MY THIRD PLACE
2011-2012 WRITING CAMPAIGN

American Planning Association
Urban Design and Preservation Division

Making Great Communities Happen
About the Urban Design and Preservation Division:
The APA Urban Design and Preservation Division is a nationwide community of professionals dedicated to supporting educational and networking opportunities for planners, urban designers, preservationists and allied professionals. Division members are uniquely concerned with the built environment, particularly urban design, historic preservation, and the legacy of the planning profession. The Division believes good urban design is essential to maintaining community character, a sense of place, quality of life, and economic vitality.

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About the My Third Place Writing Campaign:
The Third Place is a concept espoused by Urban Sociologist Ray Oldenberg in his book The Great Good Place (1989, 1991) which refers to the notion that social surroundings are separate from the tacit social environments of home and work; the first two places. Oldenberg’s premise is that third places provide for and contribute to civil society, democracy, civic engagement, and creating a sense of place. As part of the 2011 writing campaign, the Urban Design and Preservation Division extended the question to its membership and other like-minded professionals: “What is your Third Place?”

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My own third place is probably the café where I eat lunch two or three times a week, but the standard of the Great Good Place that I still carry in my heart exists now only in memory. My father ran a gas station in Duluth, Minnesota for nearly forty years – the golden age of American auto culture – until it was swept away by his own health and the second Oil Shock. He taught me about service and business, how to read people, and incidentally about internal combustion engines and mechanical systems. But most of all I learned about life among men.

Starting in the early sixties I pumped gas, washed windshields, checked oil and tire pressure; all for forty cents a gallon. There was a well-established band of players with my grandfather at the center. He had arrived in northern Minnesota to cut the big timber. His brother and business partner had followed the logging west, but he had remained. Life had been good for a while, but he lost all his money in a bank failure. He tried for years to revive the logging business in the depths of the Depression. During the War he worked at the shipyards, and later started a contracting business with my uncle. He was well into his seventies, and because of the trajectory of his life, of a philosophical bent.

He maintained his perch in the office from morning until suppertime. Throughout the day a stream of regulars passed through to gas up or have work done on their cars, but really to visit.

The day I remember was the first, twenty-five below morning of that winter, the day the junkers died, but not before calling us. I was out of high school and rode in with Dad to open an hour early. The phone was already ringing when we got there. He fired up the ‘39 Ford, three-quarter ton pick-up with the starter motor that spent the night inside. I opened-up and answered the calls. The phone didn’t stop ringing.

A long line of frozen wrecks were pushed into the service bays – points, plugs, batteries, generators – each revived and sent back into the world, not unlike scenes in the emergency rooms on ER or Nurse Jackie. By eleven, things were settling down a little. Dad and his brother were off with the truck. The office was full of regulars who felt the need to top off the tank, or price snow tires. Lunch plans were being made. Just then the truck appeared at the corner, pushing a big, old Chevy with my uncle at the wheel. The light changed and Dad eased the Chevy toward the driveway. He gave it a push and my uncle steered the Chevy into the lot and around the outside island. Dad had the truck up behind the Chevy and was pushing it toward the last turn and slight incline up to the service bay.

“I don’t know if he’s going to make it all the way,” said one of the guys, rising from his seat and moving toward the door. I saw what he meant, ran out past him, and grabbed one of the Chevy’s rear fenders. As the truck began to slip on the ice, one of the regulars took hold of the other fender, and another pushed on the center of the trunk. We powered the Chevy toward the station. I looked up and saw Grandpa, in his eighties now, had come out and was standing under the awning, puffing his pipe and gesturing encouragement with his fist. We gave a last shove, the big door opened and the Chevy rolled onto the lift, alive again, at least until the next cold night.

During this Post-Modern era of Mancessions and Information Superhighways it’s a comfort to look back at a time and place when accomplishments were more visible. But this is not nostalgia for cheap gas and muscle cars, or even for a time when somebody else washed your windshield. I feel that the experience my Dad created for his customers filled an essential human need that illuminates what it takes to build community.
alone.” So what Dad was really providing was an opportunity for a short encounter with a continuing get-together. The office of the station would only hold about six people comfortably, and as a new person came in to pay another would leave, but only after spending ten or fifteen minutes with the sense of having been somewhere; having gotten around.

