

# Our Vanishing “Third Places”

by Ray Oldenburg

Most residential areas built since World War II have been designed to protect people from community rather than connect them to it.

Virtually all means of meeting and getting to know one’s neighbors have been eliminated. An electronically-operated garage door out front and a privacy fence out back afford near-total protection from those who, in former days, would have been neighbors.

Here and there one sees evidence of people struggling against the anti-community character of the postwar suburban landscape. A rare vacant lot attracts dog-owners who, near day’s end, time their visits so as to maximize contact with others. The animals “doing their business” constitutes a social high point in their owners’ day.

Beneath a shade tree by a convenience store one sees working men drinking a beer which they may not consume inside, and enjoying the company of other men for which there is no provision inside. Elsewhere, men and women

WHAT SUBURBIA CRIES FOR ARE THE MEANS FOR PEOPLE TO GATHER EASILY, INEXPENSIVELY, REGULARLY, AND PLEASURABLY — A “PLACE ON THE CORNER,” REAL LIFE ALTERNATIVES TO TELEVISION...

build a meager social life around visits to a laundromat, a most unlikely place, and yet many laundromat owners add amenities so as to capitalize on people’s frustrated need for affiliation.

Such embers of human association signal the flaw in much of today’s residential land use pattern — all space is used up and there’s no provision for a community life. What should be local is remote, and because it is remote it serves no community at all.

What suburbia cries for are the means for people to gather easily, inexpensively, regularly, and pleasurably — a “place on the corner,” real life alternatives to television, easy escapes from the cabin fever of marriage and family life that do not necessitate getting into an automobile.

## “THIRD PLACES”

Most needed are those “third places” which lend a public balance to the increased privatization of home life. Third places are nothing more than informal public gathering places. The phrase “third places” derives from considering our homes to be the “first” places in our lives, and our work places the “second.”

Americans long enjoyed third places in the form of the inns and ordinaries of colonial society, then as the saloons and general stores springing up with westward expansion. *Colonial Taverns*. Later came the candy stores, soda fountains, coffee shops, diners, etc. which, along



Just some of the regulars.

with the local post office, were conveniently located and provided the social anchors of community life.

“Third places” also suggest the stability of the tripod in contrast to the relative instability of the bipod. Life without community has produced, for many, a life style consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle. Social well-being and psychological health depend upon community. It is no coincidence that the “helping professions” became a major industry in the United States as suburban planning helped destroy local public life and the community support it once lent.

Nor is it a coincidence that the *joie de vivre* cultures of the world are those in which third places are regarded as just as essential as home and work. “Joy in living” depends upon peoples’ capacity to enjoy the company of those who live and work around them. Places to do this must be provided and the time to do it will be available if those places are close to where people live.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THIRD PLACES TO INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES

Third places serve many functions, important both to individuals and to the communities they live in:

1. *Third places help unify neighborhoods.* Where third places are absent we find that people often live in the same vicinity for years without ever getting to know one another. Indeed, the subdivision resident who knows three other families is something of a social gad-about.

Before neighborhood taverns were banished to commercial strips, the average one drew about 80 percent of its trade from within a two-block radius. It served the same function as does the English “local” — creating community where there would otherwise be a regi-

mentation of private dwellings with little interaction between households.

2. *Third places also serve as “ports of entry” for visitors and newcomers to the neighborhood where directions and other information can easily be obtained.* For new residents, they provide a means of getting acquainted quickly and learning where things are and how the neighborhood works.

One might have thought that the high rate of residential mobility in our society would have inspired planners to make provision for new residents to get acquainted quickly and easily. With almost a fifth of the population changing residence every year, would it not have made sense to create the means for newcomers to be easily assimilated? Instead, the typical residential district is notable for its absence of public gathering places, offering instead of maze of frequently deserted streets.

3. *Third places are “sorting” areas.* While third places serve to promote the habit of association generally, they are also the places in which those with special interests find one another. In third places, amateur musicians, shooting enthusiasts, poetry lovers, fishermen, scuba divers, etc., get introduced and find local outlets for their interests. Here is provided the basis of whatever kind and degree of local culture will emerge. In the modern subdivision, “local” culture is provided by television.

