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RETAIL

Notes from the Deathbed of Toys "R" Us Store No. 7813

A shopping center in Irving becomes a place where toys go to die.

BY CAITLIN CRUZ | PUBLISHED IN D MAGAZINE AUGUST 2018

The beeping is what stays with you, the bleeps and bloops of the price check machines and cash registers and the electronic toys that kids on tottering little legs crave. There are other sounds: the quiet forcefulness of parents softly scolding those children, the creaking and squeaking of the wheels of blue carts filled with everything-must-go-priced toys. But nothing is as incessant as that beep-beep-beeping, the sound of this Toys "R" Us' dwindling heartbeat.

By the time you read this, store No. 7813—a combination Toys "R" Us and Babies "R" Us off I-635 and MacArthur Boulevard in Irving—will be dead.

I started visiting store No. 7813 two weeks before it closed, in April. By then it had been turned into a warehouse filled with shelving that was also for sale. Red signs hanging from the rafters declared in bright white and yellow block lettering, "NOTHING HELD BACK! EVERYTHING UP TO 70% OFF! STORE CLOSING SALE!" This location, and at least 735 others in the country, were in the process of being dismantled after the company filed for bankruptcy. Some 30,000 people were losing their jobs.

I was their ideal customer for a large part of my life, because my parents prospered at the exact right moment. I grew up middle class in suburbs that thrived on the proliferation of box stores as the economy grew and grew until it stopped doing that. Toys "R" Us was a treat for me growing up, the aisles of Barbies as addictive to my developing brain as my morning espresso is now. Even though it has been at least a dozen years since I've been in a Toys "R" Us

—we had definitely invaded Iraq, but I think it was before Heath Ledger died—the sight of Mattel pink could probably still send serotonin coursing through my veins.

I came back to see the slaughterhouse floor, spending at least an hour at a time roaming the aisles like a suburban boomer trying to log steps on a Fitbit. I didn't think it would be possible to be depressed at the closure of a big box store. Between the fluorescent lights and the overwhelming odor of eau de toddler, it's not my ideal shopping experience. I'm not sure it's anyone's ideal experience.

But walking through Toys "R" Us as close-out mega-sales hit the shelves was oddly upsetting. Dozens of people wandered around with me, taking the store up on its offer to tear it apart piece by piece. It didn't matter when I went; the noise never stopped. *Beep beep beep*—the sound of liquidation. And maybe the first signal that the retail apocalypse is upon us.

Store No. 7813 sits in a giant off-white building among dozens of extra-ordinary storefronts in a complex called MacArthur Crossing. But I'm not sure anyone could tell you that. Surrounding a concrete ocean of parking is a gas station, Target, Jason's Deli, Michaels, Kroger, Wendy's, Stein Mart, Panera Bread, Chipotle, FedEx, Sally Beauty Supply, AT&T, Chick-fil-A, Cheddar's, Chase, Pier 1 Imports, Gap, and Fish City Grill. There is a twin on the other side of MacArthur Boulevard with a slightly more evocative name: MacArthur Park. I'm not sure anyone could tell you that either.

The collective names do not matter, but what collectively makes up both sides of this road deeply matters. There is no original retail within a mile. What exists here in Irving could essentially be duplicated anywhere in America with big enough tracts of land. It is everywhere and nowhere.

The city of Irving was founded in 1903, when the town was 18 blocks divided into plots of land with streets and alleys. One of the town's founders, Otis Brown, built and moved into the first home in the city, on First and Hastings, in late October 1903. By December, Brown and co-founder J.O. Schulze auctioned off the land plots.

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Irving thrived as a planned community—at least the sort of planning that existed in the early 1900s. Eighteen blocks may not be anything to write home about in today's development-happy Texas, but in the early 20th century, 18 blocks and a rail depot meant the start of something exciting between the manufacturing of Dallas and the stockyards of Fort Worth.

(Fun fact: the town was named after Washington Irving, noted author of the tale of Ichabod Crane and the headless horseman, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Which is, I guess, better than naming it after the man who wrote some of the worst Christmas songs. They made it official, as opposed to just town lore, in 1998.)

Irving developed in a very typical 20th-century fashion. It managed to survive the stock market crash and sent young men off to war after Pearl Harbor. The city got a library in 1941 and became dry the following year. Irving continued to grow. By the end of the 1960s, it was the fastest-growing place in Texas, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. There were nearly 46,000 people in the incorporated area; the 1970 census showed nearly 100,000. Texas Stadium opened in 1971 and DFW Airport followed in 1974. That same year, Las Colinas, a more traditionally master-planned community, was announced to abut the Valley Ranch neighborhood.

That's where store No. 7813 sits. Still in Valley Ranch, but close enough to the master planned living and retail acreage of Las Colinas that you can see the influence in the shopping center's development.

The Karahan Companies opened MacArthur Crossing Shopping Center in 1995 on 110 acres at the southeast corner of LBJ and MacArthur Boulevard. *The Valley News*, the newsletter published by the Valley Ranch Association, reported the first anchoring tenants were Albertsons and Stein Mart.