As his health began to fail and I became increasingly involved in the business, I spent more time with Dad. He talked about how the scene at the station developed. During the War people would trade food ration stamps for gas ration stamps; “I knew I was in the right business then.” But it was the fact that his father was able to spend most days there that fostered an environment where customers lingered. If you had ten minutes Grandpa had a story from the lumber camps, which as often as not, turned into a parable about what to do when life got hard. Dad loved to joke, and it was important to him that the guys hanging around had a good time.

 Millennials in coffee shops, with smart phones and iPads, are not really there for the coffee, or even the wi-fi, but for the opportunity to drink in the scene and perhaps the chance encounter. What drew the guys there on that cold morning was the chance to breathe the air, redolent with car exhaust and starting fluid, in a temple to what was then the defining technology for the American male.

Author:
Mike Agnew, AICP has been a practicing planner for over seventeen years, and has worked for the City of New Orleans, Travis County and the Texas House of Representatives. He has earned a BS in Architectural History from the University of Minnesota and a MURP from the University of New Orleans, and has lived in New Orleans and Austin, Texas, where he was involved in the completion of the Balcones Canyonland Preserve. He is currently employed by North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, specializing in Land Use planning and has completed over thirty comprehensive plans under the state’s Smart Growth law.
My third place is the Renton Farmer’s Market in Renton, Washington. The Farmer’s Market is located in the Piazza, a well-designed, public space that was once a used car lot in Renton’s downtown. As the city grew through post-WWII suburbanization, the historic downtown expanded into a grey tangle of parking lots, car dealerships, and auto-oriented businesses. Economic downturn in the early 1990s hit this area particularly hard. Planners sought revitalization by rezoning downtown for mixed-use, helping car dealerships and auto-oriented businesses relocate to an automall, and providing economic incentives for housing. Significant public investments in a transit center, a public park, a community events center, and a parking garage added momentum to the project. Since its dedication in 2001, the Piazza has served as a community living room for people waiting for a bus, workers catching a little sunshine on their lunch break, downtown residents walking their dogs, kids splashing in the fountains, photographers snapping wedding photos, and all kinds of community events. On its own merits, the Piazza itself is a third place to many in my community.

For me, though, the Piazza is never more alive than when the Farmer’s Market is running, each Tuesday, June through September. Located in a pedestrian zone, vendors unload their wares into colorful, hand drawn carts that are used to set up the market. Like many others, my family and I arrive by foot. Although we go our separate ways each morning our paths converge at “Summer Breeze,” a piece of public art located next to a creek-like water feature that draws people into the main square. When I arrive at the market I am amazed at the abundance in our community: gorgeous bouquets of flowers, a rainbow of fruits and vegetables, handmade cheeses, free-range meats, fresh caught seafood, local honey, and a wide range of pickles, pastries, jellies, and sweets. The Farmer’s Market provides economic opportunity for small businesses to sell their products and build a customer base. Vendors tend to be local, independent businesses, who relish the opportunity to interact with customers. While I am talking tomatoes with Darrell of Westover Farm, my husband is watching a chef demo from our favorite restaurant, and my toddler is bouncing to the music performed by local artists. It gives me the opportunity to build those connections into relationships based on shared experience. It takes what is normally a chore, gathering the food to feed my family of five, and turns it into an enjoyable experience, mixing and mingling with friends old and new, almost like a party. There is no place my family would rather be on a sunny Tuesday afternoon. That is why the Renton Farmer’s Market is my third place.

In the midst of all this activity, I run into old colleague, close family friends, our midwife, a couple co-workers, someone from my church, a customer I worked with over the permit counter, my dental hygienist, and other parents from my kids’ many activities. Once, Jason, a vendor at Tiny’s Organic Fruit commented that it seemed like I knew everyone at the Market. Certainly that is not true, but every time I go to the market it reminds me how many connections I have in my community.

For the people of Renton diversity is a hallmark. Renton is a rapidly diversifying place, with minority populations growing over 165% between the 2000 and 2010 censuses. Pea vines, squash blooms, gai lan, chilies, and other hard to find produce is fresh and well priced, drawing ethnic groups to the market that eat those foods regularly. Seniors come early to get shaded seats in the bandstand and chat with new and life-long friends. Most vendors accept food stamps and WIC coupons, allowing low-income families to reap the benefits of healthy, local foods. They stand side by side with self-proclaimed “foodies” gathering treasures to take back to their gourmet kitchens.

In addition to social opportunity, the market provides political opportunity as well. Space is set aside for non-profit groups to reach out to community. Local politicians from the City Council and the School Board, and even a state legislator, frequent the market and always make time to listen to their constituents. Petitioners keep everyone up to date on the latest initiatives in the works, working the edges of the market right next to those who get up on their soapbox and exercise their first amendment rights.