4. *Third places can bring youth and adults into association with one another.* In soda fountains, diners, family taverns, produce markets, and the like, children of prewar days “hung out” with adults and learned a lot from

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## Colonial Taverns

“Group discussions were a traditional part of tavern social activity. Within the tavern context, ordinary citizens had an opportunity to express their opinions and hear the viewpoints of others. ... Politicians found working within the tavern where large crowds gathered was a means of securing public attention. John Adams commented in 1761, ‘These [public] Houses are in many places the Nurseries of our Legislators ...’ “

*From Early American Taverns, by Kym S. Rice (New York: Regnery Gateway, 1983).*

“As early as 1752 one hundred and twenty licensed taverns did business in [Philadelphia] ... Such houses offered a genuine social solvent. ‘I dined at a tavern with a very mixed company of different nations and religions,’ recorded Dr. Alexander Hamilton in his *Itinerarium* in 1744. ‘There were Scots, English, Dutch, Germans, and Irish; there were Roman Catholics, Churchmen, Presbyterians, Quakers, Newlighters, Methodists, Seventh daymen, Moravians, Anabaptists, and one Jew,’ gathered in ‘a great hall well stocked with flies.’ Daytimes, hundreds frequented the London Coffee House at Front and Market streets, opened by William Bradford in 1754, which served as a general clearinghouse for business, news and gossip ... ”

*From Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin, by Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942).*

*Illustration: Philadelphia’s famous City Tavern was located next to the Bank of Pennsylvania. The Tavern is on the left in this 1800 engraving by William Russell Birch. From Library of Congress.*





Capitol Hill, Seattle.

## Quench the Thirst for Community

by David Sucher

"This corner is every bit as barren and unfriendly as it appears to be. Yet the urban thirst for new experiences and stimulation is so great (and obvious to all) that even here in an urban Sahara the entrepreneur can — with the most minimal of investment — create an oasis for people to 'hang out, meet people, swap ideas' ...

Like the lichen — which pioneers the barest and most inhospitable mountain summit and gradually through its own chemical action breaks down the hardest rock into soil where plants can grow — any refreshment is nice but the espresso bar particularly creates a fertile ground for community.

Again, government action can thwart such small improvements as this espresso bar. But its creation — so very vital to the real life of cities — is beyond institutional reach."

From *City Comforts: How to Build An Urban Village* (Seattle: City Comforts Press, 1995). Reprinted with permission.

*Editor's Note: In City Comforts, David Sucher (a former Seattle planning commissioner) offers a number of common-sense, often easy to implement, ideas on how to strengthen neighborhoods by creating a better built environment. The book is well-illustrated and a delight to read. It should be on your bookshelf. To order City Comforts (\$21.00, including shipping), call: 800-942-2489; fax: 206-632-1883; or e-mail: dsucher@city-comforts.com.*

*Sucher, in his book, also offers a cautionary note to planners:*

"Be limited in your goals. Creating community — which is what all this boils down to — is a worthy goal. But it is a goal largely beyond the reach of government.

Community evolves from individual conversations. Venues for these conversations are difficult to create. That's one reason very few adults ever hang around the so-called Community Center. Such places, built and managed by bureaucracy, most often fall flat. Necessarily run by gray government, they lack the unique and quirky personality often contributed by individual enterprise. Interesting public spaces provide only a framework, with the daily details supplied by aware entrepreneurs who recognize what is working and what is not, and act immediately."

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them. Sadly, as time spent with parents has declined for the nation's children, so has the time spent with other adults.

Between 1965 and 1985, the amount of time parents spent with their children declined by almost half. Meanwhile, those children were increasingly being raised in neighborhoods where contact with other adults was reduced to almost nothing because of the lack of places where they might spend time together.

5. *Third places help care for the neighborhood.* The people who operate third places are often the kind of people noted social observer Jane Jacobs described as "public characters." They seem to know everybody in the neighborhood; they keep an eye on the local kids and what they're up to; they do favors for local customers; and they keep regulars up-to-date on all variety of local matters.

Third places also serve as gathering spots when emergencies or disasters occur. People want, and need, to be with other people in these situations — to help and support each other, and to decide on courses of action.

