

CHAPTER 2

The Character of Third Places

THIRD PLACES the world over share common and essential features. As one's investigations cross the boundaries of time and culture, the kinship of the Arabian coffeehouse, the German *bierstube*, the Italian *taberna*, the old country store of the American frontier, and the ghetto bar reveals itself. As one approaches each example, determined to describe it in its own right, an increasingly familiar pattern emerges. The eternal sameness of the third place overshadows the variations in its outward appearance and seems unaffected by the wide differences in cultural attitudes toward the typical gathering places of informal public life. The beer joint in which the middle-class American takes no pride can be as much a third place as the proud Viennese coffeehouse. It is a fortunate aspect of the third place that its capacity to serve the human need for communion does not much depend upon the capacity of a nation to comprehend its virtues.

The wonder is that so little attention has been paid to the benefits attaching to the third place. It is curious that its features and inner workings have remained virtually undescribed in this present age when they are so sorely needed and when any number of lesser substitutes are described in tiresome detail. Volumes are written on sensitivity and encounter groups, on meditation and exotic rituals for attaining states of relaxation and transcendence, on jogging and massaging. But the third place, the people's own remedy for stress, loneliness, and alienation, seems easy to ignore.

With few exceptions, however, it has always been thus. Rare is the chronicler who has done justice to those gathering places where community is most alive and people are most themselves. The tradition is

the opposite; it is one of understatement and oversight. Joseph Addison, the great essayist, gave the faintest praise to the third places of his time and seems to have set an example for doing so. London's eighteenth-century coffeehouses provided the stage and forum for Addison's efforts and fired the greatest era of letters England would ever see. And there was far more to them than suggested by Addison's remarks: "When men are thus knit together, by a Love of Society, not a Spirit of Faction, and don't meet to censure or annoy those that are absent, but to enjoy one another: When they are thus combined for their own improvement, or for the Good of others, or at least to relax themselves from the Business of the Day, by an innocent and cheerful conversation, there may be something very useful in these little Institutions and Establishments."¹

The only "useful something" that the typical observer seems able to report consists of the escape or time out from life's duties and drudgeries that third places are said to offer. Joseph Wechsberg, for example, suggests that the coffeehouses of Vienna afford the common man "his haven and island of tranquility, his reading room and gambling hall, his sounding board and grumbling hall. There at least he is safe from nagging wife and unruly children, monotonous radios and barking dogs, tough bosses and impatient creditors."² H. L. Mencken offered the same limited view of the places on our side of the Atlantic, describing the respectable Baltimore tavern of his day as "a quiet refuge" and a "hospital asylum from life and its cares."³

But there is far more than escape and relief from stress involved in regular visits to a third place. There is more than shelter against the raindrops of life's tedium and more than a breather on the sidelines of the rat race to be had amid the company of a third place. Its real merits do not depend upon being harried by life, afflicted by stress, or needing time out from gainful activities. The escape theme is not erroneous in substance but in emphasis; it focuses too much upon conditions external to the third place and too little upon experiences and relationships afforded there and nowhere else.

Though characterizations of the third place as a mere haven of escape from home and work are inadequate, they do possess a virtue—they invite *comparison*. The escape theme suggests a world of difference between the corner tavern and the family apartment a block away, between morning coffee in the bungalow and that with the gang at the

local bakery. The contrast is sharp and will be revealed. The *raison d'être* of the third place rests upon its differences from the other settings of daily life and can best be understood by comparison with them. In examining these differences, it will not serve to misrepresent the home, shop, or office in order to put a better light on public gathering places. But, if at times I might lapse in my objectivity, I take solace in the fact that public opinion in America and the weight of our myths and prejudices have never done justice to third places and the kind of association so essential to our freedom and contentment.

On Neutral Ground

The individual may have many friends, a rich variety among them, and opportunity to engage many of them daily *only* if people do not get uncomfortably tangled in one another's lives. Friends can be numerous and often met only if they may easily join and depart one another's company. This otherwise obvious fact of social life is often obscured by the seeming contradiction that surrounds it—we need a good deal of immunity from those whose company we like best. Or, as the sociologist Richard Sennett put it, "people can be sociable only when they have some protection from each other."⁴

In a book showing how to bring life back to American cities, Jane Jacobs stresses the contradiction surrounding most friendships and the consequent need to provide places for them. Cities, she observed, are full of people with whom contact is significant, useful, and enjoyable, but "you don't want them in your hair and they do not want you in theirs either."⁵ If friendships and other informal acquaintances are limited to those suitable for private life, she says, the city becomes stultified. So, one might add, does the social life of the individual.

In order for the city and its neighborhoods to offer the rich and varied association that is their promise and their potential, there must be *neutral ground* upon which people may gather. There must be places where individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable. If there is no neutral ground in the neighborhoods where people live, association outside the home will be impoverished. Many, perhaps most, neighbors will never meet, to say nothing of associate, for there is no place for them to do so. Where neutral ground is available it makes

possible far more informal, even intimate, relations among people than could be entertained in the home.