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All images courtesy of Renton Farmer’s Market.

Author:
Erika Conkling, AICP has been working in community and economic development for the last eleven years. Managing projects with complex issues, a large group of stakeholders, and the need for extensive public involvement is her specialty. Erika currently works as a Senior Planner for the City of Renton, Washington.
On a wintry night, when many northern Michigan residents have departed for seasonal refuge in warmer climates, the bright neon marquee of the Rogers Theater enlivens downtown Rogers City with action and activity. The action could be a movie, a live musical, a high school band concert, a guest lecture or a tap dance class. Whatever the activity, you can be sure that fresh popcorn and candy will be available in the lobby, served up by a local student working her first wage-earning job. The local kids staff the theater’s summer ice cream stand too. Customers are welcome to bring their cone into the show, or hang around with friends at the café tables located outside under signature red and gold umbrellas.

In December, the action is a community Christmas concert featuring performances from three different church choirs, a barbershop quartet, a local guitarist and a brother/sister youth combo on mixed instruments. Sing-along carols are interspersed for audience enjoyment. The event is free and open to the public, with a basket out front for donations.

The Rogers Theater is an unexpected delight in a small town of some 3,300 souls. The building was constructed in 1937 as a movie house, but the advent of video games and in-home projection systems threatened to put the movies out of business. In 2003, the theater was purchased by a retired attorney with a bent for music and the performing arts. A stage was soon added, and live productions began to alternate with first run movies.

From the start, the theater was a community undertaking. The inaugural show on the new stage was produced by the high school drama club. Eventually, a community theater organization was formed to sponsor shows, but the regulars here are not the typical art elite that might be found in a larger place. Instead, the stage and theater management duties are shared by a couple of plumbers, a retired cop, a postal worker, an in-home health care assistant, a pre-school teacher, insurance and car salesmen and a nursing home aide. Volunteer seamstresses make the costumes and cast members scrounge in their own homes to come up with the props. Every audition is open, and every production includes one or two new people not previously involved, who may be totally new to the stage or community. Actors come back time and again because of the fun and camaraderie they experience during rehearsals, performances, or the show post mortem that invariably occurs at the only local bar serving food late into the night.

In summer, a youth theater program is offered at no charge, culminating in a youth production just before school starts in the fall. Every child who auditions is given a part to play, and many come from rival rural towns not known for municipal cooperation. Kids participate in the regular show season as well, where cast members from age 6 to 94 have performed together. Young artists and local musicians have used the stage for recitals and concerts, with their names placed proudly on the marquee.

Performance nights are interesting in a small town. Many in the audience know some or all of the performers on stage. Yet now they see their friends and acquaintances in another light: with unanticipated aspects of character and talent revealed. The theater has become an important “third place,” where the whole of a unique person can be expressed, beyond the roles and restrictions imposed by family and day job. For the community, the great theatrical scenes they witness, along with the amusing flubs, will become the topic of general community conversation, not only in the following week but in the years to come, imbedded as part of local lore.

What is it about community theater that makes it such a successful “Third Place?” One participant quoted on the American Association of Community Theaters’ web site puts it this way: “A friend who used to move a lot told me that every time he moved, he would find a community theatre in which to participate. He knew it was a place he would always feel welcome. It was also a comfortable atmosphere, with the diverse personalities and backgrounds; where a person could always find someone with whom to relate. This has been true for me as well—in Michigan, the United States, and around the world.” (Shirley Harbin, Detroit, MI) In downtown Rogers City, exactly that kind of community theater is alive and well.

Full Disclosure Statement: The Rogers City Theatre is owned and operated by Karl W. Heidemann, the author’s husband, and every item in the author’s home not nailed down to the floor has been “borrowed” to appear on stage as a show prop.

