Third Places – Abstract

In 1989, Ray Oldenburg enunciated his concept of “third places”, places with important social functions but separate from home or work, the first and second places, respectively. He outlined eight ideal characteristics of third places and explained the functions of third places in neighborhoods and the benefits accrued to their patrons. However, since his book in 1989, and even his second edition in 1997, technology has transformed our urban hangouts, and significantly changed how we interact with one another. Do third places still exist in our neighborhoods? How to they function and are they still important? This paper will find that third place do exist in our cities and urban regions. Such place may not adhere to every requirement of Oldenburg’s third places, but they nonetheless perform important functions in a changing urban environment.

Third Places

“When the good citizens of a community find places to spend pleasurable hours with one another for no specific or obvious purpose, there is a purpose to such association.”

(ix, Oldenburg)

The concept of a “third place” was first introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1977 and further enunciated by his 1989 book, “The Great Good Place”. The term describes a public gathering place apart from either home (the first place) or work (the second place) that is informal in nature and serves a variety of social and communal functions, for instance as a center of social connectivity or a forum for political involvement.

This paper is focused on third places and their function in communities rather than neighborhoods. Many would use the word community as interchangeable with the word neighborhood. I have chosen not to do so, as neighborhoods are easy to find in any town or City, but true community is somewhat less frequently found, and often with more difficulty.
Especially when discussing urban places, this thought is perhaps made more pertinent by the inclusion in Oldenburg’s book of a quote from Max Lerner in his 1957 publication *America as a Civilization*. He notes that America’s nostalgia for the small town is most likely a quest for community rather than a longing for small towns themselves (Oldenburg, 3). Can such a quest for community be fulfilled by Oldenburg’s third places?

Even though Oldenburg’s original 1989 definition of a third place was written only some 20 years ago, is it already somewhat antiquated? His definition entails a plethora of attributes that are not often found in present day urban hangouts. As urban neighborhoods have evolved, new types of neighborhood establishments have been created in part because of advances (or more correctly, changes) in the way people communicate, live and work.

So what kinds of neighborhood institutions in present-day American neighborhoods fulfill Oldenburg’s ideal? What forms do they take and what functions do they serve? If these places don’t qualify as third places, are they still beneficial?

This paper will first examine the concept of third places as conceived by Oldenburg before examining present-day neighborhood institutions. It will also relate both the original and the updated definitions of third places to their impacts on a community.

Throughout his book, Oldenburg presents his concept as a rebuttal of the American suburb. He spends a significant amount of time arguing about a deficit of community in suburbia and attributes this deficiency to a corresponding lack of third places in our neighborhoods.

“Currently and for some time now, the course of urban growth and development in the United States has been hostile to an informal public life: we are failing to provide either suitable or sufficient gathering places necessary for it.”

*(ix, Oldenburg)*

While likely true and certainly compelling, suburbia is not the subject of this paper. Rather than a contrastive analysis of suburbs and urban locals, this paper focuses on the function of
third places in urban communities and the benefits third places might bring to neighborhoods.

Oldenburg frames his concept by explaining that the most successful communities are balanced in three ways: they are domestic, productive, and inclusively sociable. In such successful communities in both America and overseas, home and work fulfill the first two requirements, while third places fulfill the requirement of inclusive sociability. In his definition, the third place describes “a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work”.

In times past, other cultures had similarly important pillars of individual life; public baths in Roman cities and Arabian coffeehouses in the Middle East serve as examples. In Greek and Roman society, the agora and the forum were places of public assembly central to socializing but apart from the home or work (note: they were only open to male landowners). Fast forwarding to American communities following the industrial revolution, third places were neither prominent nor prolific like their ancient forebears (Oldenburg, 20). Additionally, over time and following segregated development trends, our separative zoning ordinances have moved homes and work further from one another. As the author says, “zoning ordinances were copied and enforced all over the land, prohibiting the stuff of community from intrusion into residential areas (Oldenburg, xiv)”. Third places have found fewer places to inhabit, especially if one isn’t interested in hopping into an automobile to frequent them.