Social reformers as a rule, and planners all too commonly, ignore the importance of neutral ground and the kinds of relationships, interactions, and activities to which it plays host. Reformers have never liked seeing people hanging around on street corners, store porches, front stoops, bars, candy stores, or other public areas. They find loitering deplorable and assume that if people had better private areas they would not waste time in public ones. It would make as much sense, as Jane Jacobs points out, to argue that people wouldn't show up at testimonial banquets if they had wives who could cook for them at home.⁶ The banquet table and coffee counter bring people together in an intimate and private social fashion—people who would not otherwise meet in that way. Both settings (street corner and banquet hall) are public and neutral, and both are important to the unity of neighborhoods, cities, and societies.

If we valued fraternity as much as independence, and democracy as much as free enterprise, our zoning codes would not enforce the social isolation that plagues our modern neighborhoods, but would require some form of public gathering place every block or two. We may one day rediscover the wisdom of James Oglethorpe who laid out Savannah such that her citizens lived close to public gathering areas. Indeed, he did so with such compelling effect that Sherman, in his destructive march to the sea, spared Savannah alone.

The Third Place Is a Leveler

Levelers was the name given to an extreme left-wing political party that emerged under Charles I and expired shortly afterward under Cromwell. The goal of the party was the abolition of all differences of position or rank that existed among men. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the term came to be applied much more broadly in England, referring to anything "which reduces men to an equality."⁷ For example, the newly established coffeehouses of that period, one of unprecedented democracy among the English, were commonly referred to as levelers, as were the people who frequented them and who relished the new intimacy made possible by the decay of the old feudal order.

Precursors of the renowned English clubs, those early coffeehouses were enthusiastically democratic in the conduct and composition of their habitués. As one of the more articulate among them recorded, "As you have a hodge-podge of Drinks, such too is your company, for each man seems a Leveller, and ranks and files himself as he lists, without regard to degrees or order; so that oft you may see a silly Fop, and a wonder Justice, a griping-Rock, and a grave Citizen, a worthy Lawyer, and an errant Pickpocket, a Reverend Nonconformist, and a canting Mountebank; all blended together, to compose an Oglío of Impertinence."⁸ Quite suddenly, each man had become an agent of England's newfound unity. His territory was the coffeehouse, which provided the neutral ground upon which men discovered one another apart from the classes and ranks that had earlier divided them.

A place that is a leveler is, by its nature, an inclusive place. It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion. There is a tendency for individuals to select their associates, friends, and intimates from among those closest to them in social rank. Third places, however, serve to *expand* possibilities, whereas formal associations tend to narrow and restrict them. Third places counter the tendency to be restrictive in the enjoyment of others by being open to all and by laying emphasis on qualities not confined to status distinctions current in the society. Within third places, the charm and flavor of one's personality, irrespective of his or her station in life, is what counts. In the third place, people may make blissful substitutions in the rosters of their associations, adding those they genuinely enjoy and admire to those less-preferred individuals that fate has put at their side in the workplace or even, perhaps, in their family.

Further, a place that is a leveler also permits the individual to know workmates in a different and fuller aspect than is possible in the workplace. The great bulk of human association finds individuals related to one another for some objective purpose. It casts them, as sociologists say, in roles, and though the roles we play provide us with our more sustaining matrices of human association, these tend to submerge personality and the inherent joys of being together with others to some external purpose. In contrast, what Georg Simmel referred to as "pure sociability" is precisely the occasion in which people get together for no other purpose, higher or lower, than for the "joy,

vivacity, and relief” of engaging their personalities beyond the contexts of purpose, duty, or role.⁹ As Simmel insisted, this unique occasion provides the most democratic experience people can have and allows them to be more fully themselves, for it is salutary in such situations that all shed their social uniforms and insignia and reveal more of what lies beneath or beyond them.

Necessarily, a transformation must occur as one passes through the portals of a third place. Worldly status claims must be checked at the door in order that all within may be equals. The surrender of outward status, or leveling, that transforms those who own delivery trucks and those who drive them into equals, is rewarded by acceptance on more humane and less transitory grounds. Leveling is a joy and relief to those of higher and lower status in the mundane world. Those who, on the outside, command deference and attention by the sheer weight of their position find themselves in the third place enjoined, embraced, accepted, and enjoyed where conventional status counts for little. They are accepted just for themselves and on terms not subject to the vicissitudes of political or economic life.

Similarly, those not high on the totems of accomplishment or popularity are enjoined, accepted, embraced, and enjoyed despite their “failings” in their career or the marketplace. There is more to the individual than his or her status indicates, and to have recognition of that fact shared by persons beyond the small circle of the family is indeed a joy and relief. It is the best of all anodynes for soothing the irritation of material deprivation. Even poverty loses much of its sting when communities can offer the settings and occasions where the disadvantaged can be accepted as equals. Pure sociability confirms the more and the less successful and is surely a comfort to both. Unlike the status-guarding of the family and the czarist mentality of those who control corporations, the third place recognizes and implements the value of “downward” association in an uplifting manner.