Author:
Mary Ann Heidemann, AICP, presently serves as the Manager of Government Programs and Compliance at the State Historic Preservation Office in St. Paul, Minnesota. Previously, Heidemann created training programs for Michigan State University Extension in the areas of economic development, community planning and environmental management. Heidemann has been an AICP member since 1988.
My favorite third place is Jenny’s Bakery, which is located in my community, Qingdao City, China. It is within walking distance to my home. I clearly remember it was established in the summer of 2009 when I was a junior in college. It is a house converted into a bakery. I was first attracted to the beautiful roses covering the fence. After entering the bakery, I found there was a lot of fresh bread. The aroma of the bread penetrated the whole shop. To my surprise, Jenny’s Bakery is different from other bakeries in China, except the enticing bread. Jenny’s Bakery has a room for community residents to relax. I felt it was just like another home away from my home. The atmosphere there is cozy and comfortable. The room has several wood tables and chairs inside, which match the wood floor. The original wood color makes them close to nature. Many interesting and beautiful photos, taken by the bakery owner, are hanging on the wall. Every table has a small green plant on it. I usually bring my laptop and sit near the window. In the morning, the sunshine comes across the window and warms the whole house. The breeze gently touches my face and brings the scent of flowers. Almost every resident in my community feels that Jenny’s Bakery is just like a home because you are free and comfortable in the cozy atmosphere. If you feel hungry, you can just grab some bread from another room. If you feel thirsty, you can get some coffee or milk by yourself. Just do not forget to put the money into the box which is provided by the owner according to the price tags. It usually costs less than two dollars to both have food and drinks. Even a common student like me can afford them. It seems like time goes slowly in the bakery, especially when you enjoy warm sunshine, gentle breeze, the scent of bread, and light music. I usually spend a whole day there.

Of course, the primary activity in the bakery is communication. I made a lot of friends at the bakery, no matter men or women, kids or old ladies. At first, we just talk about the good taste of the bread. Then as we are familiar with each other, we exchange the news about ourselves and our community. The topics range from pets to health and include all kinds of gossip. The most interesting thing is that I did not know who my neighbor was until we met at the bakery. At that time, my neighbor and I all sat in the bakery and talked about the delicious bread the bakery provided. When we had to leave, we asked for each other’s address, and found we were neighbors. We lived so closely but we did not know each other before we met at the bakery. It is the bakery that gives us some wonderful opportunities to get together and know each other.

I also talked to the bakery owner, Jenny. She has experienced a long time abroad. She took a lot of beautiful and interesting photos which are hanging on the walls. Almost every photo has its own story. She told me a lot of them and I really enjoy the conversation with her. It enriches my knowledge. Besides making some new friends, sometimes I invited my old friends to the bakery to have a cup of coffee and some delicious bread, enhancing our relationships. Actually, my friends all love its comfortable atmosphere and its clean and simple style and finally became its regulars like me. The mood here is not only playful but also cheerful. I remember the last time I was refused at a job interview and lost confidence, I went to the bakery, where my friend Wang who is the husband of Jenny just played guitar and sang a song “Hakuna Matata,” which is a song from the movie Lion King. I could not keep my sad mood when I heard his funny voice and saw his actions. He just encouraged me, saying that it was not a big deal and I deserved a better job. Usually at night, community residents get together in the bakery to play some games, like playing cards. Sometimes, Jenny will teach children and adults how to cook bread. I have participated in one of her lessons. That is a very good experience. The kids and adults who participated seemed happy.

I really love the cozy bakery, my favorite third place. It provides a home away from home just within walking distance for all community residents. The mood there is playful, and the atmosphere is comfortable. Thanks to the bakery, I made a lot of friends. The atmosphere there is cozy and comfortable. The room has several wood tables and chairs inside, which match the wood floor. The original wood color makes them close to nature.

Author:
Xuan Zhang is an urban planning graduate student at the University of Kansas. She comes from China and focuses on housing finance, housing affordability and community development in North America and China.
A couple of years ago, in describing my “third place” (as defined by Ray Oldenburg in The Great Good Place), I would have described The Pioneer, a Mexican restaurant and bar located near our home in the DU (University of Denver) Neighborhood. Almost every Friday night, my wife and I would go to The Pioneer with our neighbors, Gregg and Katie. When the weather permitted, we’d hop on our bikes and enjoy the ride there almost as much as dinner. As frequent guests of The Pioneer, we knew most of the servers by name and felt comfortable talking with the familiar people sitting near us. Tight seating inside and shared table space outside encouraged conversation with other guests, which often became the highlight of the evening.

In the last couple of years, things have changed. For one, we moved out of Denver to Lawrence, Kansas, where I am now a graduate student at the University of Kansas. Next (the big thing), my wife and I had a baby. So now the two of us became the three of us, living in a new city, and without a third place to go when we want to relax in the company of friends (with which we now had none).

Finding a new third place in a new town was going to be very different from selecting The Pioneer. As a student, money is tighter than it used to be when my wife and I worked full-time. No more drinks and dinner whenever we wanted. This new third place will have to offer free or inexpensive accommodations. Next, with a new baby, many places are off-limits. Even if we had money, I don’t see us spending our evenings at bars anymore. With these criteria in mind, our new home away from home became a city park located just south of Lawrence’s downtown, South Park.

