

Main Street: The Ultimate Community “Third Place”.

THIRD PLACES IN THE 20TH CENTURY.

Ray Oldenburg effectively describes gathering spots that serve as third places, especially in small cities and towns. His idea also extends to the “Cheers” bar in bigger cities. Members-only clubs do not qualify. Entry needs to be freely accessible to customers, visitors and a regular clientele, preferably by walking or biking.

MAIN STREET AS A THIRD PLACE.

A leap of the concept from a bar to a main street is alluded to in *The Good Great Place* when main street is offered as a third place. Collectively, stores, shops, bars, parks, plazas, Restaurants and sidewalk benches can serve as the place where people find a neutral, egalitarian place for conversation, support and comfort along with food and beverage.

City government can enable traditional third places in private buildings and perhaps foster that atmosphere in some public buildings like libraries and museum coffee shops. A bigger idea is to treat the entirety of main street as a congregate conversation pit, a “third place”...an aspirational idea that can direct the design of parks, plazas, sidewalks and casual meeting places in civic buildings.



A café, sidewalk dining and big trees downtown.

The Good Great Place

Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of the Community

Ray Oldenburg

Chapter 2, The Character of Third Places.

“Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile. Since the social institutions of society make stronger claims on the individual, third places are normally open in the off hours, as well as at other times. The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people’s more serious involvement in other spheres. Though a radically different kind of setting from the home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends.”

FEATURES OF A “THIRD PLACE”.

The quintessential “third place” is:

- Freely accessible to patrons with “regulars” a big part of the crowd.
- Neutral ground welcoming all socio-economic classes in an egalitarian setting.
- Conversational with an appreciation of individual expression and personalities.
- A place where the main form of entertainment is conversation.
- Light hearted with a playful atmosphere.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF A “THIRD PLACE”.

Third places are unique and idiosyncratic, thereby defying standard market analysis. However, some guidelines can serve as a guide to discovery rather than criteria for design.

The traditional “third place” is a café, bar, book store, ice cream parlor, hardware store or other place where people linger; a place where one finds conversation and conviviality. They are:

- Found on or near a main street within a one mile walk of where people live.
- Found in neighborhood centers or street corners.
- Completely site and location driven.

Once found, a “third place” should be protected and enhanced for “locals” -nearby workers, neighbors and those that drop by.



A downtown neighborhood café- deli: no on-site parking, only window signs and lighting; found among and adjacent to single family homes.

CONCLUSIONS.

The overarching conclusion is that the main street in a small city or town functions, or should function, as a “third place” with a collection of cafés, bars, diners, book stores and ice cream shops stitched together with conversational sidewalks, benches among trees, flowers, bike racks and Wifi. Soft streetlights are great when they encourage evening dining, music and entertainment.

Main street can coagulate into a single place, a “third place”, when a mix of uses is encouraged, nearby housing is permitted and promoted, sidewalks are widened for benches, outdoor dining, display of shop goods, walking, bike racks and the many little conveniences that send the message – “everyone’s welcome, stop and stay a while”.



A main street meeting place.