Worldly status is not the only aspect of the individual that must not intrude into third place association. Personal problems and moodiness must be set aside as well. Just as others in such settings claim immunity from the personal worries and fears of individuals, so may they, for the time being at least, relegate them to a blessed state of irrelevance. The temper and tenor of the third place is upbeat; it is cheerful. The purpose is to enjoy the company of one’s fellow human beings and to

delight in the novelty of their character—not to wallow in pity over misfortunes.

The transformations in passing from the world of mundane care to the magic of the third place is often visibly manifest in the individual. Within the space of a few hours, individuals may drag themselves into their homes—frowning, fatigued, hunched over—only to stride into their favorite club or tavern a few hours later with a broad grin and an erect posture. Richard West followed one of New York's "pretty people" from his limousine on the street, up the steps, and into the interior of Club 21, observing that "by the time Marvin had walked through the opened set of doors and stood in the lobby, his features softened. The frown was gone, the bluster of importance had ebbed away and had been left at the curb. He felt the old magic welling up."¹⁰

In Michael Daly's tragic account of young Peter MacPartland (a "perfect" son from a "perfect" family) who was accused of murdering his father, there is mention of a place, perhaps the only place, in which MacPartland ever found relief from the constant struggling and competition that characterized his life. On Monday evenings, a friend would go with him to Rudy's, a working-class tavern, to watch "Monday Night Football." "It was Yale invading a working-class bar," said the friend. "It was like his first freedom of any kind. He thought it was the neatest place in the world."¹¹ Mere escape can be found in many forms and does not begin to account for transformations such as these.

Conversation Is the Main Activity

Neutral ground provides the place, and leveling sets the stage for the cardinal and sustaining activity of third places everywhere. That activity is conversation. Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging. The joys of association in third places may initially be marked by smiles and twinkling eyes, by hand-shaking and back-slapping, but they proceed and are maintained in pleasurable and entertaining conversation.

A comparison of cultures readily reveals that the popularity of conversation in a society is closely related to the popularity of third places. In the 1970s, the economist Tibor Scitovsky introduced statistical data confirming what others had observed casually.¹² The rate of pub visita-

tion in England or café visitation in France is high and corresponds to an obvious fondness for sociable conversation. American tourists, Scitovsky notes, "are usually struck and often morally shocked by the much more leisurely and frivolous attitude toward life of just about all foreigners, manifest by the tremendous amount of idle talk they engage in, on promenades and park benches, in cafés, sandwich shops, lobbies, doorways, and wherever people congregate." And, in the pubs and cafés, Scitovsky goes on to report, "socializing rather than drinking is clearly most people's main occupation."

American men of letters often reveal an envy of those societies in which conversation is more highly regarded than here, and usually recognize the link between activity and setting. Emerson, in his essay on "Table Talk," discussed the importance of great cities in representing the power and genius of a nation.¹³ He focused on Paris, which dominated for so long and to such an extent as to influence the whole of Europe. After listing the many areas in which that city had become the "social center of the world," he concluded that its "supreme merit is that it is the city of conversation and cafés."

In a popular essay on "The American Condition," Richard Goodwin invited readers to contrast the rush hour in our major cities with the close of the working day in Renaissance Italy: "Now at Florence, when the air is red with the summer sunset and the campaniles begin to sound vespers and the day's work is done, everyone collects in the piazzas. The steps of Santa Maria del Fiore swarm with men of every rank and every class; artisans, merchants, teachers, artists, doctors, technicians, poets, scholars. A thousand minds, a thousand arguments; a lively intermingling of questions, problems, news of the latest happening, jokes; an inexhaustible play of language and thought, a vibrant curiosity; the changeable temper of a thousand spirits by whom every object of discussion is broken into an infinity of sense and significations—all these spring into being, and then are spent. And this is the pleasure of the Florentine public."¹⁴

The judgment regarding conversation in our society is usually twofold: we don't value it and we're not good at it. "If it has not value," complained Wordsworth, "good, lively talk is often contemptuously dismissed as talking for talking's sake."¹⁵ As to our skills, Tibor Scitovsky noted that our gambit for a chat is "halfhearted and . . . we have failed to develop the locale and the facilities for idle talk. We lack the

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stuff of which conversations are made."¹⁶ In our low estimation of idle talk, we Americans have correctly assessed the worth of much of what we hear. It is witless, trite, self-centered, and unreflective.

If conversation is not just the main attraction but the *sine qua non* of the third place, it must be better there and, indeed, it is. Within its circles, the art of conversation is preserved against its decline in the larger spheres, and evidence of this claim is abundant.

