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Tracking Third Places in Cities along Time

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Abstract

Third places are spaces which have emerged to become spots of positive social interaction between users of cities and increase their social functionality. They allow better connection between people in a way that fills voids and deals with segregation problems in communities. Having intermediate spaces between work and homes helps offer grey zones rather than work in work places and comfort in homes implementing some missing entertainment life. This paper tracks, studies and analyses types of third places in last years and how they have formed to fulfill and suit social needs of people. It also compares between different types regarding communities and users. It hypothesizes that suitable third places differ from a place to another according to types of users, communities and technology.

Keywords: Third Places; Social Interaction; Cities; Technology; Virtual Third Places; Connection

Introduction

Cities are growing every day and are meant to achieve goals and fulfill their users needs to keep growing. This requires them to be designed in certain updating ways to be able to grow and have more people aspiring to live better in them. All cities are composed of certain uses making them achieve different needs of diverse and inhabitants different in levels and needs. They are equipped with uses that increase livability rates of citizens beside housing and work. Such uses differ in size, percentage and variety from a city to another according to many factors. Some cities have larger residential uses than other ones which may have more industrial or administrative or others. Relative uses define about city character.

Comparative advantage of cities is an important factor to be taken into consideration for cities to be evaluated. Historical monuments in cities tend to be recognized more as touristic and farms can be some good source of agricultural income for example.

Figure 1: Cafes and restaurants around Campo square, Siena, Italy showing gathering of people. *Source*: (Noormohammadi S., 2018).

Planning new cities in the last years obliges them to add catalysts that help transfer more people and make life better. This called for third places to be introduced into them, in newer, more sustainable and suitable ways for ensuring that users can enjoy living better. Plazas in city centres and open spaces allow for people to have tours and enjoy monuments of cities. Figure (1) shows open plaza surrounded by restaurants and cafes as hubs for positive social interaction.

Call for third places arose from presence of activities that require to be done in different ways. As markets used to be about selling and buying goods in streets anciently, nowadays people shop in malls to buy, spend some time outdoors and even have their lunches. Malls in this era are considered one of the most remarkable third places. They are a gigantic closed space including shops, booths, brand shops, cafeterias, restaurants and food courts. Analyzing the combination of such different commercial uses, they have diverse places for many activities to be done for many kinds of users. In shops, women can spend their time in buying clothes, perfumes and having fun if they are a group together. Booths are considered to be a simple addition where people can buy and sell in a small area without being in a closed space. Cafeterias provide some formal and informal spaces where groups, couples and singles can sit, drink, think, have some comfortable time and even eat some fast food. Restaurants can be able to provide food for those who want to eat when they want to skip shopping when they feel hungry.

Figure 2: Maxwell Food Centre, Singapore. *Source*: Tang, n.d., 2021.

Food courts, in their modern style in this era, can be some good third place. They are the intervention where people can meet and eat in a big space. Figure (2) shows a gathering of people in a food centre in Singapore where they can come from different locations to just sit, meet and eat together. In addition, cinemas are provided in some malls to have some fun watching new movies. Some malls include hypermarkets selling all needed groceries and house requirements. Bank branches can be included in some malls to manage financial issues for all users.

Literature Review

A third place is defined by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg as a place of refuge other than the home or workplace where people can regularly visit and commune with friends, neighbors, coworkers, and even strangers. He argues that its quality is affected by physical aspects of proximity and easy access from home or work for many and ability to offer food and drinks (Oldenburg, 1991). They can be small businesses, cafes, coffee shops, bars, pubs, restaurants, community centers, general stores and so on. There are some physical characteristics that support human use and social interaction, which are visible from the street, likely characterize third places more than other places on the main street. They can be listed as: personalization of the street front by the business, permeability of the business to the street, seating provided by the business and shelter provided by the business on the street space (Mehta, V., & Bosson, J. K., 2010). Karssenberg mentions that physical forms of the city, built fabric, facades and the formation of streets are also major inter-weaving factors that affect the human activities along the streets and building (Karssenberg, H., 2016).

