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Third Places

problem of capitalism in the contemporary West: the constant and unremitting pressure toward profits. For those who own the means of production, the central problem of modernity, these scholars argue, is not the historic problem of a lack of productive capacity, but a problem of not enough consumer demand. The central economic problem of modernity, these scholars argue, is (for the owners) a problem of not enough consumption (which they resolve at the expense of the community). Theme parks and themed shopping malls stimulate consumption in ways never envisioned by nineteenth-century Marxist theory. Theme parks and their predatory offshoots—themed restaurants, themed shopping malls, themed airports, and so on—were, these scholars argue, merely insertion points for the realization of profits. In the process, they destroy any notion of real community. Fast-food establishments such as McDonald’s have transformed themselves into little more than theme parks for children, selling “Happy Meals” and inviting the family to bring the children to play with Ronald McDonald. Symbols and sentiments from a time when the United States was more oriented toward community life are constantly being expropriated for commercial uses. As the number of restaurants with the word family in their names increases, the number of meals eaten at home continues to decline. Families with children seem to find the allure of themed environments irresistible.

The reduction absurdum of theme parks was perhaps the efforts of Vilijums Malinauskas, a Lithuanian businessman, to create a park that would combine the enchantments of Disneyland with the horrors of the Stalinist gulag. Dubbed “Stalin’s World” by critics, the park, which opened in 2001 to large and enthusiastic crowds, contains recreations of Siberian prison camps from Stalin’s era, complete with special trains equipped with cattle cars that parade visitors past some of the old Soviet Union’s most notorious labor camps. “It combines the charms of a Disneyland with the worst of the Soviet gulag,” said Malinauskas. “It is great to have a vision of something our relatives experienced” (Futrelle 2000).

OUTLOOK IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Since their modest beginnings at the turn of the last century, theme parks have become an integral part of modern life. Their popular support by the public as well as their contribution to economic growth is in stark contrast to the views of critics who have denounced them as “cartoon utopias” (Sorokin 1992, p. 232)—the antithesis of real community. In spite of the warnings that themed environments are creating a world increasingly divorced from reality, entrepreneurs continue to build theme parks all over the world, and the public clearly remains enthralled by them.

—Charles Edgley

Further Reading


THIRD PLACES

In 1977, the sociologist Ray Oldenburg introduced the concept of the third place, a place that is an informal public gathering place apart from the home (the first place) and the work site (the second place), which hosts a company of regulars in addition to occasional and one-time visitors. The concept has been further refined in the decades since its introduction.

CHARACTERISTICS AND EXAMPLES OF THIRD PLACES

Third places are havens of sociability where conversation is the main activity and conviviality prevails. The atmosphere is democratic and festive, as both worldly status and personal troubles are checked at the door when a regular enters and takes his or her place amid familiar company. Third places are venues of, in the words of the sociologist Georg Simmel, “pure sociability” (Simmel 1971, p. 129). In most human association, Simmel noted, people come together for purposes that render enjoyment of one another’s company secondary. Sometimes, however, people gather for no other purpose than to engage in the pleasures of socia-
Third Places


... the post office and the public library have been and continue to be important meeting places.

Third places are easily identified by the fact that most of their regulars arrive at them alone but immediately join others, the whole constituting “the gang,” and it is these people who set the tone of conviviality and impart a festive atmosphere. Careful attention to them will often reveal a good deal of laughter, banter, teasing, and use of nicknames.

FUNCTIONS OF THIRD PLACES

Third places serve to unify the neighborhoods in which they are located, and the importance of this function is underscored by the loneliness many people experience as residents of postwar subdivisions in which zoning ordinances prohibit any form of public gathering place. Where public gathering places are remote, it is difficult to socialize.

Third places serve as ports of entry and informal information centers for newcomers and visitors to a neighborhood. Those who operate local taverns or coffee shops, and no less their regular customers, can be counted on for useful information about the area and its residents. Neighborhoods without these places can be very difficult for outsiders to negotiate. Some places are clannish, but they are the exception. Third place regulars favor a large “membership,” which increases the likelihood of plentiful company when they drop in and from which everyone benefits from having a breadth of contacts. Some places even have official greeters who take it upon themselves to greet new faces and introduce them around.

As forums for grassroots political involvement, third places have a long history. In them, people realized they confronted common problems and discovered the strength of numbers. Even today, television crews invade them to tap local opinion on controversial issues. The third place is also the common man’s intellectual forum. Virtually everyone has an interest in and opinions about the social, political, and economic conditions of the day, and in third places one can air them before an assembly of peers.

The encouragement to friendship is substantial. The only way one can have many friends and engage them regularly is to meet them on the neutral ground of third places. Here they need assume neither the role of host nor that of guest. Here they come and go without appointment or invitation and are free to leave the moment it pleases them to do so.
Third places give extended meaning to the concept of the support group. They provide not only emotional support but practical assistance as well. As acquaintances evolve into friends, the desire to help others grows. Needed items are loaned or given, as is skill, advice, and expertise. Time, effort, and money are saved when needs and problems are mentioned in the company of friends.

CULTURAL VARIATIONS

The German beer hall, where patrons sit at long tables and sing and sway in unison, encourages solidarity, whereas the Mediterranean wine bar with its small tables and quiet conversation encourages the expression of individuality. The English pub with limited fare and “perpendicular drinking” (drinking while standing) is tailored to short visits, whereas the French bistro, with its extended fare and pleasant outdoor seating, encourages a long stay. The American tavern, with its tables, booths, barstools, and freedom to stand and walk around, contrasts with the Canadian brasserie, at which patrons must choose a table and stay there. American lounges, dimly lit and shut away from the outside world, contrast sharply with the “public living rooms” of Europe and much of South America, where the plaza, the piazza, and the platz are very popular.