In his book, Oldenburg states that third places are not mere havens “of escape from home [or] work” (Oldenburg, 21). In fact, he crafted a fairly long list of attributes characteristic of the best third places. These include:
A place of neutral ground
A leveler
Conversation is the main activity
Accessibility and accommodation

Regulars
A Low profile
The mood is playful
A home away from home

To paraphrase a lengthy discussion, third places are places where people may freely come
and go, and where all are comfortable. They are places of equality, with no criteria for
membership or exclusion and places where conversation is the main activity. With
accessibility and accommodation, third places are well-located for easy and plentiful access,
and they often keep long hours in order to encourage a constant stream of both new visitors
as well as regulars. In addition, third places are often places of physical and architectural
insignificance, where a playful and inviting mood is more important than decorative
surroundings. Lastly, a third place gives its visitors “roots”, often encouraging possessive
descriptions (“our” hangout) where people can be at ease, and, therefore, in a home away
from home. Prime examples provided by Oldenburg include cafes, coffee shops,
community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars and hangouts.

So, apart from the characteristics of third places, what physical forms do they and
what functions might they perform? First and foremost in the author's mind, third places
provide opportunities for laughter, which is fundamentally beneficial and even necessary to
the human condition (Oldenburg, 51). In fact, in one of his personal studies of a
Midwestern city, Oldenburg found that the “more a given tavern met other criteria
associated with third places, the more laughter rang within it” (Oldenburg, 52).

Perhaps a bit less intuitive, third place act as a spiritual tonic, wherein personal
problems are checked at the door. Along the lines of relaxation, and even though third
places are places of personal expression, there are still rules which govern behavior requiring
that such expression does not become vulgar or out of control. Such a requirement is easy
to fulfill when patrons are regularly expressing themselves in such a manner (as opposed to engaging in much more raucous behavior less frequently). And, unlike a home or work environment, one has no obligations to stay in a third place longer than the time during which such a place is providing satisfaction.

In a time when casual connections to relative strangers are more important and likely decreasing in America, third places provide exactly this function. Oldenburg published the second edition of his book prior to the birth of online social networking, but it wouldn’t be a leap to assume that his emphasis on connecting to one’s fellow human being would today still refer to making acquaintances in the flesh.

However, third places do not just perform functions relating to personal relaxation and enjoyment. On the contrary, third places as envisioned by Oldenburg might function as edificatory escapes, political bantering rooms and other outposts serving to enlighten and enrich the public domain.

How well do today’s urban neighborhoods provide such vital third places? Has the notion of a third place died? Not surprisingly, an unknown corporate marketing magnate found the idea of a third place quite appealing and ever since the idea has gained popularity in the mainstream media. In a particularly ironic twist of Oldenburg’s definition, the coffee giant Starbucks latched onto the idea of a third place and adopted it into their marketing strategy. Can a chain of cafes with high priced coffee and pay-as-you-use internet qualify as a third place?

On the surface, a Starbucks (or similar coffee or café chain) meets many of the requirements set forth by Oldenburg. It is a neutral ground, with a low profile, many regulars and visitors alike, and accessible to most shapes and sizes of people. In the right location, it might serve as a home away from home. But it certainly doesn’t fit the mom-
and-pop description often described by Oldenburg. And, in true corporate-spin CEO Howard Shultz brags that Starbucks created the third place while helping mom-and-pop establishments: “in [the] wake, of Starbucks, so many local and regional companies and mom and pops have not only surfaced, but succeeded”.

Still, smaller national coffee joints, such as Panera Bread (which is also a cafe) could lay claim to being a third place. The biggest question with such modern-day coffee providers is how often patrons are actually talking with one another. The almost central feature of a true third place is conversation, not just with friends and acquaintances, but with relative strangers as well.

As covered in a 2008 article in The Economist, such wired cafes may still function like third places. The author argues that a person with headphones on and surfing the internet will still realign his or her focus when a new person enters the room, not much different from a “Paris existentialist and watching the world go by” while “puffing a Gitane” (Economist, 3).

