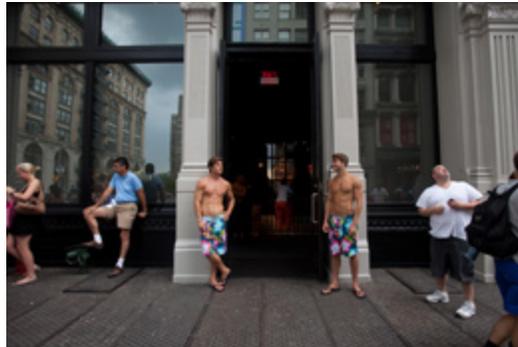


# Sweatpants in Paradise

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September 1, 2010



## 1.

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It is sometimes possible to define the depth of an experience by means of how radically it slows or hastens your sense of time. Swimming, fighting, nightmaring, enduring a migraine, having sex: these are all activities that move at exceptional rates. Shopping, too, and if you don't believe me, just enter a mall before sundown and see how you feel a few hours later when you reemerge into darkness. Depending on your mien and mood, this reemergence will feel sharply good or bad. The shopping wormhole affects everyone differently.

My father and I drove the other day to a mall in downtown San Francisco in order to exchange a pair of velour pants. San Francisco Centre contains more than 170 boutiques and is built like a gastropod shell with spiraling escalators and a white interior. There is a concierge and a family lounge. In some ways it's a fancy mall, but mostly it is like any other mall, with a food court and a lot of bathrooms and the smell of Bath & Body Works fragrances colliding in midair. "I feel like a robot," my dad said as an interactive map guided us to the correct store. All around us were young men and women moving slowly, and I was reminded of the fact that malls function secondarily as retail centers and primarily as promenades for people under thirty-five. Coupled or single, male or female: it doesn't matter. A day at the mall reveals display behavior as colorful as anything you'd see on safari.

We passed two chocolate boutiques and a place called The Art of Shaving on our way to the pants store, which was packed with shoppers and decorative jugs of candy. Painted in curly letters high on the wall was the phrase FOR NICE GIRLS WHO LIKE STUFF. While I waited for a new size of pants to be retrieved, I thought about this statement of purpose, and how blurry it was, and how accurate in its blurriness. FOR NICE GIRLS WHO LIKE STUFF exactly summed up the feelings of anticipation and anxious self-regard that a mall coaxes from shoppers. I thought of horoscopes and fog and mingling crowds while waiting for the

pants to come out. Vague things. I felt united with every other customer in the mall, committed as we were to the promenade. It was soothing and stimulating at once.

This feeling, the communal purpose and the sense of display, points to what a mall has going for it that a website, for example, does not. A mall has the sound of music, the smell of Cinnabon, the knowledge of a shared experience, the social excitement of seeing and being seen. It is a place of latent sexual promise; the teenager's alternative to a bar. It is FOR NICE GIRLS WHO LIKE STUFF. People dress for the mall like they dress for a date.



Archival photo of the Tactile Dome © The Exploratorium, [exploratorium.edu](http://exploratorium.edu).

## 2.

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When I zipped into my velour outfit for the plane ride back to New York, it felt good, like wearing a caterpillar. Throughout the flight home I thought about the malls I was leaving behind and the mall-like stores that lay ahead of me in Manhattan. Bona fide malls do not exist at the center of New York City, but mall-size stores do, and of these there is one in particular—a new one—that interests me. I learned about it through a friend who had gotten stoned, wandered inside, and entered the shopping wormhole. She called me in San Francisco and said I should go straight to the Hollister Co. flagship store as soon as I got back to New York, and to go alone, which I did.

The Hollister store sits at the corner of Broadway and Houston in SoHo, a forty-thousand-square-foot block full of California-themed apparel. Topless men and girls without pants stand at the entrance, some wearing zinc oxide smeared across noses. The employees are selected for their insane good looks and friendliness, which creates the disorienting customer experience of receiving attention from people way out of your league over and over again. You can't avoid having a sexual experience at Hollister, even if it's just to stare at a greeter's bullet-hard nipples. Hollister's strategy may not be subtle, but it is clever. By literalizing the mall's sexual promise in actual naked flesh, the brand makes it unnecessary for shoppers to wander elsewhere. Rather than provide the neutral spaces of food courts and lobbies for promenading, the store offers a prefab (and make-believe) environment of sexual opportunity. It's the whole mall in one store!