Analysing cities and their components from time to time helps having them become better. Some studies show that neighbourhood infrastructure of an area does have a major impact on residents' quality of life (Carley et al, 2001; Buonfino and Hilder, 2006; Goodchild, 2008). While there are a number of ways that this happens, one of the most important is the impact it has on social interaction. Third spaces are studied in their form and activities provided in the space for users. They are spaces that are prepared for a short stay for people for a couple or several hours where they come and leave occasionally or may extend to days and weeks in some types.

Third places impact is said to be affected with population size of cities users. Cities with small populations may have third places that may not be the most suitable with larger size cities. Metropolitan population was correlated with citation of three kinds of third places: clubs and organizations, the city area itself, and neighborhood parties, block parties, cookouts, barbecues (Jeffres, L. W. et al., 2009). Other studies show that third spaces are strong catalysts and attraction spots for urban livability and cities users. Some say that third places are important social settings where young people congregate for recreation, social contact, and community involvement apart from their homes (first place) and places of employment or education (second place) (Oldenburg R., Brissett D., 1982).

Mentorship plays a critical role in helping people to start businesses, providing them with the tools that they need to grow personally and improve their skills. Previous research has shown that mentorship, leadership development, and entrepreneurial abilities are important for one to have, but they need deeper research.

Tracking of Third Spaces

Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) discuss how the components of third place change as the world changes. A third place should be designed in accordance with community aspirations in order to fill the missing gap of sociability. Third place theory is not just about spaces and their use. It is also about meeting the needs of those in a growing academic community (Purnell, D., & Breede, D. C., 2018).

Third spaces have been evolving since years, yet taking different forms than nowadays. In Arabic cities, like Riyadh for example, neighborhoods used to be formed of clusters of residential buildings having in-between spaces like courts. Urban morphology of traditional Arab settlements is characterised by the narrow and shallow street corridors leading to neighbourhoods resulting in closer public interactions and closed private spaces, which prevented friction from bustling public life (Kiet, 2011; Costa and Noble, 1996).

Figure 3: Old urban fabric of Riyadh city in KSA. *Source*: Al-Hemaidi W. K., 2001.

The Arab culture mostly developed around the circular or spiral pattern with religion at its centre of gravity (Bianca, 2000). Centre of city used to have multifunctional core system surrounding central mosque along with interconnected souqs as common public and commercial facilities. The main spines from the grand mosque complex lead to the walls or gates from which the narrow streets lead to a cluster of neighbourhoods. There was a transition of urban space from public to semi-private to private residential units in these settlements giving a sense of zoning (Mani Dhingra, Subrata Chattopadhyay, 2016). Figure (3) shows a layout for an old neighborhood in Riyadh city in Saudi Arabia where houses were formed as a cluster surrounding some open areas.

In developing countries, for example in Egypt, one of the most famous types of third spaces is cafeterias with all of their types. It is a place that contains tables and chairs for sitting, chatting, drinking and eating and a kitchen for preparing food and drinks, in addition to a toilet. It acts as a vibrant suitable third place for users to spend time outdoors and gathering spots for youth. It is similar to the bar in European countries, where people come, sit, think, chat, make some conversations, have some drink and sometimes have some fast food.

Figure 4: Addition of seating in outdoor areas to encourage interaction.
Source: Mehta, V., & Bosson, J. K., 2010.

Restaurants, cafeterias and bars are all types of third places that are designed in different ways according to culture, community and users. Figure (4) shows photos of a vibrant area where people have activities of walking, sitting and other activities. Providing areas in streets for people to perform different activities help adding life to cities where streets don't just become corridors of transportation, but also places of different activities.

Mood, Interaction and Third Spaces

One of the issues that face any person in this era is mood. It is what can make people function properly in some way or another, especially in certain jobs. Office buildings in some companies take it into consideration while designing their offices. In schools as well, some subjects are taught in a way to boost the mood and refresh it like physical activities, drawing and music classes. People, in their life, continuously seek having good moods in most activities. They aspire to eat well, drink what is refreshing, sleep deeply and enjoy all what they can do in life. This aspire for good life is certainly accompanied with their desire to achieve good mood while living. Third spaces are suggested to be designed in a way that they can be mood changers in a way that first and second places of home and work can not give or provide. External interaction with strangers rather than known people in first and second places gives some different kind of livability.

