

It's Friday night at Strommen Størsenter. Im sitting in Joe and the Juice eating a substandard chocolate muffin, listening to substandard top 40s hip-hop-the kind that even you've never heard the song you recognize anyways- heavily sampled from popular 90s hits. Recycled music that has somehow lost its edge compared to its predecessor.

Despite the specter of the coronavirus, the mall is still lively. Teenagers eat frozen yogurt. Dads walk with their young kids, erratically darting from tile to tile, avoiding the cracks between. Everyone wears a mask. There are signs everywhere reminding people to keep two meters distance and arrows pointing "Inngang" and "Utgang". The virus choreographs our movements, but capitalism marches on. The mall is open after all, despite the current surge in cases in Oslo and its surrounds.

Its early November, and the signs of capitalism's favourite holiday are everywhere. Lights strung across open spaces, Christmas trees crowded in corners. Christmas carols play in many stores. The banality of the hip-hop at Joe + the Juice is a welcome reprieve.

I have a lovehate relationship with the shopping mall. The town I grew up in had the most space zoned for retail per capita in North America. It was a town of malls. It was also, for a period of time in the 90s, the heroin capital of North America- it was a town of consumption. Perhaps the two were somehow linked. As Commercial Street, the downtown high street, filled with drug users malls continued to grow and expand. Harbourfront Centre. Harewood Centre. Terminal Park Plaza. Country Club Centre. Rutherford Mall. Woodgrove Centre. All connected by Hwy 1, stretching through town from south to north, in specific hierarchy from the disaffected south, to the more affluent north.

Nanaimo's geographical location had much to do with its proliferation of retail space. Located on Vancouver Island, approximately 2 hours north of the much larger capital city Victoria, Nanaimo severed as a retail hub for the much smaller communities in Northern Vancouver Island. By no means in the 'middle' of the Island, Nanaimo sits on the edge between the more populous 'South Island' and very sparsely populated 'North Island'. A pilgrimage point.

It's Saturday afternoon at Lillestrøm Torv. A much smaller shopping centre located 2.4km from Strømmen Størsenter, across the river Nitelva in neighbouring Lillestrøm. Compared to the størsenters's sprawling labyrinthine architecture and motley aesthetics Lillestrøm Torv seems sedately unified. Completely renovated in 2017, and spread over 3 floors in two buildings connected on the 3rd floor by a Skyway the Torv offers a much different shopping experience. Sitting at a WB Sampson there is no reprieve from the Christmas carols to be found here. It is so small it seems impossible to be anonymous in this space. I wonder if this lack of anonymity limits the potentiality of the shopping centre. What else do we seek when we enter through the revolving doors into the atmosphere-controlled environment than the opportunity to try on someone else through our purchasing power. Does

this sweater make me a new person? Who would I be if I owned that coat? The promise of capitalist consumption narratives - we can be anything - be anyone - as long as we are willing and able to pay the entrance fee.

Unlike yesterday at Strømmen, I actually purchase something at Lillestrøm Torv - well other than the muffin and hot chocolate at Joe + The Juice that is. The H&M here stocks The Ordinary's Hyaluronic Acid 2% + B% serum - a hydration support formula I haven't been able to find in Oslo. I bought 2 bottles, and 1 bottle 'Buffet' by the same brand - a Peptide serum that fights pesky signs of ageing. Maybe I'm trying to be someone else through my purchasing power too. Someone younger, someone with fewer worries, or at least fewer worry lines.

Being from a town of malls, many of my earliest memories involve being in the mall. Eating lunch with my Grandmother at the Zeller's store restaurant, when store restaurants were still a thing. Performing in ballet and jazz recitals at the community stage in Rutherford Centre. The chiming clock tower and water feature that held the central place of pride at Woodgrove. Curiously, few of these memories involve actually shopping. My memories of shopping centre on visiting exciting new malls in larger cities. Two-hour pilgrimages to Eton's centre in Victoria. Or less frequent trips to Park Royal or Pacific Centre in Vancouver. The malls in Nanaimo weren't for shopping it seemed. They served some other social function in my early life.

Moving beyond the vague remembrances of childhood the mall centres vividly in my adolescent life. The strongest association I have with the shopping mall during this time is one of freedom. Long before I was permitted to roam more widely, the mall offered a platform for a kind of independence I craved. The mall offered a contained space to wander aimlessly. Perhaps all those easily derided, "consumption queen" preteens aren't looking for new hairbands or whatever it is 12-year-olds want these days. Perhaps what they really seek at the mall is the same sense of freedom I craved. Curious that the mall is deemed to be the safest "public" space for them. That capitalist consumer culture capitalizes of parental fears and adolescent desires to position its key institution as the answer to this inverted conundrum.









