart and Burlington Coat Factory. And they have continued to shop there because their incomes are not, you know, rising to keep pace with inflation. So we just have this huge gap where there used to be the middle class that was supporting this mid-range department store and those people are still shopping at discount stores. You know, discount stores by and large weren't mall anchors tend to be big box stores with in their own plazas. That aspect of mall culture, mall economics hasn't rebounded. So that's still having an effect on, you know, where people shop and what's successful.

JVN [00:46:56] That is so interesting to zoom out from that perspective and see, like, that that's kind of the "why"s. So, then there was, like, also in, like, the nineties, 2000s. It's like, I think about, like, "White Hot," that, like, Abercrombie documentary, like, I think about Hollister's. I think about the Buckle. Like, in my hometown, the Buckle was there and we would literally go play The Buckle Game, which is where you had go into the Buckle and try to go to the back of the store and touch the wall and get back out without any of the salespeople asking if you needed anything, which was impossible. But it was, like, a really fun game. So with the dead malls, like, I actually read this story the other day. It was about this Hollister that got converted to a laser—no, an escape room? It was a Hollister they got converted to an escape room. Yes. And they left like the outside looking exactly like the Hollister fort.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:47:38] Yes, yes, like the porch, yeah.

JVN [00:47:39] Yes. And you can still smell like the perfume and like the fragrance from how strong they were, like on the walls, in the escape rooms inside. I thought that was, like, a really clever because, like, I love a good escape room. Like, how fun.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:47:50] Well, I think things like escape rooms are the amusement parks of our era. I mean, I think for malls to succeed in the future, they're going to have to convert a lot of things that used to be for shopping into entertainment, because entertainment still draws people out of the house and the way that shopping does it. So as I see malls try to kind of reposition themselves, like, the two biggest things that they're getting into is food, like, bigger food courts, more local businesses, more, like, ethnically diverse food courts, and often, like, gourmet markets. And so, like, some super high end malls have an Eataly in them now.

JVN [00:48:33] Yes! Or, like, Selfridges is, like, they have the most amazing food, grocery, like, restaurant bit. I just got to go a few weeks ago. It's, like, the most delicious stuff, ever.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:48:45] Right. Well, there are malls where instead of a department store anchor now, they're going to have a food hall like Selfridges or like Eataly.

JVN [00:48:55] I noticed people were there, like, doing their grocery shopping, like, they were totally locals. That weren't there, like as tourists—like, they had, like, you know, reusable bags and were like, doing their grocery shopping and like, they're really nice, like, you know, grocer part.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:49:08] Yeah, well, I think in a lot of places, if you put in a Whole Foods, if you put in a Trader Joe's, if you put in one of those, and then you also have a wine store, you've kind of created this slightly higher end food experience that people will travel for. And then they're doing that shopping and then they see, "Oh, yes, there are still some clothing stores here. Why don't I go into that store over there and buy some slacks?" That's always been part of the mall ethos, this idea that you would go in with a list and then you get distracted and stay longer and spend more money.

JVN [00:49:44] So what about, like, gyms? I imagine, like, a big old department store? Like that could be, like, you could put in, like, handball courts and like a big old fitness thing. Like, I can imagine, like, a big ass Equinox. And isn't there an equinox in that, like, one thing? Did they change the name from Columbus Circle, finally? But that's, like, a big mall in New York where, like, there's, like, a gym and, like, a bunch of other stuff.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:50:06] There's a big Equinox as part of the Hudson Yards development. And yes, there are gyms going to the former department stores. Sometimes they can even have a really great climbing wall because the ceilings are too high. There is also, like, trampoline parts that are super popular with families. I just saw a mall where they're turning a former Sears into, like, an indoor skate park and, like—

JVN [00:50:28] Ooooh!

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:50:29] Dirt bike racing track. So, yes, all kinds of athletic family entertainment. Event type places are replacing department stores. So, yeah, entertainment and food are the two big things.

JVN [00:50:44] Have you been watching *The Last of US*?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:50:48] I have not. I—It seems sort of scary to me. I don't really like scary.

JVN [00:50:53] It's not *not* scary. I have to cuddle with, like, all my dogs and cats and I have to have, like, our alarm system turned on and stuff. Like, it's not *not* scary, but it just—the reason I asked is because, like, you see Boston in what would be now. But it's, like, post-apocalypse though like a lot of like the skylines are fucking, like, falling over and there's, like, vines growing out of everything. But that made me wonder, like, has there been any malls that they just, like, tore down and, like, replaced with, like, a park or turn it into, like, green space or not? Is that, like, a deeply offensive thing to ask, like, a gigantic fan of, like, architecture... for malls?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:51:28] No, it's not at all! It's not at all. They have torn down some walls and made them into green space. There's one example I have in the book of Meriden, Connecticut, which is in, like, central Connecticut, and they had a downtown mall that was built in the seventies and it was built in a bottom, basically a former wetlands. And they built the mall over that. And then they were very surprised when it constantly flooded. So the mall was built and it just constantly flooded for, like, 20 years. And finally they realized that there should not be a building in that location because it was a former wetland and they tore down the mall and they daylight a creek that had been running through the property.

