

ESSAY

Where everybody knows your name

In a society fragmented by technology, a “third place” can be somewhere to reconnect with old friends — and make some new ones

By Richard Kyte



I first heard the phrase “third place” in a coffee shop in Waco, Texas. I was in town for a conference and having coffee with my friend Beau, a sociology professor. We were discussing the history of coffee shops (as wonky academics are inclined to do) when he dropped the phrase “third place.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What is a third place?”

Beau mentioned Ray Oldenburg’s books *The Great Good Place* and *Celebrating the Third Place*, which were published more than 30 years ago. In them, he classifies home as one’s first place, work as one’s second place, and the third place as where one goes to socialize, to make friends.

Social media and smartphones have taken over our lives in ways nobody could have imagined at that time. Work has also changed, with many more people working from home or, at least, taking work with them wherever they go. The distinction between home and work that defined first and second places has been blurred, and that makes third places even harder to define. Does it even make sense to define types of places by their function when technology has made it possible to do almost anything anywhere?

One thing hasn’t changed in the last 30 years, however, and that is the need for human connection. These days there is more appreciation for the depth of that need, and many more social scientists are studying the ways in which that need is expressed, satisfied, or frustrated.

But we also have more than 2,000 years of literature addressing the topic. The centrality of love and friendship to our lives has always been a concern of philosophers, poets, novelists, and dramatists. The need that underlies our longing for third places isn’t new; what is new is the challenge technology has presented to us as we try to satisfy that need. Third places — such as churches,

sporting events, cafes, and libraries — are a key to cultivating friendship in a world that is increasingly socially fragmented.

Third places are not remnants of a bygone age. They are just rarer than they used to be, and that is why it is important to look more closely at them. The first step is simply recognizing what a third place is, and for this there is no better source than Oldenburg himself, a sociologist who studied urban life and described their characteristics in his books.

The first characteristic is that third places are neutral ground. People are free to come and go, and nobody has the responsibilities of the host or the obligations of the guest. This creates conditions in which people can meet as equals, which is the second characteristic of third places. People who occupy very different social or professional roles find it quite natural to come together in third places. This makes it very different from the workplace, which is generally hierarchical in structure. Whereas the workplace tends to emphasize status, it is irrelevant in third places. What matters more is personality.

The lack of status means third places tend to be inclusive. Anybody can speak up. Anybody can direct the flow of conversation. The agenda is always in the room; that is, what people talk about are the things that are on their minds, not just what one person thinks is important. As a result, such places are animated by lively conversation, which is the third characteristic. Storytelling, joking, and playful banter are the norm.

Another characteristic of third places is their accessibility. They are easy to get to and one can count on them being open. They are the type of place one is free to drop in at any time. They don’t require planning or appointments or a great deal of travel.

The fifth characteristic is that there are “regulars” who show up consistently and give a place its unique personality.

This personality comes from the people who inhabit the place and from their friendly relations with one another. A coffee shop inhabited by individuals silently engrossed in their phones or laptops is no more a third place than a large public restroom with several stalls.

Another, perhaps incidental, characteristic is that third places tend to be rather ordinary. They are not unusually expensive or fashionable but have a predictably low profile. What draws people to third places is not their aesthetic but rather another characteristic — their playful mood. Hearing regular, genuine laughter is one of the surest signs you have stepped into a third place.

The final characteristic is that the place feels like a home away from home. It is a place one goes, not to see and be seen, but to relax and feel welcome. A third place is comfortable.

It is important to keep in mind that characteristics are not necessarily essential features. Identifying several characteristics might help us determine whether a particular place is an example of a third place, but the absence of one or more of those characteristics does not mean a particular place does not fit into the category. A set of characteristics, in other words, does not function as a checklist. This is important to remember when considering whether venues that lack some of Oldenburg’s characteristics — an online discussion forum or a neighbor’s deck, for instance — might serve as a third place.

The great challenge of our time is learning how to make use of the many technological advances that improve the quality of life without allowing those same advances to undermine our connection to one another, connections that are every bit as essential to human flourishing as food, water, shelter, and security. Aristotle expressed it with this sentiment: “Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.”

Society precedes the individual because it is only in society that we can learn the virtues, the character traits that allow us to flourish. It is in society that we learn patience, courage, generosity, justice, and love. It is in society — that is,

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in a robust network of mutual accountability — that we learn to be human.

But can we meet that challenge? Can we develop new social structures that allow us to form deep and meaningful connections to others even when we do not need to in order to survive? Can we reinvent forms of life that allow us to flourish together? I do not know the answer to those questions, but I know we must try. We must try to do something deliberately and intentionally that previous generations of human beings did out of necessity. We must create places for the purpose of deepening our connections to others: not private places set aside from the rest of humanity, not workplaces where we go to earn a living, but a different kind of place. A third place.

People everywhere are experiencing what many experts term an epidemic of loneliness, isolation, and depression. At the same time, we have service clubs in many communities — not just Rotary, but Kiwanis, Lions, Optimist, and other organizations — that have been in gradual decline since their peak in the 1960s. That's unfortunate, because historically, service clubs have been one of the chief

means by which communities organize teams of volunteers to meet a variety of social needs. They also function as places where members can broaden their circle of acquaintances and form lasting friendships.

Recently I was attending a meeting of my club, the Rotary Club of La Crosse in Wisconsin. As a fellow member announced that the club needed volunteers for an upcoming event, I looked at all the people in the room and wondered how many of them I had volunteered with over the years. I soon gave up. At every table there were several people whom I had worked alongside, and the sight of each one of them brought up distinct and pleasant memories. It was a room full of friends and acquaintances.

It is understandable that in a world where we have a vast number of options for spending our free time, we would be hesitant to make a commitment to join an organization where we are expected to show up every week. It is understandable but unfortunate, because showing up is what it takes. You can't have an organization without members; you can't have a third place without regulars —

and you can't have friendships without spending time together.

In *The Land Remembers*, his memoir about growing up on a farm in Wisconsin during the Great Depression, the writer Ben Logan recalls a winter evening when his father brought home a new kerosene lantern. The bright light illuminated the entire room, and the kids soon spread out, each reading their books in separate corners. They no longer had to crowd around the dim light of the old Ray-O-Vac lantern at the dining room table.

Logan's mother, seeing what was happening, wasn't sure she liked the new lamp. His father looked at the empty chairs around the table and wondered if they should go back to the old lamp.

"I don't think it's the lamp," Logan's mother said. "I think it's us. Does a new lamp have to change where we sit at night?"

Logan explained what happened next: "Father's eyes found us one by one. Then he made a little motion with his head. We came out of our corners and slid into our old places at the table, smiling at each other, a little embarrassed to be hearing such talk."

The world has changed a great deal in recent decades, and it will continue to change as new technology shapes our cities, our organizations, our workplaces, and our homes. That doesn't mean we can't choose to sit together anymore. Friendship does not just happen accidentally. It takes time for relationships to mature, and the best way to nurture relationships is by participating in shared activities on a regular basis. What if the solution to many of today's most pressing social concerns is right in front of us? We just need to seek out opportunities to spend regular time in the company of others, establishing a robust self-identity through growing and deepening our relationships. The third place is a way of life. ■

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