There is a name for this tactic. Abercrombie & Fitch, which owns Hollister as well as the abercrombie and now-defunct Ruehl brands, is among a growing corps of stores intent on targeting a customer's in-store experience as the main vehicle for its brand promotion. Abercrombie's 2009 annual report describes a shopping experience designed to stimulate

“senses of sight, sound, smell, touch and energy by utilizing visual presentation of merchandise, in-store marketing, music, fragrances, rich fabrics and its sales associates to reinforce the aspirational lifestyles represented by the brands.”

In practice this means a few things. It means that the Hollister store on Broadway is cramped and dimly lit, with narrow wallpapered rooms converging at a mezzanine lit up with live projections of Huntington Beach (waves waist-high and closing out). It means that a low-output fog machine pumps mist from the rafters while potted palms obstruct the floor at random places, both ingenious ways to slow down foot traffic. The store’s official theme is “EPIC,” and this is also the name of the brand’s newest men’s cologne, which hangs thick in the air. Things to buy at the store include distressed cargo pants, sweatpants embroidered with VARSITY CLUB SURFERS, sweatshirts designed to look like Spicoli’s drug rug, and flip-flops on sale for \$11.90. The tags on the women’s clothing say BETTYS and the men’s tags say DUDES. Music is a big deal at the store, almost a physical presence. A customer-service rep named Danielle told me that company policy dictates that the in-store music should hover between eighty and eighty-five decibels. (The level at which sustained exposure may result in hearing loss is ninety to ninety-five decibels.) The actual store sound track is unrecognizable yet generic; it is the music heard from the cars of popular kids in high-school movies.

### 3.

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The real Hollister is a small California city in San Benito County about forty miles inland, just west of Interstate 5. In 1868 it was named for Colonel W. W. Hollister, who drove a flock of sheep across the country as early as 1851. The land was considered sacred by the Chumash Indians and is currently known for its business-friendly environment and mild winters. Though Hollister Co. displays the year 1922 on its logo, the brand was in fact launched in 2000 in Columbus, Ohio. It is not clear why 1922 was selected as Hollister’s origin point. Many things happened that year, none related to logo sweatpants: the Eskimo Pie was patented, Ernest Shackleton died, Hungary joined the League of Nations. If I had to guess at the significance of 1922 regarding Hollister, I’d point to three events that also occurred that year: The California grizzly bear was declared extinct, Helen Gurley Brown was born in Green Forest, Arkansas, and a meteorite landed near Blackstone, Virginia. In these three events we have the death of something authentically Californian, the birth of a woman who would encourage sartorial expressions of sexuality, and a random occurrence that no one could explain.

If Southern California surf culture is Hollister’s guiding mythos, it is odd, too, that the company should name itself for a town twenty miles inland with declining home sales and greater-than-average earthquake activity. Did a lot of thought go into the choice? Or possibly none at all? It could be that “Hollister” just sounded more marketable than the nearby towns of Chualar and Molus. A fake testimony delivered by an imaginary dude on the Hollister website confirms the authenticity of the brand and its flagship:

*I headed out to SoHo to see what the EPIC Hollister store was all about. Born and bred in Southern California, I was curious to see what's up. As soon as I came in I was like—oh, this is gonna be big....*

*Everyone who works there is hot as hell—it looks like how you wish everyone looked on the beach. No grumpy old ladies screamin' at kids. The place is hooked-up, it's got everything. Dude, it's pretty spot-on to SoCal.... I got all mesmerized....*

But as its name suggests, “spot-on to SoCal” is exactly what Hollister isn't. What overwhelms a visitor more than the completeness of the flagship's fantasy is its specificity, first, and then its confusing lack of origin. To what movie, location, or lifestyle is Hollister referring with its potted plants and surf gear? How come we recognize it? Why is it cool?

#### 4.

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The night after I went to the Hollister flagship store for the first time, I woke up in the middle of the night, not sure whether I'd been sleeping or just lying prone long enough to feel like it. I got out of bed, turned on my computer, and opened a quarterly report for Abercrombie that I'd downloaded earlier in the week—one of those million-page PDF files that you avoid on the desktop for days until moments like the one at hand, when factors of concentration and boredom align into a PDF-reading mood.