JVN [00:52:08] What's that mean?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:52:09] It means that the creek had been buried underground and under asphalt, and that was partially responsible for the flooding because it was being fed every time it rained. And the water had nowhere to go because there was a parking lot, so there was flooding. So they took up the dirt and took up the asphalt and let the creek be what it wanted to be. And they put in a green. It's now called Meriden Green, and they built some new housing with retail on the side of the new park, and they built, you know, a covered area where they can have a farmer's market. And so now there's no more flooding downtown. Now they have this great open space and they still had enough room around the edges to build some higher density housing and they're going to put in some public housing. So it was really a win-win from this mall that wasn't doing anyone any good and was kind of an environmental disaster.

JVN [00:53:05] So, okay, love that story. And then there's, like, Century City Mall, West L.A., which we talked a little bit about before, but, like, it just had a huge, like, renovation. It seems like it's really successful. It's really pretty. So, like, do you feel hopeful for the future of malls? Like, we kind of touched on it, it's, like, some are going to survive and continue to thrive, others are going to totes not. I wonder what's going to happen to Quincy Mall.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:53:29] Yeah, I think there will be malls in the future. One of the arguments that I make in the book is that we have a human need to be together, to shop together, to eat together and malls to build that in areas that don't have a lot of other options, a.k.a the suburbs. So I think, like, the US is going to continue to need malls and so hopefully the ones that are successful can stay successful. But I also think that some of the dead malls can be repurposed for other good things. So it's important to think of the dead malls not as being, like, a dead end, but as an opportunity for some creative thinking about how the suburbs have changed and what people who live there need now.

JVN [00:54:17] So who owns the malls now? Like, just, like—

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:54:20] It's mostly, like, two or three companies, Brookfield, Simon and Westfield.

JVN [00:54:27] I've seen the Westfield!

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:54:29] Yeah, Westfield is an Australian company and they're actually trying to get out of the US mall business. The Houston Galleria is owned by Simon. Simon owns 100 malls. The Simon brothers were early mall entrepreneurs in the 1960s in Indianapolis. So they're pretty interesting story. But like most mall owners, they do not like to talk to the press, like, none of these big companies would talk to me at all.

JVN [00:54:54] Interest.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:54:55] They're very secretive.

JVN [00:54:56] So we have to read the book. And so that's good. Okay, so, like, my last thing is, like, a rapidfire and then we're done. Are you ready? Favorite mall snack of all time.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:55:05] Auntie Anne's.

JVN [00:55:06] Oh, my God. I love that answer. Okay, so B on that. What's your favorite dipping sauce?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:55:12] Oh, I don't like dipping sauce. I'm not a sauce girl.

JVN [00:55:14] Oh! Okay, so then what's your favorite pretzel?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:55:18] I just like the classic pretzel.

JVN [00:55:20] Oh! Okay!

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:55:21] Oh, Like, the classic with the salt. Sorry. I'm very—I have very, very simple taste.

JVN [00:55:26] Hot! That's—if we were doing a follow up episode, it would be about, like, taste and, like, why that's your favorite. I'm, like, obsessed. I'm obsessed with you. Favorite mall purchase of all time.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:55:34] Gotta be a jewel tone Gap Shetland wool sweater.

JVN [00:55:39] Classic. Mall performance?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:55:43] Well, I didn't get to see Britney at the mall, but I have to imagine that it would be Britney.

JVN [00:55:49] Favorite mall art or design?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:55:51] Oh so Southdale Mall in Edina, Minnesota, has two sculptures by Harry Bertolia, who is a major mid-century sculptor. And I love that they are just hanging out there at the mall.

JVN [00:56:04] Ah! Favorite mall ever.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:56:06] It's got to be Northpark in Dallas because it's just the kind of pure mall-ness.

JVN [00:56:11] Favorite mall memory.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:56:13] My dad dancing to the Muzak and embarrassing me horribly as a teenager.

JVN [00:56:21] That's so cute! I have very similar memories of my stepdad doing the same thing. What's your favorite second life for a mall? If you could repurpose all the dead malls as something to be, like, just a great contributing thing for society, what would it be?

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:56:33] Oh, well, there is a beautiful community college in a dead mall in Austin. And I think, yeah, if all our malls could become public, educational institutions, like, that would be awesome.

JVN [00:56:46] Ah, what a good way to fucking end the episode. I live in Austin! You're the best. Alexandra Lange. I had so much fun talking to you. Thank you for being, like, the most patient PhD scholar of all time with my ass today. We appreciate you so much and we appreciate your work. Your book is out now, right? We can read it now: Meet Me By The Fountain. Yes, queen! Get the book. We're obsessed with you. Thank you for coming on Getting Curious.

ALEXANDRA LANGE [00:57:12] Thank you. This is really fun.

JVN [00:57:14] Ah! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, please introduce a friend and please show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me and Erica Getto, with production support from Julie Carrillo, Chris McClure, and Erin McKeon.

[SINGING]

*At Quincy Mall, we've got it all
At Quincy Mall, we've got it all
The finest food and cuisine!*