The Regulars
What makes South Park a great third place? One requirement for a third place, as defined by Oldenburg, is that it has its share of 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” (Oldenburg, 1999). The more we started going to South Park, the more we started seeing and greeting the same people. This was especially apparent at the park’s free wading pool where I would talk to the same moms and dads each week who also brought their children to the pool.

The Mood Is Playful
Oldenburg describes third places as playful. “Whether pronounced or low key, however, the playful spirit is of utmost importance” (Oldenburg, 1999). Possibly because of the recreational intent of a park, I don’t ever recall a conversation as anything but upbeat and playful. Most of the parents seemed happy to be out of their homes, watching their kids play with other kids, giving them a chance to hang out with other parents.

A Low Profile
South Park is not fancy. It has all the necessary components of a good park - playground equipment, a small wading pool, a gazebo, plenty of green space - but it is not a Central Park or Golden Gate Park. As Oldenburg comments, “Third places are unimpressive looking for the most part. They are not, with few exceptions, advertised; they are not elegant” (Oldenburg, 1999). The focus of this park is not on its facilities. While adequate enough to provide children the opportunity to play, the focus is on socializing. Parents get together and talk while kids play on the equipment. Advice on daycares, baby food and car seats comes easily at this setting.

Exploration and Understanding
The Reasonable Person Model, as defined by Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, “links environmental factors with human behavior” (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003). Two of the needs of human behavior, according to the Reasonable Person Model, are exploration and understanding. Understanding is described as when humans have “preferences for scenes that [are] not confusing and where it seem[s] possible to wander without getting lost” (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003). Exploration is when the “scenes offered the possibility of discovery and learning, and especially the promise of more information as one imagined oneself walking further into the scene” (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003). My third place, South Park, offers both of these opportunities. The park is large enough that I can wander around and explore new areas, without the fear of getting lost. Also, by talking to new people at the park, I have the opportunity of discovery and learning.

Affordable
Finally, I want to emphasize my last requirement for a third place – it must be affordable. In the case of South Park, it is free. The wading pool, the playground equipment, the picnic benches, and the events at South Park are all free and open to anyone. This was very
important to us, especially when we first arrived at Lawrence and neither of us were working yet.

Conclusion
In conclusion, a third place for a young family may not have the same lure or excitement as a third place for a single adult, but it is still serves an important role – socializing with friends in a comfortable environment. I am glad we discovered South Park and the people we’ve met there.

Works Cited:


Author:
Nate Vander Broek recently graduated from the University of Kansas with a Master of Urban Planning. He currently works as a transportation planner for the City of Rapid City in South Dakota. Before going to school, Vander Broek resided in Denver, Colorado where he became interested in transit and pedestrian planning.
Third places serve different needs for different people daily: to meet with friends, to share ideas, to grab a bite to eat, to celebrate the occasion or to mourn a loss. Though every third place is different, each has characteristics that make them important fixtures in communities. Gruben’s Uptown Tap in Plainfield, Illinois is a local bar and grill where, for years, people have gone to meet friends, catch-up with neighbors and take a break from their everyday lives.

Located at 24035 W. Lockport Street in Plainfield, Illinois, Gruben’s Uptown Tap is in the heart of the downtown. Gruben’s maintains a low profile in the downtown area, advertised only by the painted sign on their window and a modest orange sign above the bar. The restaurant and bar’s allure as a third place comes from its worn and classic exterior and, as Ray Oldenburg put it, the lack of “the shiny bright appearance of the franchise establishment” (Oldenburg 1999).

What makes Gruben’s different from other local food and drink establishments is that it’s a place where members of the community go to relax, have a burger and beer, and catch up with friends and neighbors. The open interior of Gruben’s allows for patrons to see and interact with everyone in the bar. The interior of the bar is inviting and entices visitors to explore the rest of room for a familiar face. Gruben’s provides a social scene that is not “confusing and seems possible to wander in without getting lost” (Kaplan and Kaplan 2003). This sense of social exploration gives Gruben’s a unique third place feel. It provides the excitement of meeting someone new with the stability of seeing a familiar face at the next table.

When you first arrive in Gruben’s you hear the buzz of citizens exchanging funny stories and old memories over food and drink with the sound of classic rock and country playing in the background. The open interior of the bar allows for patrons to interact with each other but always leaves the possibility of spotting an old acquaintance from across the room. Ray Oldenburg identified conversation as a main activity of third places and through their open design Gruben’s has created an environment that encourages conversation among patrons (1999).