6. *Third places foster political debate.* From the colonial inn to the old country store, from the neighborhood tavern to the soda fountain, third places have historically served as forums for political debate and discussion.

It should surprise no one that political literacy is low in this country; that people don't know who serves in the President's cabinet, or who their local legislators are. This kind of information matters to us more when we put it to use by conversing, arguing, and debating with each other. We can better test and refine our opinions by interacting with others, not by simply listening to the pronouncements of television commentators.

7. *Third places help reduce the cost of living.* Where people meet regularly to relax and enjoy one another's company, natural support groups or "mutual aid" societies tend to form. As we take our relaxation with people, we grow to like them and, as we come to like them, we

are inclined to “do for them.” Third places are also easy places to collect time-saving, labor-saving, and money-saving advice — sometimes without even asking!

8. *Third places are entertaining.* And the entertainment is provided by the people themselves. The sustaining activity is conversation which is variously passionate and light-hearted, serious and witty, informative and silly. In the course of it, people become very near and dear to one another such that continuity is assured.

Television offers the principal form of entertainment today. Yet how many of us, having “surfed” through the available channels two or three times and been bored by it all, wouldn’t like to walk down to the corner and have a cold one (or a hot cup of coffee or tea) with friends and neighbors? Ah, but there’s nothing on the corner, nor in walking distance at all, to easily go to.

9. *Third places give the gift of friendship.* Not the singular, lifelong “best” friendship necessarily, but the tonic of friends met in numbers. The great boon to friendship is that which is often called “neutral ground” and third places represent the best of it. On neutral ground people avoid the obligations of both guest and host and simply enjoy the company. They come and go without making arrangements or excuses; they may leave the very moment it suits them to do so. It is a very easy form of human association.

When friends meet in numbers, as opposed to “one-on-one,” there is a festive spirit and laughter is frequent. There is an atmosphere of acceptance and belonging that no single friend, no matter how close, can provide.

10. *Third places are important for retired people.* They provide the means for keeping in touch with others and continuing to enjoy the life of the community. “Only in America,” it seems, do millions of retired people make a final migration away from the cities and towns where they worked and knew people.

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## The Corner Grocery

“We believe that people are not only willing to walk to their local corner groceries, but that the corner grocery plays an essential role in any healthy neighborhood: partly because it is just more convenient for individuals; partly because it helps to integrate the neighborhood as a whole. ...

[A] study by Arthur D. Little, Inc., ... found that neighborhood stores are one of the two most important elements in people’s perception of an area as a neighborhood. ...



*Corner grocers still flourish in many older neighborhoods*



*... and also serve as informal community information centers.*

Apparently this is because local stores are an important destination for neighborhood walks. People go to them when they feel like a walk as well as when they need a carton of milk. In this way, as a generator of walks, they draw a residential area together and help to give it the quality of a neighborhood.”

*From A Pattern Language: Towns -Buildings -Construction, by Christopher Alexander, et. al., (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977).*

## River Park’s Main Street

In one chapter of *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg discusses some of the changes to one small midwestern town:

“In River Park [in 1940] informal socializing spilled out into the street and into places of commerce ... . It is for this reason that Main Street was almost as much a third place as any of the sites along it. ... The more gregarious or less busy citizen might take an hour to negotiate one block of Main Street, for there were always a good many people walking or lounging along it during daylight hours. It was not just a matter of whom one might meet coming out of a store or walking in the other direction, for one could chat with the elderly and retired who sat along the store front steps and benches provided by many of the business establishments. The old-timers liked nothing better than to talk with the more active people of the community and keep up on things.

If one were to visit River Park today, one would see quite a different place from that which existed in 1940. ... The people are largely gone from the street now, as are the physical amenities that earlier accommodated them. The architecture of Main Street has changed noticeably. The earlier storefronts featured large windows and the majority of them had outdoor seating, in most cases integral to their architecture. Wide steps and Kasota stone slabs that flanked the entrances were heavily used by those who found them cool places to sit in the summer. ... Large windows and the encouragement to lounge at the portals combined to unify indoors and out and to encourage a ‘life on the street’ as well. That outdoor seating is all but gone now. The new storefronts are tight against the street and their much smaller windows allow little seeing in or seeing out.”



