



Downtown Economics

Ideas for Increasing Vitality in Community Business Districts

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Creating Third Places *Places where communities gather*

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Third places differ from the places where we live and work (first and second places); they are the places where communities gather. Third places take many shapes. But, it is not the physical nature of the place that makes it a *third place*. Instead, a third place is characterized by **social interaction**. When people gather together, their social interaction can range from **passive** to **active**.

Passive social interaction is a shared experience wherein no direct interaction with other people takes place. Examples include dining in a public restaurant or gathering to watch live music, movies or a sporting event.

Active social interaction involves direct interaction with other people. In the case of third places, this generally occurs with people you do not know very well or even at all. Active interaction includes introductions, discourse, and conversation. Truly successful third places promote active interaction.

Third places come in many forms; they can be private businesses or public places. They may include barber shops, libraries, dog parks, town squares, coffee shops, pubs or even grocery stores. In fact, they do not even have to be permanent places; third places can also take the form of an activity or event such as a monthly knitting group, a recreational sports team, or a farmer's market.

Third places are places where:

- People visit on a regular basis
- People can drop in
- It is ok to linger as long as you want
- People see others they know
- It is acceptable to speak with strangers
- People hear local news and discuss issues

The Value and Importance of Third Places

The *life of a town*, small or large, is often measured by the number of people out and about. For a business to succeed, they need customers or "feet on the street." Successful third places do just that; they attract people and add vibrancy to a location. In effect, a successful third

place adds to the economic health, sense of place and sense of community and by building on proven ideas, communities can adapt existing businesses into thriving third places.

Characteristics of Third Places

Although any place may become or temporarily serve as a third place despite design, attributes, or characteristics of the place itself, several elements of third places do lead to active social interaction, which can be identified, planned for and implemented. There are five main characteristics of third places that can enhance active social interaction:

1. Location
2. Physical design
3. Management
4. Amenities
5. Activities

Location

Location has a big influence on the number of people that frequent a place. Places that are convenient for people to visit encourage repeat business. As a result, third places are often found on main roadways or connected to bike paths, pedestrian routes or bus routes. A safe location is critical, as is a site that can take advantage of foot traffic from nearby businesses, public facilities and residences. Parking also needs to be considered.



Physical design

For a third place to be successful, whether it is a festival, park, library, coffee shop or some other business, it must encourage social interaction. Comfortable seating that can

be moved to suit someone's needs encourages interaction. People need to hear each other without having to shout. Having access to food and beverages either on site or nearby is important. Outdoor locations should have a firm surface, shade and protection from the weather. More people will use these places regularly if they are close to additional services such as restrooms and are not far from where they live.

Management

A critical characteristic of a successful third place is the open invitation to linger. This runs counter to a business that frowns upon or bans loitering. Linger should not just be okay, customers should be invited and even urged to do so. The facility needs to be affordable and open when people want to use it, feel safe and attract a diverse customer base. Staff should be friendly and help encourage conversation, and in general, third places should exude a casual atmosphere.

Amenities

Amenities, like third places, vary greatly. For outdoor spaces, amenities may include a playground area, a dog run, a fountain for kids to play in, a stage, or a sports field. The provision of food and beverages can increase the time spent at a site.

Published and unpublished research by the authors has found that the top amenities at restaurants and cafés are areas to sit outside, a room that can be reserved for meeting space or parties, and free wireless internet. By adding these and other amenities, it is possible to greatly increase active social interaction.

Activities

Organizing and offering activities at a third place is the element that has the greatest potential to foster active social interaction. Take for example, a park and a café, which are well designed, accessible, conveniently located; open when people want to use them; and allow people to linger. The park could offer the amenities of a basketball court and a food cart that stops by on a regular basis. The café could offer the amenities of outdoor seating, meals and wine. In both places, on occasion, people might meet and get to know one another, either on the basketball court or while sitting at the café, but in both places, this active social interaction may not happen very frequently.

Both these third places could be enhanced by organizing and offering activities, such as a summer sports league at the park or such activities at the café as classes, open crafting groups, or game tournaments. Promoting and offering amenities encourage people to linger; all of which is good for business.

In addition to these five criteria there are two additional factors that increase the success of third places: **community value** and **buzz**.

If a third place is seen as part of the community and adds value to the community, then customers understand that if the third place disappears, the community will suffer.

And, if a community can get excited about a place, they will be more likely to use the space. William H. Whyte, who studied New York City's public spaces said, "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people."

Conclusion

If there is no demand for a basketball league or café in your community, these places will most likely never become third places. It is important to understand the market, and to know the pulse of one's community. The best way to accomplish this is by taking an inventory of third places in your community and evaluating each one using the five criteria.

An interesting way to do this is to give community members some background on the five criteria and a camera and let them develop the inventory. Third places have elements that need to be seen and felt and are best captured in person. This method also builds awareness of local third places and can serve as a marketing tool.

When trying to build third places, a good place to start is by enhancing existing locations. Developing interesting activities and management policies that allow customers to linger can create a significantly larger customer base. Planting trees or expanding a bike/pedestrian path often transforms the life of a business or public space. Simply offering Wi-Fi, a new patio, some nice chairs and the option to buy a cup of coffee can transform downtown businesses into third places and invigorate the sense of place and community in a downtown.

Larger projects may require more capital and additional planning. They should fit into a community's overall plan, and when possible, use existing sites rather than develop greenfield locations. An exception would be to create a third place in a new neighborhood. Wherever it is located, a third place is a critical component to a long term, successful, livable community.

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