Initially, one may note a remarkable compliance with the rules of conversation as compared to their abuse almost everywhere else. Many champions of the art of conversation have stated its simple rules. Henry Sedgwick does so in a straightforward manner.¹⁷ In essence, his rules are: 1) Remain silent your share of the time (more rather than less). 2) Be attentive while others are talking. 3) Say what you think but be careful not to hurt others' feelings. 4) Avoid topics not of general interest. 5) Say little or nothing about yourself personally, but talk about others there assembled. 6) Avoid trying to instruct. 7) Speak in as low a voice as will allow others to hear.

The rules, it will be seen, fit the democratic order, or the leveling, that prevails in third places. Everyone seems to talk just the right amount, and all are expected to contribute. Pure sociability is as much subject to good and proper form as any other kind of association, and this conversational style embodies that form. Quite unlike those corporate realms wherein status dictates who may speak, and when and how much, and who may use levity and against which targets, the third place draws in like manner from everyone there assembled. Even the sharper wits must refrain from dominating conversation, for all are there to hold forth as well as to listen.

By emphasizing style over vocabulary, third place conversation also complements the leveling process. In the course of his investigations into English working-class club life, Brian Jackson was struck by the eloquence of common working people when they spoke in familiar and comfortable environments.¹⁸ He was surprised to hear working people speak with the "verve and panache" of Shakespearian actors. I observed much the same artistry among farmers and other workers in Midwestern communities who could recite, dramatically, verse after verse of poetry, reduce local cockalorums to their just proportions, or argue against school consolidation in a moving and eloquent style.

In Santa Barbara there is a tavern called The English Department,

which is operated by a man who was banished from the English department at the local university for reasons that august body never saw fit to share with him. He'd spent most of his adult life listening to talk. He had listened in seminars, classrooms, offices, and hallways of various English departments. But the tavern, he found, was better; it was *living*. "Listen to these people," he said of his customers. "Have you ever heard a place filled like this? . . . And they're all interested in what they're saying. There's genuine inquiry here."¹⁹ In a moment of candor, a past president of a professional association in one of the social sciences told an audience that it had been his experience that most academic departments effectively "rob their students of their Mother wit." The owner of The English Department had made the same discovery. In contrast, third places are veritable gymnasiums of Mother wit.

The conversational superiority of the third place is also evident in the harm that the bore can there inflict. Those who carry the despicable reputation of being a bore have not earned it at home or in the work setting proper, but almost exclusively in those places and occasions given to sociability. Where people expect more of conversation they are accordingly repulsed by those who abuse it, whether by killing a topic with inappropriate remarks or by talking more than their share of the time. Characteristically, bores talk more loudly than others, substituting both volume and verbosity for wit and substance. Their failure at getting the effect they desire only serves to increase their demands upon the patience of the group. Conversation is a lively game, but the bore hogs the ball, unable to score but unwilling to pass it to others.

Bores are the scourge of sociability and a curse upon the "clubbable." In regard to them, John Timbs, a prolific chronicler of English club life, once cited the advice of a seasoned and knowledgeable member: "Above all, a club should be large. Every club must have its bores; but in a large club you can get out of their way."²⁰ To have one or more bores as "official brothers" is a grizzly prospect, and one suggesting an additional advantage of inclusive and informal places over the formal and exclusive club. Escape is so much easier.

Conversation's improved quality within the third place is also suggested by its temper. It is more spirited than elsewhere, less inhibited and more eagerly pursued. Compared to the speech in other realms, it is more dramatic and more often attended by laughter and the exercise

of wit. The character of the talk has a transcending effect, which Emerson once illustrated by an episode involving two companies of stagecoach riders *en route* to Paris. One group failed to strike up any conversation, while the other quickly became engrossed in it. "The first, on their arrival, had rueful accidents to relate, a terrific thunderstorm, danger, and fear and gloom, to the whole company. The others heard these particulars with surprise—the storm, the mud, the danger. They knew nothing of these; they had forgotten earth; they had breathed a higher air."²¹ Third place conversation is typically engrossing. Consciousness of conditions and time often slips away amid its lively flow.

Whatever interrupts conversation's lively flow is ruinous to a third place, be it the bore, a horde of barbaric college students, or mechanical or electronic gadgetry. Most common among these is the noise that passes for music, though it must be understood that when conversation is to be savored, even Mozart is noise if played too loudly. In America, particularly, many public establishments reverberate with music played so loudly that enjoyable conversation is impossible. Why the management chooses to override normal conversation by twenty decibels is not always obvious. It may be to lend the illusion of life among a listless and fragmented assembly, to attract a particular kind of clientele, because management has learned that people tend to drink more and faster when subjected to loud noise, or simply because the one in charge likes it that way. In any case, the potential for a third place can be eliminated with the flip of a switch, for whatever inhibits conversation will drive those who delight in it to search for another setting.