For decades, this area has been positioned to project retail prowess. On the Greater Irving-Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce "Sell the Seller" bus tour of 2000, the developments were promoted as evidence of Irving's retail strength. It still mostly looks the part. The aesthetic choice is brick, either traditional red brick or a white stone brick, with neon signs. It wouldn't be out of place in any sprawling suburb, and it lacks the hallmarks of a modern outdoor mall development—palm trees, large display windows, streets with large enough sidewalks that signal to pedestrians that the road is also a sidewalk. On the other side of MacArthur Boulevard is the 72-acre MacArthur Park at Las Colinas development, anchored by Target and Kroger, with the same aesthetic choices.

The Irving of now is a sprawling city with a Four Seasons but which lost the Dallas Cowboys to Arlington and Frisco. It has grown to include one of the state's largest mosques, among the dozens of other worship centers in its incorporated limits. It's home to nearly a quarter of a million people and houses one of the country's busiest airports. But it's truly an urban sprawl, a suburb through and through. So when you look closer into MacArthur Crossing shopping center, little seems amiss.

The closing of store No. 7813 is the first crack in the façade.

When I first visit, store No. 7813 is in decent shape, despite the closeout sale. (The adjoining Babies "R" Us is a ghost town.) You can walk the perimeter of the store to see whatever is left. Oddly, the stock of video games remains full, while the stock of starter drones and karaoke machines is sparse. In the video game section, I almost step in what looks like smeared human feces. I choose to believe it is literally anything other than feces.

As I meander around the roughly 100 shelves, I get a grasp of the offerings kids have. Princess Elena of Avalor merchandise might not be selling right now, but there is a bed option and a Barbie-proportioned doll, Funko toy, clothing, and much more. Powerpuff Girls are not selling, either; their section remains the most well-stocked. But the bikes, scooters, and motorized cars are getting taken off the displays quickly. The tot-size kitchens are gone, and they won't sell you the display models. Instead, you can walk down multiple aisles of weird board games, fidget spinners, and Tsum Tsum toys.

The saddest part of the entire store isn't the human feces or empty baby shelves. The saddest part is tucked away near the back, under "Creative Activities": a wall of Crayola 24-pack crayons marked 50 percent off. There are easily 300 packs of crayons here. Each pack is priced $1.49, which means they'll ring up at 75 cents. I hope a teacher finds the shelf. But I stand there for 15 minutes and loiter in the surrounding aisles for much longer, and I am the only person who seems interested in the Crayolas.

While you're shopping, you overhear customers talking with employees about needing better jobs. Amazon comes up frequently. Even though the fluorescent lighting isn't nearly as bad as it could be in here, it's still a workplace closing. BuzzFeed News reported in April that the company told employees there is no money for severance. Besides, the company is apparently under no legal obligation to offer it. But don't worry: golden parachute bonuses to departing executives total about $8.2 million, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. Toys "R" Us is one of many household names that succumbed to bankruptcy under the backing of private equity companies. People without golden parachutes—or even just the parachutes of a healthy savings account—are again paying the price.

I buy about $40 worth of stuff I don't need that first day; I'm not even sure why.

The store manager is pretty insistent that I can't talk to the employees but says there's no reason I can't shop at store No. 7813 as much as I like. I can keep returning as long as I'm willing to join the people scanning the price check machine every day. I buy about $40 worth of stuff I don't need that first day; I'm not even sure why. My brain just saw the difference between the original price and the sale price, and I HAD TO HAVE IT.

If you decide not to buy a toy, if you fight off your brain's impulses, you can leave any and all merchandise next to the price scanner at the end of the aisle. An employee in blue will eventually be by to pick up the merchandise and place it on one of the shelves that was once as overflowing as its neighbor. You will only notice it after coming in day after day, but even the front shelves, packed to look as full as possible, will slowly stop getting restocked.

It is depressing to watch something decay and die in slow motion as your hands are full. The store is dying, but what I'm really watching are people's jobs on life support. The only redeeming part to this slow downslide toward closing is that you can leave Toys "R" Us. You can walk outside and see that the parking spaces outside Sally Beauty Supply and Wendy's are full. For now, Irving can pretend this isn't happening.

Anyone who is using this closeout sale only to score early Christmas presents is missing the point of a store closure. A sign the size of my torso projects in bright red and yellows that the LAST 4 DAYS of the sale are upon us.

Outside, on a slightly overcast Sunday, an older man and woman are loading up a flat-bed trailer full of shelving units. A relative of theirs is opening a jewelry store and still needs shelving.

Last week I saw a man try to haggle over the display case that houses a TV for an Xbox One display. It now has a neon orange sign with "DISPLAY NOT FOR SALE" in very capital letters. Liquidation sales mean those shelving units will be taken out and so will the coolers, cabinets, and maybe even the cash registers.