When I opened the document, I saw that it was not a quarterly report at all but some sort of marketing memo from 2007, seemingly originating with Abercrombie but posted on Wikipedia without a source. Inside were bulletins about the company's financial performance and initiatives, including one designating \$10 million for louvers and new signage. The document was illustrated with ad-campaign photographs and a picture of a bus. It contained bullet-pointed statements with nouns capitalized strangely, as though translated from German. For the quarter's accomplishments it listed:

- Introduce Fifth Concept in January 2008
  - Currently implementing Core Retail Merchandising System
  - Assembled strong and talented development team
- and:
- Very excited about the business; great potential

I read the memo from start to finish and retained nothing, possibly because it meant nothing. But it meant nothing in relation to a retail giant with net sales in the billions and flagship stores in New York and London. What did it all mean? I went back to sleep.

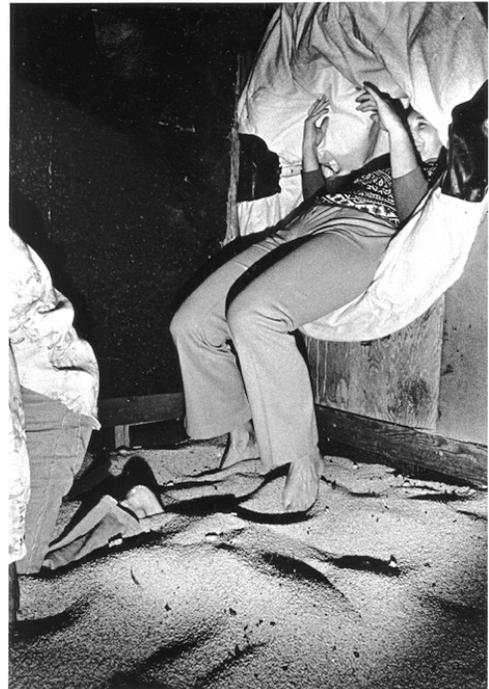
## 5.

In 2008 IBM released an executive brief called “How Immersive Technology Can Revitalize the Shopping Experience.” It outlined in lists and sidebars the future of shopping, and it accompanied a pair of stereoscopic goggles at that year’s National Retail Federation Convention & Expo in New York City. The goggles were introduced as an in-store amenity that would allow customers to enter a 3-D virtual world when they visited their favorite store; for example, by viewing “a fashion show from Europe complete with music and smells,” where, as a model walks down the runway, “her perfume will be noticeably in the air.” IBM’s brief poses the following questions:

Do individuals feel like your brand is relevant to their lifestyle? Do they understand the value of your brand experience over the commoditized products that you are selling? Or, as they wander from store to store, do your potential customers forget your brand as it blurs in their minds with those of competitors?

The solution IBM proposes to these problems is immersive retail, a strategy that aims to destabilize a current trend in consumer behavior that management advisers call *commoditization*. Commoditization describes the circumstance in which consumers care only about an item’s price, perceiving no other difference between competitors. For retailers like Hollister—brands that produce basic items of OK quality for not-cheap prices—commoditization is an unfriendly concept.

Immersive retail is also a way to counter the allure of online shopping, which boils down to its convenience (what you need: an Internet connection and a finger) and privacy. Stereoscopic goggles are a prediction that convenience and privacy will soon fail to be sufficient inducements to spend. IBM describes the goals of immersive retail the way a party planner might envision a successful bar mitzvah, aiming for a “memorable, interactive and emotional” experience full of “personalized dialogues.” The paper explains that immersive retail “is more about involving the customer than it is about the merchandise.” It is about shirtless male employees miming one-armed pushups on a rack of distressed jeans, yelling, *That’s what I’m talkin’ about!* and *Party at my house!* on a script every ten minutes. It’s about filling a store with club chairs and issues of the *Surfer’s Journal*, and about belly-button piercings that glint in the lamplight. “For stores in many retail segments to stay ahead of competitors,” the brief explains, “they will need to generate the excitement of a theme park ride—and become a



Archival photo of the Tactile Dome © The Exploratorium, [exploratorium.edu](http://exploratorium.edu).

destination.” Immersion retail presents clothes in the environment in which they are putatively designed to be worn, telling customers exactly what a product is supposed to mean.

