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ARE INDOOR MALLS IN THE BAY AREA FADING AWAY? THE TEEN MALL RATS OF YORE MAY HAVE SCAMPERED OFF TO ONLINE PASTURES, BUT MILLENNIALS STILL LOVE MALLS THAT OFFER MORE THAN RETAIL

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It's mid-summer in the Bay Area. Do you know where your teenagers are? Well I don't know either, but one thing's sure, they're not at the mall. I checked. In fact, it seems a lot of people are not shopping at some of our venerable indoor malls. I don't know what everyone's doing instead. Painting their toenails? Potting a cactus? Plotting a run for office?

When I was a kid, I would totally have been at the mall on a hot day, back when there was nothing cooler — in more ways than one — than an [Orange Julius](#) and air-cooled paths leading to Casual Corner and Miller's Outpost. The once-gleaming, hardwood-floored, ficus-and-fern-filled Vallco Shopping Mall in Cupertino was my second suburban home. (My pal Jeannie and I even tried to stay the night once, hiding behind a rack of sequined evening gowns in I. Magnin until my mom found us. Better her than security — I think ...)

Back then, teens traveled in packs, flirting, giggling, trying on clothes they'd never buy. Jordache was the coin of the realm, and the scent of Mrs. Fields' white-chocolate/macadamia-nut cookies mingled with clouds of [Estee Lauder's](#) Youth Dew, the latter often spritzed without warning by an attacking sales clerk. If I'd had a personal anthem, it would have been the "Shopping" song by Barenaked Ladies: "Everything will always be all right ... when we go shopping."

These days, teens flirt and socialize online, and Vallco is an empty hulk but for a movie theater, an ice rink and a Chinese restaurant. Reports of the nation's shuttered indoor malls come in more often than a new line of iPhone cases at the Apple store. Retail analysts say one out of every four indoor malls in the U.S. could close by 2022 in what's been dubbed "the retail apocalypse."

Why? Online shopping. Duh. Plus lifestyle changes, a preference for outdoor/mixed-use complexes (think lofts, shops and restaurants) and the oversaturation of indoor malls from the '80s and '90s. "They just built too many malls, too many stores," says Ron Friedman of [Marcum LLP](#) in Los Angeles, which researches retail and consumer trends. "Now millennials want more of an experience, food options, entertainment. Malls have to adapt. The ones that don't will disappear."

But is it true even here, in the bubble of the Bay Area?

I have to admit, I hadn't been to a traditional indoor mall in ages. So I decided to engage in a highly scientific, thoroughly unofficial study: visiting several local malls to try them on for size, so to speak, and see if they still fit in today's world. Yes, it's called research!

BOOM OR BUST?

What I discovered was a mixed shopping bag. In a pleasant surprise, it seems some are downright thriving.

Concord's Sunvalley Shopping Center (turning 50 in August) is elbow-to-elbow on the weekends — even rife with teenagers! — especially since they put in a huge arcade/bowling/karaoke entertainment complex last year, plus restaurants with better offerings than the mere mall mainstay of Hot Dog on a Stick. (No offense, hot dogs. Or sticks.)

Maybe it helps to have to have the word "valley" in the name, because Westfield Valley Fair in San Jose is booming, too. I worked in a small dress shop (Easton & Rowe) at Valley Fair in the early '90s, when there was just one main concourse. In years since, it's doubled in size with high-end retailers such as [Hugo Boss](#), Tiffany, Prada, Versace and Balenciaga. It's like a party inside the [Microsoft](#) and Apple stores. And now another huge section is going in, adding 100 more shops, plus a [Bloomingdale's](#), theaters and more, all slated to open in 2019.

Still, I didn't see many teenagers — mostly lots of parents with small kids, or older shoppers.

Indeed, whatever magic potion lures teens to Sunvalley, they should pipe it into the air at other malls.

Stoneridge Shopping Center in Pleasanton, while still going strong, isn't always the first choice for the younger crowd, says my pal Margaret, who lives in Livermore and has a 16-year-old daughter. Margaret can't remember the last time she visited Stoneridge herself, and her daughter has been there only once this year — not to shop, but to meet friends at [The Cheesecake Factory](#).

"(Teens) don't treat the mall the way my friends and I used to when I was in high school," Margaret says. "Instead, they meet at a community pool, at a fro-yo shop, at the library, at a park, at someone's home. My daughter actually goes out of her way to avoid going to the mall."

Southland Mall in Hayward has been struggling. Its white-tiled concourse still boasts a [Sears](#), a [J.C. Penney](#) and [Macy's](#). [Dick's Sporting Goods](#) recently filled a vacant spot. And a walled-off section has a big sign, "New [Century Theatres](#), coming 2017." But just across from that are a handful of empty stores. Mid-day, mid-week there were only about 10 people in the food court.

RAZED EYEBROWS

My friend April sometimes shops at Stonestown Galleria in San Francisco. "Our mall has had a lot of improvements, but the quality of stores is declining," she says. "They put in a new burger joint, but it replaced a [Williams-Sonoma](#). We have a bunch of locations in the mall to get your eyebrows waxed. Is the demand really that high? Is there a shortage of tweezers in the world?"

Hilltop Mall in Richmond is pretty sad. I'd never been to Hilltop before, so I couldn't compare past to present, but the vast, barren parking lots tell the tattered tale — acres of emptiness and retail despair. You could land a 747 out front, and no one, except maybe the seagulls, would

notice. The inside still looks lovely with the ubiquitous white tile (if nothing else, purveyors of white tile must be rolling in dough) and a central circular ramp that wraps around a sculpture.

But storefront after storefront is vacant. The remainder are shops you've never heard of. Styles-4-U, La Diva, EZ Eyebrow. Plus non-retail businesses — a physical therapy office, an Army recruiting center, [Farmers Insurance](#). There's still a [Walmart](#), [Sears](#) and [Macy's](#), but the big [J.C. Penney](#) is closing this month. Everything's 70-percent off, and display cases are stripped of goods like animal carcasses picked clean by busy buzzards.

And then there's Vallco. My poor Vallco. The hardwood floors were long ago replaced with the boring white tile. The place is dead. Completely dead. You can still get in, if you can find the entrance by the [AMC Theatres](#). But all the roll-up doors are down. Brown paper covers the old [Macy's](#) windows. The Capezio, where my mom once bought my first ballet shoes, has a sign: "Relocating to Main Street Cupertino in 2016." (That's a brand-new, mixed-used lofts/shops/restaurants complex just a block away.)

I shed a tear.

Alas, maybe it's not such a bad thing that some of these places are gone. There were indeed too many malls. There were so many [Macy's](#) stores in the Bay Area, they became mundane. Maybe big stores and malls will now work harder to lure customers, perhaps offering a more glamorous experience with better customer service, elaborate window displays and racks of sequined gowns in which to hide.

Retail isn't going away just yet. Even [Amazon](#) is getting into the brick-and-mortar act, so there's hope. And if we're lucky, "Everything will always be all right." All right!