As there are agencies and activities that interfere with conversation, so there are those that aid and encourage it. Third places often incorporate these activities and may even emerge around them. To be more precise, conversation is a *game* that mixes well with many other games according to the manner in which they are played. In the clubs where I watch others play gin rummy, for example, it is a rare card that is played without comment and rarer still is the hand dealt without some terrible judgment being leveled at the dealer. The game and conversation move along in lively fashion, the talk enhancing the card game, the card game giving eternal stimulation to the talk. Jackson's observations in the clubs of the working-class English confirm this. "Much time," he

recorded, "is given over to playing games. Cribbage and dominoes mean endless conversation and by-the-way evaluation of personalities. Spectators are never quiet, and every stage of the game stimulates comment—mostly on the characteristics of the players rather than the play; their slyness, slowness, quickness, meanness, allusions to long-remembered incidents in club history."²²

Not all games stimulate conversation and kibitzing; hence, not all games complement third place association. A room full of individuals intent upon video games is not a third place, nor is a subdued lounge in which couples are quietly staring at backgammon boards. Amateur pool blends well into third place activity generally, providing that personality is not entirely sacrificed to technical skill or the game reduced to the singular matter of who wins. Above all, it is the latitude that personality enjoys at each and every turn that makes the difference.

The social potential of games was nicely illustrated in Laurence Wylie's account of life in the little French village of Peyranne. Wylie had noted the various ways in which the popular game of *boules* was played in front of the local café. "The wit, humor, sarcasm, the insults, the oaths, the logic, the experimental demonstration, and the ability to dramatize a situation gave the game its essential interest."²³ When those features of play are present, the game of *boules*—a relatively simple one—becomes a full-fledged and spirited social as well as sporting event. On the other hand, "Spectators will ignore a game being played by men who are physically skilled but who are unable to dramatize their game, and they will crowd around a game played by men who do not play very well but who are witty, dramatic, shrewd, in their ability to outwit their opponents. Those most popular players, of course, are those who combine skill with such wit."

To comprehend the nature of the third place is to recognize that though the cue stick may be put up or the pasteboards returned to their box, the game goes on. It is a game that, as Sedgwick observed, "requires two and gains in richness and variety if there are four or five more . . . it exercises the intelligence and the heart, it calls on memory and the imagination, it has all the interest derived from uncertainty and unexpectedness, it demands self-restraint, self-mastery, effort, quickness—in short, all the qualities that make a game exciting."²⁴ The game is conversation and the third place is its home court.

Accessibility and Accommodation

Third places that render the best and fullest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there. To have such a place available whenever the demons of loneliness or boredom strike or when the pressures and frustrations of the day call for relaxation amid good company is a powerful resource. Where they exist, such places attest to the bonds between people. "A community life exists," says the sociologist Philip Slater, "when one can go daily to a given location and see many of the people he knows."²⁵

That seemingly simple requirement of community has become elusive. Beyond the workplace (which, presumably, Slater did not mean to include), only a modest proportion of middle-class Americans can lay claim to such a place. Our evolving habitat has become increasingly hostile to them. Their dwindling number at home, seen against their profusion in many other countries, points up the importance of the accessibility of third places. Access to them must be *easy* if they are to survive and serve, and the ease with which one may visit a third place is a matter of both time and location.

Traditionally, third places have kept long hours. England's early coffeehouses were open sixteen hours a day, and most of our coffee-and-doughnut places are open around the clock. Taverns typically serve from about nine in the morning until the wee hours of the following morning, unless the law decrees otherwise. In many retail stores, the coffee counters are open well before the rest of the store. Most establishments that serve as third places are accessible during both the on and off hours of the day.

It must be thus, for the third place accommodates people only when they are released from their responsibilities elsewhere. The basic institutions—home, work, school—make prior claims that cannot be ignored. Third places must stand ready to serve people's needs for sociability and relaxation in the intervals before, between, and after their mandatory appearances elsewhere.

Those who have third places exhibit regularity in their visits to them, but it is not that punctual and unflinching kind shown in deference to the job or family. The timing is loose, days are missed, some visits are brief, etc. Viewed from the vantage point of the establishment, there is a

fluidity in arrivals and departures and an inconsistency of membership at any given hour or day. Correspondingly, the activity that goes on in third places is largely unplanned, unscheduled, unorganized, and unstructured. Here, however, is the charm. It is just these deviations from the middle-class penchant for organization that give the third place much of its character and allure and that allow it to offer a radical departure from the routines of home and work.

As important as timing, and closely related to it, is the location of third places. Where informal gathering places are far removed from one's residence, their appeal fades, for two reasons. Getting there is inconvenient, and one is not likely to know the patrons.

The importance of proximate locations is illustrated by the typical English pub. Though in the one instance its accessibility has been sharply curtailed by laws that cut its normal hours of operation in half, it has nonetheless thrived because of its physical accessibility. The clue is in the name; pubs are called locals and every one of them is somebody's local. Because so many pubs are situated among the homes of those who use them, people are there frequently, both because they are accessible and because their patrons are guaranteed the company of friendly and familiar faces. Across the English Channel sociable use of the public domain is also high, as is the availability of gathering places. Each neighborhood, if not each block, has its café and, as in England, these have served to bring the residents into frequent and friendly contact with one another.