Gruben’s Uptown Tap is a local favorite of mine and other members of the community because it provides a consistent atmosphere. On any night of the week there can always be found at least a small group of regulars analyzing the latest Chicago sports game or shooting darts at the corner of the bar. It takes few visits to see the familiar faces of the diverse groups of regulars. Construction workers, the local men’s softball league, bank employees, workers from city hall, accountants, all come to Gruben’s. Locals want to feel that upbeat mood and outgoing atmosphere and they go to Gruben’s to meet with people who want that same environment.

In addition to the features I previously identified, Gruben’s Uptown Tap is located in a walkable area, which makes it even more of a great third place. Walkability, in my opinion, is an important feature of a third place. Third places should be in a location that is convenient for someone to just stop in and say hello. It shouldn’t be a place where people have to drive from all around to get to or have difficulty locating where it is. Third places should be located near the people that spend time there and make them the unique places they are. Being located in the heart of downtown Plainfield, surrounded by historic and redeveloped residential areas, Gruben’s is that place people can walk to anytime of the day and stop for a while.
Gruben’s Uptown Tap is where I go when I need to feel like I am part of a greater group of individuals. It promotes an inclusive environment that brings people of different ages, sex, careers, and backgrounds together for social interaction and the sense of community it creates. To quote the Gary Portnoy song made famous by the television show Cheers, "Sometimes you want to go, where everybody knows you name, and there always glad you came". And for me that place is Gruben’s Uptown Tap.

Resources:
Oldenburg, Ray. The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community. Da Capo Press, 1999

Author:
Jim Scudder grew up in Plainfield, IL, a southwest suburb of Chicago, IL. Currently, Scudder lives in Lawrence, KS where he is a graduate student at the University of Kansas completing a Master’s degree in urban planning. Following graduation Scudder hopes to work in economic or real estate development.
Some third places are meticulously planned—courtyards, tavern greens, piazzas, and city squares, for example. Others acquire the status via an informal adoption process of a private establishment—the local coffee shop where patrons can get neighborhood gossip before leaving for work in the morning, the corner market stand, or the bar in Cheers. And still others are created from the relics of the past, re-dying the worn city fabric of yesteryear into couture spaces of today.

Ten years ago, in a pocket of Manhattan west of 10th Street, there was a section of rundown warehouses home to a thriving sex trade, drug dealers, and a lone (but eternally fabulous) Diane von Furstenburg clothing boutique. Overhead, an elevated rail line, long ago decommissioned, cast a shadow across the neighborhood. Called the Meatpacking District for its origins as the city’s location of slaughterhouses and butchers, it had steadily declined as the manufacturing industry slowly left the area. The elevated rail that was used for the transportation of meat and related products was, by the fifties, obsolete as trucking became more and more commonplace. By 1999, developers were pushing for the rail’s demolition. Concerned residents banded together and formed the Friends of the High Line, raised money, and lobbied for city support to transform the rail into a pedestrian walkway. Once CSX Transportation, Inc. donated the rail to the city, the project was underway.

Today, the 1.45 mile line winds its way along the west side, where it offers fabulous views of the Hudson River and city skyline. Much of the original steel rails were incorporated into design features, the native plants that sprouted up between the disused tracks were enhanced and turned into landscape features, and public art was designed and installed.

The uniqueness of the High Line as a third place is that in addition to it being a destination and meeting place, it is also a pass-through. While there are locations to stop, sit, and talk (and even in January the benches were full of people sitting, reading, and talking), most people tend to engage others while strolling its length. Even on that wintry January day, there was a couple planning a wedding, families discussing the latest gossip surrounding Uncle Harry, friends making plans for Saturday night, and even the odd job interview. The fact that the High Line is a walkway does not seem to hinder its use as a meeting place at all.

To date, the High Line has been home to four art exhibitions and an experimental film screening. The topics range from the camouflage of storage containers; a digital adaptation of the Hudson River; and an architectural sculpture that serves as a bird, butterfly, and insect observatory. As with most artwork, these inspire High Line patrons to stop, look, and converse with others as to their meaning and impact on the urban surroundings.

This elegant structure exemplifies the success of stakeholder engagement process, as several diverse groups banded together to create the Friends of the High Line, which selected a design team, lobbied the regulatory agency for the right to railbank the line, raise the necessary funding, and oversee the High Line’s transformation from an overhead eyesore to the inspirational example of re-imagining and repurposing the urban landscape. From property owners to activists to the odd millionaire or two, this eclectic conglomeration found a common ground on which to stand—30 feet in the air—in order to achieve their vision of their community.