Milligan (1998) states, "Place attachment is significantly based on the meaningfulness of the interaction itself (which then imbues a site with meaning), not on the inherent meaningfulness of the place in which it occurs". In other words, people are attached not to brick and mortar but to the interaction that takes place within that physical structure. Third spaces are designed to be able to generate positive interactions between users for enhancing mood for different users.

Figure 5: Sheltered Resting Area in Wuhan city in China acting as third space.
Source: Zeng, Y.; Chen, B., 2024.

Most third places are designed to serve as social connectors. Their success depends on their ability to make people feel better where they become a positive addition in their life at different times suiting many moods. Figure (5) shows a simple seating area in Wuhan city in China where people gather in a shelter around a table to have some time together.

Natural spaces as third places

One of the most frequently visited third spaces in all cities is beaches and parks. Frequent exposure to natural settings, such as beaches, can improve mental health generally by lowering stress and anxiety. Beaches and water canals in cities help add a diverse and

unique natural element where people get exposed to a dynamic natural feature on land. An added water feature on land that is present by nature and used by people creates a life that is different from the axiality of streets and running vehicles on asphalt.

Urban parks and gardens in cities and neighborhoods also act as third spaces for all types of users. They allow for people to spend time in open fresh areas to release stress and connect back with nature. Lots of activities can be done in parks where people can meet, walk, talk, barbecue and even perform some work tasks. They are suitable for diverse users of families, couples, friends, singles and children to play freely. Parks and green areas are characterized by being filled with natural elements of trees, grass and openness to sky where open environment gives feeling of vastness and offers an environment filled with connection to nature.

Third Spaces and Technology

Third spaces are affected in their forms and constitution with technology. Cafeterias in cities are equipped with screens showing movies and matches of football as some sort of entertainment. In other fast food restaurants, some music is played in the background. Technology has spread widely in last decades to the level that some say it has offered the opportunity for construction of virtual third places. Thus, it is considered to be one of the critical elements in the formation of third spaces. Meanwhile, not all third spaces are run by technology or include it in their form or constitution. Yet, malls for example, are now equipped and run with technology. Sound systems in shops, lighting systems and screens showing prices, brands and sales are all included in the majority of malls. In addition, their absence may make them dysfunction properly. Cinemas are all run with screens and can not function at all without them. Some third spaces run better with technology, like theatres and museums. Theatres are composed of stages and seating for spectators who make reservations and enjoy plays and shows that are performed with actors and sound systems. Museums, as well, have lighting systems that make them operate in the evening and screens that show history of what is shown for visitors. Equipping all of them with screens and professional lighting systems help make users experiences much richer. Some restaurants and cafeterias are shifting towards making deliveries using barcodes and mobile applications for easiness of their users. This makes technology in this era one of the main factors that can be much effective in third spaces.

Figure 6: Screenshot from Asheron's Call II that shows two players standing outside of town center exchanging healing "buffs" (beneficial spells cast on oneself or other people's avatars) and thanks you's. *Source*: Constance A. Steinkuehler, Dmitri Williams, 2006.

Technology has allowed emergence of online games that allow some sort of connection between game players. Some games are played in a way that make players communicate together and exchange some items during playing where they form sort of communication Figure (6) shows screenshot from a game having conversation about sharing items.

Results, Discussion & Conclusion

Tracking of third spaces along time have shown their evolution and development according to many factors. Markets were the first type of third places where people used to sell and buy goods in open streets, then started to evolve in other ways. In recent years, cities included malls, restaurants, cafeterias, food courts, clubs, parks and beaches as third places. They offered public spaces designed in different ways to suit diverse users.

Technology has been an effective element in the type and form of third space in many ways. At some time, technology and screens have spread in cities becoming a primary factor indoors and outdoors. This has resulted in major changes in cities, mentally and psychologically making users live in more digital ways than they used to in the past decades. Basically, third places appeared when houses and work were not the only places that people can live in. By time, they have found that new types of uses should be gone to in order to have better life.

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