Where third places are prolific across the urban topography, people may indulge their social instincts as they prefer. Some will never frequent these places. Others will do so rarely. Some will go only in the company of others. Many will come and go as individuals.

The Regulars

The lure of a third place depends only secondarily upon seating capacity, variety of beverages served, availability of parking, prices, or other features. What attracts the regular visitor to a third place is supplied not by management but by the fellow customers. The third place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars. It is the regulars who give the

place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there.

Third places are dominated by their regulars but not necessarily in a numerical sense. It is the regulars, whatever their number on any given occasion, who feel at home in a place and set the tone of conviviality. It is the regulars whose mood and manner provide the infectious and contagious style of interaction and whose acceptance of new faces is crucial. The host's welcome, though important, is not the one that really matters; the welcome and acceptance extended on the other side of the bar-counter invites the newcomer to the world of third place association.

The importance of a regular crowd is demonstrated every day throughout America in licensed drinking establishments that *don't* have a loyal patronage. The patrons sit spaced apart from one another. Many appear to be hunching over some invisible lead ball of misery sitting on their laps. They peel labels off beer bottles. They study advertising messages on matchbooks. They watch afternoon television as though it were of compelling interest. The scene is reminiscent of the "end of the world ambience" described by Henry Miller in his depressing description of American "joints."²⁶ There is an atmosphere of lethargy, if not genuine despair. Most of the hapless patrons, one may be sure, enter not only to have a drink but also to find the cheer that ought to be drink's companion. Seeking to gain respite from loneliness or boredom, they manage only to intensify those feelings by their inability to get anything going with one another. They are doomed, almost always, for if silence is not immediately broken by strangers, it is rarely broken at all. This dismal scene is not found in third places or among those who have third places. Those who become regulars need never confront it.

Every regular was once a newcomer, and the acceptance of newcomers is essential to the sustained vitality of the third place. Acceptance into the circle is not difficult, but it is not automatic either. Much of what is involved may be learned by observing the order of welcome to third places. Most enthusiastically greeted is the returning prodigal, the individual who had earlier been a loyal and accepted regular but whom circumstances had, in more recent months, kept away. This individual is perhaps the only one likely to get more than his democratic share of attention. After all, he's been away and there is much to ask and tell him. Next in order of welcome is the regular making his

anticipated appearance. The gang was counting on his arrival and greets him accordingly. He is followed by the stranger or newcomer who enters in the company of another regular. Then come strangers in pairs and, at the bottom of the order, is the lone stranger, whose acceptance will take the longest.

Yet, it is the lone stranger who is most apt to become a regular. What he must do is establish trust. More than anything else, it is the element of trust that dictates the strength of the welcome. Strangers accompanied by regulars are vouched for. Strangers in pairs seem all right to one another at least and usually engage in such talk as will further attest to their acceptability. The lone stranger, however, has little to back him up. Though it is in the nature of inclusive groups to welcome new players to the game of conversation, it is also in their nature to want to know and trust those with whom they are talking. Since public life in America is relatively devoid of those connecting rituals that in other cultures serve to ensure the introductions of strangers, the order of welcome is doubly important.

How, then, does the lone stranger become a part of the group? It is not difficult, but it takes time because of the kind of trust that must be established. It is not the kind of trust on which banks base credit ratings or that between combat soldiers whose lives depend on each other. It's more like the trust among youngsters playing unsupervised sandlot baseball. Those who show up regularly and play a fairly decent game become the regulars. Similarly, the third place gang need only know that the newcomer is a decent sort, capable of giving and taking in conversation according to the modes of civility and mutual respect that hold sway among them, and the group needs some assurance that the new face is going to become a familiar one. This kind of trust grows with each visit. Mainly, one simply keeps reappearing and tries not to be obnoxious. Of these two requirements for admission or acceptance, regularity of attendance is clearly the more important.

Viewed from the newcomer's vantage point, third place groups often seem more homogeneous and closed to outsiders than they are. Those not yet a part of them seldom suspect their abundant capacity to accept variety into their ranks. Elijah Anderson was able to write a penetrating analysis of a black third place because this middle-class university student was accepted by the regular and relatively uneducated company of a lower-class ghetto bar.²⁷ In England, the public bar within

the multiroomed public house is reserved for working-class patrons and is off limits to the well-dressed who can afford the fancier rooms. But, as one observer reports, "Once you have been in a few times you can go whenever you like."²⁸ Such examples are indicative of the character of inclusive places where the membership takes as much delight in admitting unlikely members as exclusive places do in making certain that newcomers meet proper and narrow qualifications.

A Low Profile

As a physical structure, the third place is typically plain. In some cases, it falls a bit short of plain. One of the reasons it is difficult to convince some people of the importance of the third place is that so many of them have an appearance that suggests otherwise. Third places are unimpressive looking for the most part. They are not, with few exceptions, advertised; they are not elegant. In cultures where mass advertising prevails and appearance is valued over substance, the third place is all the more likely *not* to impress the uninitiated.