## Third Places I Know

by Kathy Madden

Many cities are bringing back neighborhoods by creating new types of third places. Local efforts don't have to be dramatic or expensive. Sometimes, just small changes can create a world of difference.

In New Haven, Connecticut, the width of a street bordering the Yale University campus was reduced, and the sidewalk enlarged, with parking added back along the rest of the block. The new sidewalk space is used for outdoor seating next to a coffee shop. People now meet there, and run into friends ... a man has even started selling newspapers on the corner because enough people now pass by.

In San Rafael, California, one community developed a plan to upgrade an existing park (in conjunction with its "sister city" in Italy). A new bocci court in the park has become a gathering spot for all ages. Every night at least a hundred people play bocci, bring picnics, and socialize with their friends.

In San Bernardino, California, a downtown community has worked with the city to create a central square where a parking lot had stood. In the square, there are now markets and events, the bus stops nearby, and angled parking has been added to the edge of the square (helping create a more active retail environment than parallel parking would, while also slowing traffic speeds).

In my neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, there are many places where people gather, including an active farmers market, a bookstore open until 9 or 10 at night, bagel stores with outdoor seating ... There are also many family-owned businesses: a butcher, a fruit and vegetables shop, a middle eastern supply store. Many of these places have been owned and operated by at least two generations. They are places where the owner trusts you to pay the next day, and where you greet each other by name. Shopping in my neighborhood is a social as well as a retail experience.

Kathy Madden is Vice President of Project for Public Spaces, a non-profit organization that works with communities across the country on improvements to public spaces to increase pedestrian activity and promote a sense of community. She authored, "A Cry for Community," in PCJ #16.



## "Heyimas": Another Kind of Third Place

"In a Valley town everybody had two houses: the house you lived in, your dwelling-place, in the Left Arm of the double-spiral-shaped town; and in the right Arm, your House, the heyimas. ... The heyimas was a center of worship, instruction, training, and study, a meetinghouse, a political forum, a workshop, a library, archive, and museum, a clearinghouse, an orphanage, hotel, hospice, refuge, resource center, and the principal center of economic control and management for the community ... In the smaller towns the heyimas was a large, five-sided, underground chamber, subdivided with partitions, with a low, four-sided, pyramidal roof showing above-ground."

From *Always Coming Home*, by Ursula K. Le Guin (Grafton Books, 1988). Editor's Note: *Le Guin's book about the Kesh people, besides telling a fascinating story, offers many insights into the meaning of community and its physical form.*



## New Urbanism Principles

"Many activities of daily living should occur within walking distance, allowing independence to those who do not drive, especially the elderly and the young. ... Concentrations of civic, institutional, and commercial activity should be embedded in neighborhoods and districts, not isolated in remote, single-use complexes."

From the "Charter of the New Urbanism" adopted by the Congress of the New Urbanism. Editor's Note: *The Charter of the New Urbanism is available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.arc.miami.edu/cnu/charter.htm>.*

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"Sun Cities" did not come into vogue until retirees confronted the prospect of trying to find a life in the boring suburbs from which work had provided the only means of regular escape. The young and the active need the elderly and the contributions they have always made to community. But the elderly also need community, and need it more acutely.

### SOME PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

Having described some of the many benefits of third places, let me offer just a few personal observations:

- Third places work as I described in the preceding paragraphs only when they are local; and they work best when within walking distance of the people they serve.

- With very few exceptions, third places have been and remain local, independently owned, commercial establishments. Chain establishments run by large corporations can, at best, yield less hardy forms of third places, subject to the (cash) flow of distant owners.

- While third places often seem to depend on a mysterious chemistry, planners can help foster the conditions in which they might emerge.

One way is by eliminating the policies prevalent in so many zoning codes of prohibiting commercial uses such as taverns, coffee houses, donut shops, and the like, from locating where people live. These policies don't just discourage third places, they virtually prevent them. You can't have a *neighborhood* tavern or *neighborhood* coffee house that's not located in the neighborhood.

Another way planners can help is by promoting walkable communities, where people, in fact, are able to easily make their way to their nearby "third place." ♦

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