Third place

In community building, the **third place** is the social surroundings separate from the two usual social environments of home ("first place") and the workplace ("second place"). Examples of third places would be environments such as churches, cafes, clubs, public libraries, or parks. In his influential book *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg (1989, 1991) argues that third places are important for civil society, democracy, civic engagement, and establishing feelings of a sense of place.

Robert Putnam addressed issues related to third place in *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital* (1995, 2000).

A barber shop in Brazil. The barber shop is an example of the **third place**; in many societies it has been a traditional area for (especially) men to congregate separate from work or home.

Contents

Oldenburg's characteristics

Oldenburg calls one's "first place" the home and those that one lives with. The "second place" is the workplace — where people may actually spend most of their time. Third places, then, are "anchors" of community life and facilitate and foster broader, more creative interaction.[1] In other words, "your third place is where you relax in public, where you encounter familiar faces and make new acquaintances."[2]

Other scholars have summarized Oldenburg's view of a third place with eight characteristics:[1][3]

- Neutral ground

    Occupants of third places have little to no obligation to be there. They are not tied down to the area financially, politically, legally, or otherwise and are free to come and go as they please.

- Leveler (a leveling place)

    Third places put no importance on an individual's status in a society. Someone's economic or social status does not matter in a third place, allowing for a sense of commonality among its occupants. There are no prerequisites or requirements that would prevent acceptance or participation in the third place.

- Conversation is the main activity

Playful and happy conversation is the main focus of activity in third places, although it is not required to be the only activity. The tone of conversation is usually light-hearted and humorous; wit and good-natured playfulness are highly valued.

- Accessibility and accommodation

  Third places must be open and readily accessible to those who occupy them. They must also be accommodating, meaning they provide for the wants of their inhabitants, and all occupants feel their needs have been fulfilled.

- The regulars

  Third places harbor a number of regulars that help give the space its tone, and help set the mood and characteristics of the area. Regulars to third places also attract newcomers, and are there to help someone new to the space feel welcome and accommodated.

- A low profile

  Third places are characteristically wholesome. The inside of a third place is without extravagance or grandiosity, and has a homely feel. Third places are never snobby or pretentious, and are accepting of all types of individuals, from several different walks of life.

- The mood is playful

  The tone of conversation in third places is never marked with tension or hostility. Instead, third places have a playful nature, where witty conversation and frivolous banter are not only common, but highly valued.

- A home away from home

  Occupants of third places will often have the same feelings of warmth, possession, and belonging as they would in their own homes. They feel a piece of themselves is rooted in the space, and gain spiritual regeneration by spending time there.

Types of third places

Jeffres et al. (2009) listed the following types of environments as possible third places, considered in their research: community centers, senior centers, coffee shops and cafes, bars and pubs, restaurants, shopping centers, stores, malls, markets, hair salons, barber and beauty shops, recreation centers, YM/WCA, pools, movie theaters, churches, schools, colleges and universities, clubs and organizations, libraries, parks and other places allowing for outdoor recreation, streets, neighbors' yards, homes and apartments, and events like neighborhood parties, block parties, cookouts, barbecues, town meetings, bingo, and various media (online, newsletters, newspapers, phone, bulletin boards).[4]

The concept of a "third place" has become popularized and has been picked up by various small businesses, including as a name for various locally owned coffee shops, and is commonly cited in urban planning literature on the issue of community-oriented business development and public space.[5][6]

As "third place" becomes more popular, several coworking office spaces have embraced this concept as the basis of their interior design.[7][8][9]

Variant forms of the concept include the "community coffee house" and the "community living room", a term which has been adopted by several organizations[10][11] to describe the model of a cooperatively-run "third space" which includes commercial or non-commercial functions with an emphasis on providing a free space for social interaction.

The general store or pub and occasionally bookstore or diner are traditional variants of the concept, provided in such cases there is an emphasis on expectation of socialization, and customers are invited to stay and "hang out" with or without making any (or additional) purchases. Institutions which traditionally provided some functions of a third place included shared leisure facilities

such as a bowling alley or arcade, function halls, lodges or social clubs, when and if facilities were available for casual use.

A church community fills this role for many people, including groups that focus on common interests and hobbies. Activities, events, and cell groups can build the connections that are necessary for authentic community.[12]

Virtual third places

Since Oldenburg's writings, there are people in the computer and internet industry that have declared that third places are observed or shifting to the virtual world or virtual third places.[13] This descriptive practice is easily adopted because of the similarities in descriptive characteristics found between the virtual and physical worlds.