Several factors contribute to the characteristic homeliness of third places. First, and recalling Emerson's observation, there are no temples built to friendship. Third places, that is, are not constructed as such. Rather, establishments built for other purposes are commandeered by those seeking a place where they can linger in good company. Usually, it is the older place that invites this kind of takeover. Newer places are more wedded to the purposes for which they were built. Maximum profits are expected and not from a group of hangers-on. Newer places also tend to emerge in prime locations with the expectation of capitalizing on a high volume of transient customers. Newer places are also more likely to be chain establishments with policies and personnel that discourage hanging out. Even the new tavern is not nearly as likely to become a third place as an older one, suggesting that there is more involved than the purpose for which such places are built.

Plainness, or homeliness, is also the "protective coloration" of many third places. Not having that shiny bright appearance of the franchise establishment, third places do not attract a high volume of strangers or transient customers. They fall short of the middle-class preference for cleanliness and modernity. A place that looks a bit seedy will usually repel the transient middle-class customer away from home and protect

those inside from numerous intrusions by one-time visitors. And, if it's a male third place in which women are not welcome, a definite seediness still goes a long way toward repelling the female customer. Many otherwise worn and aging structures, I should point out, are kept meticulously clean by owners devoted to the comfort and pleasure of their customers. It is the first impression of the place that is at issue here.

Plainness, especially on the inside of third places, also serves to discourage pretention among those who gather there. A nonpretentious decor corresponds with and encourages leveling and the abandonment of social pretense. It is part of a broader fabric of nonpretention, which also includes the manner of dress. Regulars of third places do not go home and dress up. Rather, they come as they are. If one of them should arrive overdressed, a good bit of ribbing, not admiration or envy, will be his desert. In the third place, the "visuals" that surround individuals do not upstage them.

The plainness and modesty surrounding the third place is entirely fitting and probably could not be otherwise. Where there is the slightest bit of fanfare, people become self-conscious. Some will be inhibited by shyness; others will succumb to pretention. When people consider the establishment the "in" place to be seen, commercialism will reign. When that happens, an establishment may survive; it may even thrive, but it will cease to be a third place.

Finally, the low visual profile typical of third places parallels the low profile they have in the minds of those who frequent them. To the regular, though he or she may draw full benefit from them, third places are an ordinary part of a daily routine. The best attitude toward the third place is that it merely be an expected part of life. The contributions that third places make in the lives of people depend upon their incorporation into the everyday stream of existence.

The Mood Is Playful

The persistent mood of the third place is a playful one. Those who would keep conversation serious for more than a minute are almost certainly doomed to failure. Every topic and speaker is a potential trapeze for the exercise and display of wit. Sometimes the playful spirit is obvious, as when the group is laughing and boisterous; other times it

will be subtle. Whether pronounced or low key, however, the playful spirit is of utmost importance. Here joy and acceptance reign over anxiety and alienation. This is the magical element that warms the insider and reminds the outsider that he or she is not part of the magic circle, even though seated but a few feet away. When the regulars are at play, the outsider may certainly know neither the characters nor the rules by which they take one another lightly. The unmistakable mark of acceptance into the company of third place regulars is not that of being taken seriously, but that of being included in the play forms of their association.

Johan Huizinga, grand scholar of play, would have recognized the playground character of the third place, for it was clear to him that play occurs in a place apart. Play has its playgrounds—"forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."²⁹

The magic of playgrounds is seductive. Having been part of the play, the individual is drawn to where it took place. Not every game of marbles, Huizinga conceded, leads to the founding of a club, but the tendency is there. Why? Because the "feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, or mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. The club pertains to play as the hat to the head."³⁰ Many couples are certain to have known the feeling to which Huizinga alludes. They experience it when, in the course of many social events that are duller than they should be, a magic time occurs. It may be an impromptu gathering with no set activity at which everyone stays longer than intended because they are enjoying themselves and hate to leave. The urge to return, recreate, and recapture the experience is there. Invariably the suggestion is made, "Let's do this again!" The third place exists because of that urge.

A Home Away from Home

If such establishments as the neighborhood tavern were nearly as bad as generations of wives have claimed them to be, few of the ladies should have found much reason to be concerned. The evil houses

would have fallen of their own foul and unredeeming character. In fact, however, third places compete with the home on many of its own terms and often emerge the winner. One suspects that it is the similarity that a third place bears to a comfortable home and not its differences that poses the greater threat. Aye, there's the rub—the third place is often more homelike than home.

Using the first and second definitions of *home* (according to my Webster's), the third place does not qualify, being neither 1) the "family's place of residence" or 2) that "social unit formed by a family living together." But the third definition of home as offering "a congenial environment" is more apt to apply to the average third place than the average family residence. The domestic circle can endure without congeniality, but a third place cannot. Indeed, many family nests are brutish places where intimacy exists without even a smattering of civility.

