



MAKING A GARDEN OUT OF A JUNGLE: THE POWER OF “THIRD PLACES”

BY KALI SAPOSNICK



Celebrating The Third Place

edited by
Ray Oldenburg

In 1989 sociologist Ray Oldenburg recorded the sharp decline of “third places” in America with his ground-breaking book *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts & How They Get You Through the Day* (Paragon; rereleased in 1997 by Marlowe & Company). He defined the third place as the core setting for informal social interaction and an essential realm of human experience (along with the home and the workplace). These public gathering places, common in Europe and other parts of the world but quickly disappearing in the U.S., provide people with opportunities to relax and converse with others in their community. Without such places, life becomes “jangled and fragmented.”

Like other observers, Oldenburg has depicted the modern trend toward increasing social isolation as troubling: “Ever since the solidifying effect of World War II passed into history, Americans have been growing further apart from one another. Lifestyles are increasingly privatized and competitive; residential areas are increasingly devoid of gathering places.” What are the effects of isolation on American lifestyles? Despite our material comforts, many of us suffer from boredom, loneliness, and alienation.

Oldenburg’s vision of restoring third places stems from his conviction that when we feel connected to one another socially, we become healthier

as individuals and stronger as a society. Conversely, he argues that no matter how advanced technology becomes or how many public policies we implement, when we neglect the informal group experience, we disempower ourselves and weaken the democratic process.

Elements of the Third Place

In the last decade, *The Great Good Place* has garnered a growing readership among individuals and groups seeking to revitalize urban areas and public life. In 2001 Oldenburg edited *Celebrating The Third Place* (Marlowe & Company), a collection of essays from people around the U.S. who have been designing and creating public gathering places. Against great odds—many small businesses fail—these pioneers have sustained diverse enterprises by intuitively practicing or learning the principles outlined in *The Great Good Place*. As employers, they treat their staff with respect, encourage them to take responsibility for the business, and train them well. As hosts, they develop rapport with their customers and create a warm and fun ambience. Most importantly, their businesses embody what Oldenburg identifies as the main characteristics of a third place:

- **Neutral ground.** In a third place people can easily join in or disengage from the conversation.
- **Leveler.** All people, regardless of class and status, are welcome and intermingle.
- **Engaging Conversation.** Talk is the main activity and provides the greatest value. The rules are simple: Don’t dominate the conversation, be sensitive to others’ feelings, speak on topics of general interest, and avoid trying to instruct.

- **Accessibility and accommodation.** People can wander in almost any time of day or night and find someone to talk to.
- **Regulars.** The people who frequent the place give it character, set the tone, and welcome both old-timers and newcomers.
- **Low profile.** The decor is plain and unimpressive, discouraging pretension and self-consciousness.
- **Playful mood.** Displays of wit are encouraged. The congenial environment makes it feel like a home away from home.

Informal Conversation and Organizational Change

What is the significance of third places for those interested in organizational change? For a number of years, observers have been discussing the importance of free-flowing, informal conversation among coworkers in order to share knowledge and spark innovation. For example, Juanita Brown and some colleagues gave birth to the World Café methodology, which links small- and large-group conversations to enhance collaborative thinking (see “The World Café: Living Knowledge Through Conversations That Matter,” V12N5). According to Brown, key features of café conversations are that they take place in neutral territory where everyone feels included, and they serve as bridges for people of diverse perspectives and backgrounds.

Likewise, Etienne Wenger’s work on communities of practice highlights how we create and use knowledge through informal networks (“Communities of Practice: Learning As a Social System” V9N5). These networks share many characteristics with third places, in that individuals are bound by

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similar interests rather than organizational structures. Wenger cites the example of Xerox repair technicians who learn more about solving problems over breakfast together than from formal knowledge-sharing programs.

Oldenburg warns that we must be diligent in protecting third places: “Neglect of the informal public life can make a jungle of what had been a garden while, at the same time, diminishing the ability of people to cultivate it.” As these examples show, we

break the bonds of community at our own peril, for they are vital to our success as a society and are extremely difficult to replace. ■

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