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Karen G. Lawson
Iowa State University, klawson@iastate.edu

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Libraries in the USA as Traditional and Virtual 'Third Places'

Abstract

Traditional "third places" provide physical places for human contact and social experience outside of the home or workplace/school. Institutions as disparate as fitness centers, libraries, and beauty salons are examples of third places: locations where people gather and often talk about things that are important to them. Libraries have a long tradition of connectedness and community that has put them in the forefront of traditional third places. As library Web sites are created and evolve, the sense of place provided by physical third places will become increasingly important online. Much about connectedness and community online can be learned from the concept of third places and their importance in real life and in cyberspace. The traditions inherent in libraries as physical third places provide predictions, projections, and inspirations for continued good service in the online presence of libraries.

Disciplines

Library and Information Science

ABSTRACT

Traditional "third places" provide physical places for human contact and social experience outside of the home or workplace/school. Institutions as disparate as fitness centers, libraries, and beauty salons are examples of third places: locations where people gather and often talk about things that are important to them. Libraries have a long tradition of connectedness and community that has put them in the forefront of traditional third places. As library websites are created and evolve, the sense of place provided by physical third places will become increasingly important on-line. Much about connectedness and community on-line can be learned from the concept of third places and their importance in real life and in cyberspace. The traditions inherent in libraries as physical third places provide predictions, projections, and inspirations for continued good service in the on-line presence of libraries.

Traditional "Third Places"

In his book, *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg (1989, p.16) describes community gathering places he calls "third places." A "third place" is not home (the "first place") and it is not work/school (the "second place"). It is a place where anyone can go to socialize. Some of the most common third places that Oldenburg lists in his book are cafes, coffee shops, community centers, bars, beauty parlors, general stores, and other "hangouts." These institutions lend a public balance to people's home and work lives.

Third places and the power of informal life have long been an important part of the culture of the United States. The inns of colonial society were transformed into the saloons and general stores that sprung up with the country's westward expansion. Later came the soda fountains, coffee shops, and diners, which, along with the local post office, were centrally located and provided, along with churches, the social anchors of community life. The local library became another important foundation of the community and also served as a third place.

Third places are crucial to a community for a number of reasons. They are distinctive informal gathering places where people feel at home. Third places nourish relationships and a diversity of human contact by helping to create a "sense of place" and community. They often invoke a sense of civic pride while providing opportunities for serendipity, companionship, and relaxation after long day at work or school: they make life more colorful. Third places, in their highest form, enrich public life and democracy.

There are essential ingredients to a well-functioning third place. They must be free or quite inexpensive. They must be highly accessible to neighborhoods so that people find it easy to make the place a regular part of their routine. They should be a place where a number of people regularly go, and where they feel welcome and comfortable. According to Oldenburg (1989, p.284), World War II marks the historical juncture after which informal public life began to decline in the United States. Old neighborhoods and their cafes, taverns, and corner stores have fallen to urban renewal, freeway expansion, and planning that discounts the importance of congenial, unified, and vital neighborhoods. Newer neighborhoods have developed under the single-use zoning imperative that often makes these critical, informal, social gathering places illegal. He believes the loss of third places is a statement on the loss of community in the United States.

Suburbia

Every generation attempts to reinvent society to take advantage of the inventions available to its age. Following World War II, the post war economic boom and growth of disposable income in the United States increased the demand for mass production of the automobile. The desire to travel easily became widespread and there was political and economic pressure to expand the national road network. Kunstler (1993, p.86) makes this statement in his book the *Geography of Nowhere*: "There was nothing like it before in history: a machine that promised liberation from the daily bondage of place. And in a

free country like the United States, the automobile came as a blessing." Kunstler goes on

to describe how in the early days of motoring, people could not foresee the multiple

problems that the automobile could cause: major shifts in the landscape, air pollution, and

even of culture in general. Cars were simply wonderful accessories that would make the

world a better place.

Young people who had suffered through the Depression and WWII took great

advantage of the post-War economic boom. Post-WWII prosperity and the ensuing

marriage and baby boom, combined with people's preference for space, called for a place

to live that would support a lifestyle aimed at family orientation and tranquility. In many

instances, this caused communities to be built quickly and with a minimum of input from

the people who would eventually inhabit them. They were largely constructed for a

homogeneous group of people and tended to use homogeneous architecture.

For the young families that first inhabited them the suburbs were in many ways

the idyll they wished for. There were many young children to play with each other and

up-to-date school buildings supported the growing education system. The houses were

accompanied by yards for swing sets, swimming pools and barbeques. The early suburbs

were often built out to the edge of town, so a child or adult had an easy walk to the

countryside. Construction was constant, giving a sense of building and growing. The

song of the ice cream truck, the uncomplicated bike rides, the corner Mom and Pop

grocery store – what happened? In *Bourgeois Utopias: the Rise and Fall of Suburbia*,

Fishman (1987) makes us keenly aware that modern, class-segregated suburbs

represented a total transformation of urban values. Unlike the pre-modern city, where

workplaces and residences were integrated, suburbia is a middle-class invention where

residents paid psychological and sociological prices for their new idyll. The authors of

Suburban Nation: the Rise and the Decline of the American Dream (2000) contend that

building practices that have produced sprawling subdivisions, shopping centers and office

parks connected by new highways have not only destroyed the traditional concept of the

neighborhood, but eroded such vital social values as equality, citizenship and personal

safety.