Third places vary greatly in noise level, in size, in lighting, in the bill of fare, in their visibility to passersby, in the status of waitpersons, in their reputations, and in their vitality. Social historian Philippe Aries (1977) observed that third places thrive best in the joie de vivre cultures of southern Europe.

Politics also makes a difference. Third places have been targeted for elimination under several monarchies and under fascist and Communist governments. Those in power fear that when citizens get together to talk, what is said may be critical of the regime and foment dissent. The Nazis, for example, closed coffee houses and arrested their habitués upon invading other European countries.

Democracies have an essential need for third places since the essence of democracy is more social than political. Change within authentic democracies emerges from the interaction of ordinary people who use a vocabulary in opposition to the dominant economic themes of production and consumption. Churches, taverns, clubs, reading rooms, and so forth permit wider sociability than the immediate circles of friends and family, and this wider sociability is to the benefit of democratic society. Thus, the vitality of a society’s third places indicates the vitality of the society.

—Ray Oldenburg

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Being recognized and accepted for who you are is one of the most important things we look for in community. The popular 1980s television show Cheers struck the perfect note with its song line, “You want to be where everybody knows your name.” Set in urban Boston, the Cheers bar was a community in which friendships and sexual relationships evolved but did not dominate the show’s focus on the network of ties between all the regulars—male and female, of different classes and backgrounds.

Unlike the later spin-off Frasier, the relationships at Cheers were not family ties. They were urban relationships, people thrown together by chance and forming bonds that helped them cope with changes in their work and personal lives.

The Cheers bar was an idealized version of what Ray Oldenburg, sociologist and Encyclopedia of Community editor, dubbed “the third place.” One important characteristic is that everyone there was part of the community. The staff—again male and female—were central characters, unlike the dippy, anonymous baristas in the coffee shop frequented by the characters of Frasier. In fact, the transition from 1980s Cheers to turn-of-the-century Starbucks, where staff stands behind a tall counter completely separated from the customers, might mirror our increasing sense of urban isolation and the growing commercialization of third places.

—Karen Christensen

See also BARS AND PUBS; PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Further Reading

TIES, WEAK AND STRONG

The members of every community can be thought of as linked by a network of one-to-one ties between people who are related to one another as friends, neighbors, relatives, or coworkers. The distance between any two people is the minimum number of steps through ties in the network needed to go from one to the other. A noteworthy characteristic of communities is that these distances are not very great, no matter how large the community. This would not be surprising if ties were scattered randomly, but they are not. Instead, one-to-one ties in a community tend, often very strongly, to cluster. The strongest kind of cluster is the clique, in which everyone has a tie to everyone else. If everyone's ties are strictly embedded in cliques, then each pair of every person's partners are themselves partners; this would exclude the role of bridges (that is, ties that connect cliques but are not part of a clique). What would we find if a clustering index of the transitivity of such triples were done for each person in a network? That is, if A likes B and C, do B and C like each other? If the index were perfectly transitive for everyone, then people in different cliques would have to be disconnected, and the distances between them would be infinite.

THE STRENGTH OF WEAK TIES

Questions about such factors as transitivity or reciprocity in networks led network researchers such as Anatol Rapoport (b. 1911), Stanley Milgram (1933–1984), Mark Granovetter (b. 1943), and Duncan Watts (b. 1971) to investigate how it is that even very large communities are still "small worlds" (S-W) in which ties may be strongly clustered, yet no two people—or very few—are much further away from each other in the network than the now-famous six degrees of separation. In 1957, Rapoport, for example, showed that rumors followed a lazy S-shaped curve typical of a diffusion process in their spread through a high school. In the first few steps of transmission, they spread to very few people overall; with a few more steps, they spread like wildfire through the school; but oddly, they never reached a sizable residual set of people who seemed to be insulated from the rumor. Rapoport and Granovetter showed the first stage to correspond to spread within cliques and the second to spread between cliques. The lack of spread to a residual set of people was explained by the fact that certain cliques and isolates were not linked to the larger network. Granovetter's contribution in "The Strength of Weak Ties" (1973), the most cited article on social networks, went further to show that if a person's strong ties are those in which there is strong investment of time and affect, then it is paradoxically the weaker ties that connect him or her to others and to resources that are located or available through other clusters in the network. In his Boston study of male professional, technical, and managerial workers who made job changes, he found that most workers found their jobs through personal contacts, but ones that were surprisingly weak. The contacts were not generally close friends or relatives; rather, they were often work-related connections, and generally more impersonal ties with less frequent contact.

Reflecting on Rapoport's information diffusion model and on Jeffrey Travers and Stanley Milgram's 1969 small-world studies, Granovetter formulated his hypothesis on the strength of weak ties: Strong ties tend to be clustered and more transitive, as are ties among those within the same clique, who are likely to have the same information about jobs and less likely to have new information passed along from distant parts of the network. Bridges between clusters tend to be weak ties. Hence acquaintances are more likely to pass job information than close friends, and the acquaintances of strategic importance are those whose ties serve as bridges in the network. The Search for an Abortionist, a 1969 work by Nancy Howell (at that time Nancy Lee), showed that women acquired scarce information in a similar fashion—through short, weak chains of connection.

Of the many later studies, some found that weak ties are more important in the search for scarce rather than plentiful resources. Only in times of plenty are close associates likely to have access to what you need. Granovetter's arguments against economists' models of rationality in decision making, however, are still among the most persuasive for the general importance of social networks. He asserted that choices are not a matter of