Obviously, there is a great deal of difference between the private residence and the third place. Homes are private settings; third places are public. Homes are mostly characterized by heterosocial relations; third places most often host people of the same sex. Homes provide for a great variety of activities, third places far fewer. Largely, the third place is what the home is not, yet, there clearly exists enough similarity to invite comparison.

Seeking traits of "homeness," I chanced upon a volume by the psychologist David Seamon. He set forth five criteria against which "homes away from home" can be assessed. Seamon's illustrative comments are confined to the private residence. Clearly, he did not anticipate a comparison such as this; that makes his criteria particularly useful and not biased toward public places.³¹

The home *roots* us, begins Seamon; it provides a physical center around which we organize our comings and goings. Those who have a third place will find the criterion applies. As a self-employed individual once told me with regard to his coffeeshop, "Other than home, this is the only place where I know I'm going to be every day at about the same time." If the individual has a third place, the place also "has him." In America, the third place does not root individuals as tightly as, say, in France, but it roots them nonetheless. Those who regularly visit third places expect to see familiar faces. Absences are quickly noted, and those present query one another about an absent member.

The third place cannot enforce the regularity of appearance of the individual, as can home or work. A woman from Arizona related to me an account of her third place while she was a single working woman in Chicago. It illustrates the expectations that emerge among third place regulars. She and several others had become friends out of the mutual accessibility and appeal offered by a corner drugstore and its short-order food service. "The store was more home than where we all lived," she said, "in the resident hotels, apartments, YWCA, or whatever. If one of the group missed a day, that was all right. If we didn't see someone for two days, someone went to check to make sure the person was all right."³²

For most Americans, third places do not substitute for home to the extent that hers had. In some cases, however, they root them even more so. Matthew Dumont, an East Coast psychiatrist, once went "underground" to study a place he dubbed the Star Tavern, in a blighted area of his city. There he found that the bartender and his tavern were meeting the needs of homeless men far better than the local health and welfare agencies. The Star was not a home away from home for those men. It *was* home.³³

Seamon's second criterion of "at-homeness" is appropriation, or a sense of possession and control over a setting that need not entail actual ownership. Those who claim a third place typically refer to it in the first person possessive ("Rudy's is our hangout"), and they behave there much as if they did own the place.

When visiting another's home, one is bound to feel a bit like an intruder no matter how cordial the host, whereas the third place engenders a different feeling. The latter setting is a public place, and the regular is not an outsider. Further, just as a mother realizes her contribution to the family, regulars realize their contributions to the sociable group. They are members in good and full standing, a part of the group that *makes* the place.

Often, the regular is extended privileges and proprietary rights denied transient or casual customers. A special place may be reserved, formally or informally, for the "friends of the house." Access through doors not normally used by the public may be granted. Free use of the house phone may be permitted. But whether tangible benefits and privileges accrue or not, appropriation increases with familiarity. The

more people visit a place, use it, and become, themselves, a part of it, the more it is theirs.

Third, contends Seamon, homes are places where individuals are regenerated or restored. Here, one must readily concede that third places are not recommended for the physically ill or exhausted. The home, if not the hospital, is required for them. But, in terms of the regeneration of the spirit, of unwinding, or of “letting one’s hair down”—in terms of *social* regeneration—the third place is ideally suited. Many a dutiful wife and mother will confess that she feels most at home with her close friends at some comfortable snuggerly apart from her home and family.

The fourth theme of “at-homeness” is the feeling of being at ease or the “freedom to be.” It involves the active expression of personality, the assertion of oneself within an environment. In the home, observes Seamon, this freedom is manifest in the choice and arrangement of furniture and other decor. In the third place, it is exhibited in conversation, joking, teasing, horseplay, and other expressive behaviors. In either case, it is a matter of leaving one’s mark, of being associated with a place even when one is not there.

Finally, there is *warmth*. It is the least tangible of the five qualities Seamon associates with “at-homeness,” and it is not found in all homes. Warmth emerges out of friendliness, support, and mutual concern. It radiates from the combination of cheerfulness and companionship, and it enhances the sense of being alive. On this account, the score is lopsided in favor of the third place for, although homes can exist without warmth, the third place cannot. While homes provide much that is necessary apart from warmth and friendliness, these are central to third place association that would quickly dissolve without them.

Seamon makes much of the relationship between the warmth of a room or other space and the use it gets. Unused places feel cold and unshared places lack warmth. Seamon is also aware of the sharp rise in “primary” or one-person households in the United States and wonders what impact the loss of warmth has on those individuals and on society. I share a similar concern over the decline of warmth-radiating third places in America’s towns and cities, and I’d hazard a guess at the effect of this loss. Colder people!

Summary

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 formal 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 and is 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.

Such are the characteristics of third places that appear to be universal and essential to a vital informal public life. I've noted each of them in turn without attempting to describe any net effects that these several characteristics may combine to produce. I turn my attention now to such effects.

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