Of course, not all would agree. James Katz, a professor at Rutgers, argues that “cyber-nomads” (people listening to music and using the internet) hollow out third places, often more engaged with “their email inbox than with the people touching their elbows”. The main concern, perhaps shared by Oldenburg, is that cafes full of people working on computers don’t make people happy. Another negative aspect of such nonsocial interaction might serve to only further widen the gap between people and their points of view. Mass media is created for private consumption at home or in isolation. The perfect informal counter to such isolation is a third place where participatory discussion can be a force for
good, bridging the gap between neighbors, figuratively and literally (Oldenburg, 76). In an isolated café, such discussion doesn't take place as often.

So it would seem that since the days of Oldenburg’s first writing, that there have become two types of third places. The first type fosters connection between people while the second serves as a semi-public individual escape where one might see and experience human interaction without actually taking part.

This isn’t to say that our present day neighborhoods don’t have third places. What about the ice cream parlor, the donut shop, barber shops, nail salons, tattoo parlors, corner stores, or book stores? Hair salons and barber shops are likely less gender-neutral than Oldenburg would like, but they certainly provide places where conversation reigns supreme and can serve as great places for newcomers to get introduced to a neighborhood or community. Tattoo parlors cater to a more specific subset of the population and likely draw a significant portion of their patrons from outside the neighborhoods in which they are located, but nonetheless foster social connectivity. Even more progressive third places exist in our urban neighborhoods. Food trucks are mobile foodservice providers with short and inconvenient hours, often showing up in a different neighborhood every night to cater to the bar or party crowd. But even in such an unlikely and fickle third place conversation can the main activity, with regulars and newcomers alike. And combined with social media, such mobile third places can garner even further social and cultural connections.

Upon embarking on a search of how third places are conceptualized in modern thought and the modern media, it is apparent that the vast majority of references to third places don’t meet all of the ideal characteristics of Oldenburg’s third places. However, in a more thorough reading of the third places concept reveals that the author realizes not all of
his requirements will be met. In general, the more that are met, the better an establishment might function in the community.

And even Oldenburg widened his definition of third places in his preface to the second edition of “The Good Great Place”. For example, newly expounded functions include: entertainment provided by patrons themselves; a means for the elderly to interact with all ages; a place for youth and adults to interact in a relaxed atmosphere; a staging area in a time of crisis; a sorting area for individuals to find other folks with similar interests; and a port of entry for newcomers to the neighborhood. He even discussed third places as offices (though the author purports that third places as offices are more frequently found in cultures other than the United States – a bit old fashioned now 14 years later) (Oldenburg, xxv). Today, coffee shops and other public and semi-public places with Wi-fi access have become wildly popular among the professional creative classes and students alike.

So establishments shouldn’t have to meet all the requirements of third places in order to provide meaningful social (and other) benefits. His book only provides a rough road map of the ideal functions and traits. Take the neighborhood of Avondale in Cincinnati, for instance: could a tool lending library function as a third place? If programmed in the correct manner and used by the neighborhood, such an establishment could serve as a meaningful forum for community input and social connections while providing a much-needed community resource. On a broader scale, third places relate to the planning component of the I-75/I-71 corridor because the benefits and social characteristics of third places might serve a purpose in creating better, more livable neighborhoods by fostering community connectedness throughout the I-75 and I-71 corridor.

In the end, Oldenburg uses his preface to the second edition to most accurately summarize his concept: “the first and most important function of third places is that of
uniting the neighborhood”. It is the promotion of community which Oldenburg takes cause to promote, and it seems that third places are precisely what urbanites might love about urbanity.

Surely, one could spend significantly more time on the topic of third places, as there are many more questions raised than answered. A full scale study of a neighborhood or city might reveal where and in what numbers and to what degree third places still exist. Furthermore, it would be interesting to map third places from an individual point of view, and perhaps learn how happiness and social connections varied depending on the types and numbers of third places people visit. As mentioned in the article from The Economist, some coffee shop owners have begun to shut off their wireless internet service for certain hours of the day or when live music is performed in order to foster more lively conversation. It might be interesting to see how such modifications affected the atmosphere in a third place.

Though his topic could certainly be construed as purely academic, the author brings to his writings humility and humanity. It may at first seem as though he is arguing for some sort of progressive shift in urban culture. In the end, Oldenburg contends that residents of urban neighborhoods are will eventually realize just how important find third places are to a fulfilling community life. Optimistically, Americans may realize that true community “is possible and [should be] celebrated” (Oldenburg, 296).