## 6.

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I do not think I am alone in recounting my teenage years in terms of things bought and the hopes invested in them. As a teenager in California, I wore sweatshirts and tight jeans like the ones Hollister sells, feeling always slightly paler and less experienced than the Kelseys and Jennifers of the world, as though the number of boys I’d hooked up with (zero) was embroidered across my trucker cap for all to see. These feelings rise anew when I enter the Hollister store, and I know why: despite its missteps, the brand nails certain aesthetic truths about my home state.

I attended community college with girls who resembled beta versions of the store’s employees. To Mass Communications 110 they wore garments that insisted on comfort and conveyed the sexiness of total relaxation: sweatshirts, sheepskin boots, and thongs bisecting the slice of tanned upper butt that rose from low-cut jeans. It was a look of lazy, hygienic sexuality. The hottest girls always had brand-new socks, for example, and this was a key detail.

I’m lucky that I coincided with the trend. For one thing, it was an equalizing force. At a school made of both moneyed slackers and teenage mothers, the wealthy girls shopped at the same places as the non-wealthy girls. The former might have collected Tiffany bean pendants at home, but in the classroom it was possible for everyone to look basically the same.

Weed was another great equalizer. It is hard to overstate the importance of weed as a determining factor in the lives of West Coast teenagers. Weed was the reason girls selected clothes based on fuzziness, the reason boys sounded dumb, the reason we inflected every sentence as a question and used *like* and *you know* as phatic communications. In an era of T9 input, text messages begun with *I* would automatically fill in *mstoned*. Anyone familiar with the dim and spray-scented bedrooms of a weedy adolescence will recognize in Hollister’s decor an environmental proxy of the average Friday night. Weed may not be for sale at Hollister, but its exigencies are everywhere.

One place we liked to visit while stoned was an interactive science museum in San Francisco called the Exploratorium. The Exploratorium is geared toward children but designed to be fun for adults, too, like a Pixar movie. It is vast, educational, and filled with exhibits that let you electrocute a pickle or dissect a cow eyeball. Inside the museum lies a geodesic structure called the Tactile Dome, which was introduced in 1971 as an experiment in sensory disorientation. The Dome is small, “about the size of a large weather balloon,” and contains a three-dimensional labyrinth of pitch-black passages. A user takes off her shoes at the entrance, crawls through tunnels, climbs up a rope wall, and shoots down a slide into a pit of

beans, all without the use of her eyesight. The passageway has thirteen chambers and no right angles, and various objects (keys, rubber toys) are hidden along the passageway for visitors to identify by touch. An early press release explained that visitors to the Dome “have compared the experience to being born again, turning yourself inside out head first, being swallowed by a whale, and inevitably, being enfolded in a giant womb.” The maze takes about ten minutes from start to finish and stimulates both fear and lust, each arising from the heightened sensuality of short-term sightlessness. The final descent into beans is Dionysian.

Dr. August F. Coppola, a scientist,<sup>[\*]</sup> and Carl Day, an architect, are the men responsible for the Tactile Dome. They spoke of the project at its inception as part of “an art revolution which uses people as participants” rather than “as targets at which to hurl artistic messages.” The press release explained that both men “believe the revolution, if successful, will greatly affect not only art, advertising and industrial design but even life styles and basic beliefs.”

With nothing to see and only one direction to go, the Tactile Dome offers the purest antidote I can find for immersive retail. It stokes the senses where Hollister dulls them; it offers ecstasy followed by self-reflection rather than headache. I don’t doubt that Hollister’s dulling effect is strategic. Engineers of immersive retail must understand that we buy things when we are bored and not when we’re excited, alive, and metaphysically horny—that these feelings are just promises to get us in the door. Hollister is dark, sexy, and stimulating, but it won’t turn your head inside out. The store has no slides and no rope nets, only stairs and emergency exits. And there is no bean pit at the end.

\* Coppola is the brother of Francis Ford Coppola and the father of Nicolas Cage. The November 4, 2009, obituary in the *San Francisco Chronicle* notes that “Professor Coppola was often referred to as someone’s relative. But his own charisma and immense intellect left lasting marks on California and on San Francisco.” It continues, “Fascinated by touch and its taboos—he told the Exploratorium that ‘the first commandment in life is given: “Don’t touch”’—Professor Coppola’s exhibit [the Tactile Dome] made touch mandatory. He later wrote *The Intimacy—a Novel*, about a man who interacts through touch.”