In combination with the Industrial Revolution and as media transitioned from the public space to more comfortable roles inside one's home, there was a large shift away from public activities because they could be enjoyed within the confines of one's home. With the advent of online technologies these virtual third places have been observed in online communities. The characteristics observed in these communities vary from their physical application but meet the context of personalization, permeability, approachability, and comfortability.

With the increasing popularity of online multiplayer video games, individuals from across the world are becoming more connected with each other through these video games. The potential for social culture clashes is inherently high considering the large volume of interactions of users from different cultures. However, the online virtual communities constructed within these games share the same characteristics with traditional third places.[14] One of the more prominent features of these communities is the social equalizing aspect. These games allow users to interact through their in-game character, or avatar, which serve as a medium for the player and removes the players's social identifiers. Avatars often interact via built-in text chat systems, allowing users to communicate without revealing their identity through their voice. Therefore, any type of social identification is dependent upon the avatar, not the actual player.

While these online communities provide freedom from traditional social status, that is not to say there are no social hierarchies within the games; each game community constructs their own social norms that determine in-game social status. However, each player begins the game at an equal footing and must achieve social recognition through their in-game accomplishments. The concept of "regulars" within third spaces is also prominent in online gaming communities. These regulars are often identifiable through some type of special identifier; some games include special insignia or titles for accomplished users, making these users stand out to all users. The regulars set standards for accepted in-game behavior, serving as a type of social moderator (especially for new players). For instance, many of these games offer the opportunity for PvP (player vs player) combat, in which users battle against each other. However, this creates an opportunity for users to "grief" one another, which is intentional harassment meant to disrupt gameplay for other users.[15] This type of behavior is often kept in check by the community regulars. "Regular" status is attainable for all users, which furthers the sense of community within the game. As users play more, they are accepted into the community by fellow regulars, forming new social bonds.

As online technologies advance, these online video games become more accessible to individuals across all backgrounds. While these games are often played on traditional video game consoles or on PCs (which often requires purchasing the video game software), there are many internet browser based games (such as *RuneScape* and *Farmville*) that allow anyone with internet access to play for free. This widens the variety of individuals that are entering into the community.[16]

It has been proposed that micronations which have extended online communities (e.g., Ladonia) also resemble third places.[17]

Internet access and third places

An increasing percentage of American workers now telecommute, not from home, but from a third place.[18] Workers cite isolation when telecommuting from home and find working in public spaces a happy medium between the home office and the corporate office. Availability of public wifi has been a major enabler of this trend, and an increasing number of retail chains are

catering to it.[19]

A third place which provides internet access may create a hollow effect in that the patrons are physically present but do not make social contact with each other, being absorbed by their remote connections. This is similar to how patrons behave in learning commons environments like those in university libraries where the preponderance of socializing is among people who already know each other. Some businesses, like The Third Place coffeehouse in Arlington, VA,[20] are trying to ameliorate this effect by staging performance art such as live jazz and hosting game nights to encourage audience engagement.[21]

Postmodern conception

Political geographer and urban planner Edward Soja also developed a theory of Thirdspace, in his 1996 book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places*. His postmodern conception draws on and is influenced by Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and postcolonial thinkers Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, bell hooks, Edward Said, and Homi K. Bhabha. Soja's concept of Thirdspace "breaks the Firstspace-Secondspace dualism and comprises such related concepts as 'place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory and geography' (50) that attempts to come to terms with the representational strategies of real and imagined places. He proposes a 'trialectics of spatiality' (57) which is a process, a dynamic force and 'recombinational and radically open' (50)."[22]

Towards a Fourth Place

Morisson (2018) argues that places in the knowledge economy are evolving.[23] He argues the existence of a Fourth Place. In the knowledge economy, the rise of new social environments is blurring the conventional separation between the first place (home), the second place (work), and the third place. New social environments in the knowledge city can combine elements of the first and second place (coliving); of the second and third place (coworking); and of the first and third place (comingling).[23] Furthermore, the combination of elements of the first, second, and third place in new social environments implies the emergence of a new place, the fourth place.

See also

- Urban sociology
- Community building
- Fiscal localism
- Urban planning
- Public space (urban design)
- Pub
- General store
- Coffeehouse
- Coffeehouse (event)
- Social center (activism)
- Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*
- Ray Oldenburg, author of *The Great Good Place*
- Third Space Theory
- Coworking
- Coliving

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