Unlike many other third places, the High Line is, and has always been, a representation of its surroundings, continually reflecting the changes of the neighborhood. As a railway, it was the sturdy leather belt that held together the conglomeration of meat packing businesses. As an abandoned metal structure, it was the chain strap looped between the rough-and-tumble businesses and buildings that peppered the area. And, as a reclaimed public space, it is the silk ribbon in the sky that intertwines itself through the renovated lofts, restored warehouse façades, repaved streets, and new businesses.

What I love so much about the High Line as a third place is that while most third places are well defined (a park, a café, town square, etc.) this one is a changeling. It’s as if this structure above the ground plane becomes what the neighborhood requires—first a railway and then a park—it’s flexibility is the key to its ability to become a third place in a community that also continuously reinvents itself.

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Everyone has twenty-four hours in their day. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place*, suggests daily routines revolve around home (the first place), work (the second place), and a third place, which is to “provide for and contribute to civil society, democracy, civic engagement, and creating a sense of place.” (APA)

Along this definition by Oldenburg, the criteria I used to evaluate a third place are:

- The Third Place is a Leveler (Oldenburg)
- The Regulars (Oldenburg)
- A Home Away from Home (Oldenburg)
- Meaningful Action (Kaplan)
- Encourages Community Involvement

The third place I chose was the local community church. I discovered in an article about Ray Oldenburg doing consultation work with some churches in helping define them as a third place. This idea of churches as a sense of place intrigued me, and I felt it warranted an investigation. I would like to begin by expounding on a few thoughts: Church is associated in the context of both the physical building and the worshiping community within its walls. Further, my intent is to illustrate how this local congregation meets the criteria of a third place described by Oldenburg and others, not promote any one religion.

**A Leveler**

Oldenburg describes a leveler place as it “permits the individual to know workmates in a different and fuller aspect than is possible in the workplace.” (Oldenburg) Church is inherently a spiritual institution that creates an interaction different than everyday life. Through these interactions, a common “language” emerges of shared understanding. Meaningful relationships are cultivated with each member of the congregation no matter their position in society. One’s position as penitent worshiper also has a more humbling impact on each member eroding away conceived status allowing members to stand shoulder to shoulder united in a cause.

**The Regulars**

“What attracts the regular visitor to a third place is supplied ... by the fellow [church members].” (Oldenburg) The regular within religious communities is the devout individual that serves in the church no matter what circumstance, year after year. Rooted by their faith they are a constant in the eyes amongst changing families in the church. They are the people you can rely on to be there every week, they sit in the fourth row from the front, you see them at the bake sale, food drives, etc. Further, these local church congregations are extremely close and each member of the denomination is seen as an extension of their family. With this idea of common family, members return week after week.

**A Home Away from Home**

In discussing this concept I would like to briefly elaborate on the idea of fellowship within the church. More than one’s friends, fellowship stems from the idea of the community being an extension of one’s own family, the church then becomes an extension of the home. Oldenburg expounds on the ideas of the psychologist David Seamon in his book *The Great Good Place*. Seamon describes home as a place that “roots us ... to a physical center around which we organize our comings and goings.” (Oldenburg) The local church can be a meaningful place that people congregate to during the week outside of their weekly worship service. It has been interesting to see the trend in churches in the past few years to attract people to the building during the week by implementing coffee shops, gardens, community centers, and books stores. Creating a home away from home to socialize and relax. One article stated that churches are like community centers. “As their name implies, community centers are often the heart of their communities. These places where people can exercise, take their children for day care, hold concerts, take classes, and hear the community’s news. The infrastructure of service is already in place.” (Flourish)

**Meaningful Action**

In an article titled Health, Supportive Environments, and the Reasonable Person Model, Stephen and Rachel Kaplan state that “people are more reasonable when the environment supports their basic informational needs.” (Kaplan) Our environment is supported by Meaningful Action. Meaningful Action means that “participation responds to people’s strong motivation to be heard, to make a difference, to feel they are needed.” The humanitarian and social work of the church provides help from repairing a neighbor’s house, visiting the sick, wholesome recreation, to rallying together in the wake and aftermath of a natural disaster. These are examples of meaningful action in the community.