Sunday is a family affair at store No. 7813. Children cry and bump into things because they can control only so much of how they move through the world at that age. Carts hit shelving and packages fall off the displays. Worse, there are toddlers' voices that haven't yet learned volume control nor cadence, asking to hold the next new thing they see. When the world is haphazardly laid in front of you, it looks like you should have it all in your cart.

Despite the store's imminent demise, it remains somewhat organized. All the Star Wars toys are still together, most of the Powerpuff Girls stuff is now quarantined at the front of the store. There are less than a dozen bikes and scooters left, and they've been moved to the front of the store where they are parked like a valet for babies at a club in Uptown. There's a kid sitting in a miniaturized red Porsche like it's a car lot. Maybe he'll remember this joy when he turns 16.

The floors, though, are getting disgusting. What's the point of cleaning them? Huge amounts of people are coming through each day—stomping and clomping—and soon no one will. Because the fate of the physical location hasn't been announced, there's no way to know if those tiles with the signature star "R" will remain in the floor, let alone stay out of a dumpster. It's not like anyone is complaining about store sanitation at this point. This is the same day I find a half-eaten hot dog bun on a shelf behind some toys. What a fun surprise for those of us picking up a Bop It! Maker from the shelf for a bit of nostalgia.

The best part of the closure is that the employees have blocked off the entire back half of the store using old displays that are yellowed enough to look like they've been here since the last time I stepped in a Toys "R" Us, next to a modern cartoon version of Geoffrey the Giraffe, the store mascot. In case you get any ideas about going past the barricade, there's also yellow caution tape, as if the back half of the store—still with standing shelves and unswept floors—is a crime scene. As far as I know, it's not a crime scene. Sadly, it's just dirty.

It reminds me of a Goodwill or a Salvation Army store at this point. The prices are so low that people don't treat the toys like merchandise but something they're entitled to touch, feel, and open because it's not going to be on the shelves for much longer anyway. It's like the part of our brains that controls normal shopping decorum shuts off when we see bright red and yellow signs saying, "UP TO 80% OFF!!!!" Anything whose parts are readily seen through the packaging has been opened, so even as employees pick up discarded merchandise, there's no real way to keep it at the level of a store that plans to be operational in the future.

They have prices to scan to fill the silence for the rest of us.

When I come into the store on the LAST 3 DAYS, the hot dog bun is gone. The number of aisles has dwindled. I count nine. Because the merchandise is nearly gone, you have more opportunity to look at the store itself. That's when I realize that there's no music playing. There are roughly three dozen people walking around with me, not noticing me taking notes about the chicken nuggets from Wendy's discarded on a lower shelf or the excess of Lalaloopsy Kitchen, as I balance my purchases in my hands. They have prices to scan to fill the silence for the rest of us.

It's hard to mourn the end of something so faceless and with such a lack of personality. (Maybe that's why I found great comfort in the chicken nuggets still being there the next day.) This boringness becomes more apparent as customers dismantle the store. The red signs proclaiming "EVERYTHING 90% OFF" and "NOTHING HELD BACK" are falling off the strings that suspend them over the no man's land of the back of the store.

It's all a little too on the nose for the second to last day ever of store No. 7813.

The oddest part of all of this is that now I own a blue Toys "R" Us team member shirt. They were selling them for $5 on the last day the store was open. I needed an excuse to be there; here is something cheap. Those t-shirts are the most in-stock item. Despite this, there are roughly 18 customers here to pick over the most picked-over merchandise. No small aisles are open, but two corrals of stuff are open alongside about 24 feet of the large aisles so that you can still access the scanner. They don't want you venturing too far back and there's nothing left there, anyway. Nothing but fidget spinners.

"This is sad," one young shopper says to a friend. They seem confused that the store has absolutely nothing to offer them on the last day. They're young, though, so there's plenty of time to be disappointed by the financial system and mismanagement of capitalism. I'm not defending the existence of big box stores like Toys "R" Us, but I am defending the right to dignity and stability of those working in big box stores. The retail industry employs nearly 4.5 million people. The median salary in 2017 was $23,370 per year made at $11.24 per hour. In Texas, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, it's slightly higher at $12.85 per hour on average for an annual salary of $26,730. Those people should be better paid, and the end of their jobs should sound an alarm bell.

Instead, this store went quietly into a Texas spring night.

The sign over the exit still reads, “Thanks! Have fun!” There’s even a cartoon of mascot Geoffrey. What was supposed to be a cheerful salutation to departing customers takes a mocking tone as I look at the bare bones of a store that once defined childhood opulence and joy.

Don’t worry, though. After this sale ends, as a big red sign reminds us, you can still visit these nearby locations! Because there’s still plenty of big box sprawl out there.

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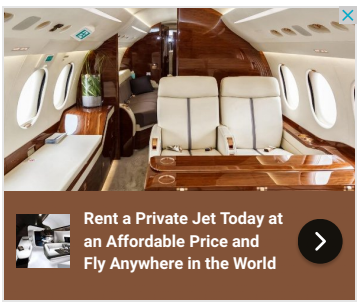

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