**Encourage Community Involvement**

This criterion I created myself in describing local churches as a third place. In describing this criterion, I am not implying politics, but I am
referring to the broader communities in which these denominations are located. The community church is inherently routed in the culture of the neighborhood and city it belongs. It is an integral part of the community, helping the less fortunate and those in need. I feel one important criteria of any third place is to reach outward in whatever sphere that the organization may belong. Whether it be a local pub patrons to embrace new members of the community, or an ice cream shop to help neighborhood families have a safe haven for their kids, church’s should reach outward in some way to its Sunday going community. In the city I live in there is a collaboration of churches that allow a local soup kitchen to use property and resources to help the poor. They reach out to those who may be faithless, or not of their faith. I think all third places need to do this, not in an advocacy role, but in a people-caring role.

I submit, that by a church being a leveler, attracting regular visitors, being a home away from home, providing meaningful action, and encouraging community involvement, then it is truly a third place. If our lives are a healthy blending of home, work, and church, our capacity reach out to the community is a good use of our twenty-four hour day.

References


It is just another Friday evening after work in Washington DC, and I am cozily settled into my seat on the Orange Line train heading home. I aimlessly start flipping through the current issue of the Smithsonian Magazine tucked in my handbag, and there my journey begins – reminiscing fun memories, making plans for the year ahead, and musing into some distant dreams. As I smile through photographs of familiar classical buildings, dream of upcoming Smithsonian journeys to exotic locales, and make mental notes of the spring workshop listings, I wander back through all the wonderful times I have spent on the National Mall - experiencing its majesty and beauty in all four seasons that endow the Northeast.

It was just last Saturday when I had set out to spend a day at my favorite place in the city. After struggling with ice skates in the cold wintry air in the Sculpture Garden ice rink, I darted into the Pavilion Café. Over hot coffee and a sandwich I admired the panoramic view of the garden. As I walked towards the East Wing of the National Art Gallery to immerse myself in their relentless modern art collection for the afternoon, I cherished the snow-clad modern and contemporary sculptures and couldn’t help recalling the coldest day I have spent on the National Mall during President Obama’s Inauguration Ceremony. I shivered at the thought of taking the train down to DC in the wee hours of the morning, spending eight hours standing outdoors with a million plus enthusiastic people in twenty degrees temperature, snipers in position on the roofs of all these magnificent civic buildings. That day has imprinted a special memory forever.

Summer time is all hustle and bustle on the National Mall as tourists flood the city to admire its historic, cultural, civic and political grandeur. It is also a fun season for us locals with a series of outdoor events. The Memorial Day long weekend kicks off with the popular outdoor Jazz in the Garden series. While bonding with close friends and acquaintances over sangria and music every Friday evening, the week typically ends with a soothing foot soak in the central fountain. As we close in towards the summer solstice, it is time to celebrate diversity in the nation’s capital with the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival. During this international exposition of living cultural heritage produced annually, I love indulging in ethnic food, handicrafts and cultural events. This is soon followed by the staging of the Solar Decathlon, where an international student community enthusiastically experiments and competes in the design and implementation of energy-efficient houses powered by the sun.

Then July brings the highlight of the year, as the nation unites and celebrates its birthday with orchestra and fireworks. As I type, I cannot wait for yet another picnic on the West Lawn of the Capitol, listening to the National Symphony Orchestra and watching the monuments fade into twilight. Come August, Screen on the Green is a favorite Washington DC summer tradition. My email inbox gets busy with a chain of emails to determine that one obliging friend, who would claim a desirable spot on the lawn early in the evening. Nothing like spreading a blanket on a warm night and watching a
classic film on a gigantic screen with the monuments lit up in the backdrop.

As the hot humid summer air gives way to fall colors and the earthy smell of leaves, it is the most romantic season of the year in DC. My favorite memory of the National Mall is from the Potomac River on a Fall Foliage Cruise. That one Groupon coupon I purchased, led to a completely different set of visual memories of the National Mall in my mind. Being so accustomed to experiencing the massive scale of Beaux-Arts buildings while gazing at them from their carefully manicured foregrounds, and now admiring the monumental skyline from a distance, layered between trees and the sky was a unique experience. Moreover, the stark whiteness of the buildings against the deep blue sky and hues of fall colors was so rejuvenating.

The National Mall is truly my “third place” after home and work – a perennial haven in my daily life. It is the place I love to celebrate the changing seasons, indulge in cultural festivals, further my hobbies, gaze at works of art when my mother visits me, participate in political events, enjoy picnics with friends, or a solitary walk admiring the monumental core in the capital of the nation.

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