Suburban sprawl, spreading across the landscape has had a great impact on

society and individual behavior. Sprawl causes enormous waste, frustration, and long-

term costs by depleting land and resources. Another major dilemma for suburbia is its

inhabitants' dependence on the automobile. Solomon (1988, p.63) writes: "Work,

commerce, and dwelling in suburbia are typically separate and linked only by

automobile" and "More than ever, hours of vacuous motorized torture are required to get

from one place to the next…worst of all, this new, sanitized, anti-urban world is a place

of diminished insight."

Dependency on the automobile intensifies these problems, while increasing

pollution, congestion, and social isolation. In *The Experience of Place*, Hiss states:

> Our relationship with the places we know and meet up with – where you
> are right now; and where you've been earlier today; and wherever you'll
> be in another few hours – is a close bond, intricate in nature, and not
> abstract, not remote at all...Overdevelopment and urban sprawl can
> damage our own lives as much as they damage our cities and countryside
> (Hiss, 1990, p.xi-xii).

Oldenburg concurs with this sentiment:

> American lifestyles, for all the material acquisition and seeking after
> comforts and pleasures, are plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation,

and a high price tag (Oldenburg, 1989, p.13)

The tranquility and safety that were eagerly sought by post-war suburbanites have frequently been sacrificed for the sake of more roads, malls (instead of local shops), and cars that cause congestion and distance between people.

Libraries as Traditional and Transitional Third Places

Twentieth century libraries are excellent examples of great good places. For purposes of this article, the emphasis will be on public libraries, but other types of libraries (academic, special, school) are all third places for their communities. They each welcome members of their particular communities regardless of age and economic status and provide them with access to information, services, and a responsive, usually safe, environment. Traditional libraries provide human contact and social experience and strive to foster service, social equality, and the appreciation of human individuality. In doing this, they support education and socialization needs of society, meet the information needs of a broad spectrum of users, promote self-education, and satisfy the popular tastes of the public.

In 1931, S. R. Ranganathan, librarian and educator, published his book *The Five Laws of Library Science*. The fifth law, "[a] library is a growing organism" is a clear directive for librarians to be constantly thinking of what a library should be doing to meet the evolving needs of users. More than six decades later, Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman (1995, p.8) developed five new laws of librarianship. Their third and fifth laws are "use technology intelligently to enhance services" and "honor the past and create the future." Both sets of library "laws" are augmented in Thomas Horan's *Digital Places*

(2000). He rephrases these earlier laws into a form of advice for any institution evolving

to accommodate emerging technologies: "At any given point, our social and physical

landscape embodies but a moment in ever-changing technological circumstances: a

technology comes into being, enables a set of economic and social activities, and then

gives way to a new technological platform with its own set of behaviors and

consequences" (Horan, 2000, p.3). He goes on to give the example of movie drive-ins as

a technology-driven combination that accommodates the popularity of automobiles and

movies. Libraries also combined the popularity of mobility with their traditional service,

the dissemination of books, and two of the resulting products were bookmobiles and

branch libraries. Horan's description of the New York Science, Industry, and

Technology Library in Manhattan includes an explanation from the library's architects

Gwathmey Siegel & Associates: "the contrast between the 1906 Renaissance Revival

façade and the elegant modernist interior reflects the balance between the library's

nineteenth-century origins as a temple of wisdom and its twenty-first century role as an

emporium of rapidly changing information" (Horan, 2000 p.53). Horan refers to this type

of transition as a "recombination." Another type of recombination is the incorporation of

traditional third places such as coffee shops and/or cafes within libraries for both

financial and social reasons.

     Riewoldt, in *Intelligent Spaces* (1997, p.18) specifically discusses libraries in the

context of what he calls "Knowledge Exchanges." He describes a group of libraries in

various parts of the world that he considers exemplars of the recombination of the

traditional with the electronic. In reference to one of these buildings, the Phoenix

(Arizona) Public Library he notes "the architect's skill lies in his ability to transform necessity into metaphor" (Riewoldt, 1997, p.210).

Drive-in movies have now, for the most part, given way to home entertainment systems. While there are still bookmobiles, our computers now take us for journeys on the Information Superhighway, the Internet. A new generation is creating virtual communities and home (pages) in cyberspace. Holland writes: "the term 'change agent' is used in the library literature to encompass phenomena and events which drive change, such as new technologies" (2000, pp.105-117).

Designing Virtual Third Places

New communities are forming in cyberspace and Horan asks the question: "How and where do cyberspace and physical space intersect?" (2000 p.6) Internet users are creating a home away from home (often from within their physical home!). They are after information, but they also want a sense of community. Horrigan notes that the Internet has the capacity to "expand users' social worlds to faraway people and simultaneously to bind them more deeply to the place where they live" (Horrigan, 2001, p.2). There is opportunity for library web site designers to not repeat the mistakes of traditional suburban developers and to attempt to avoid suburban/cyburban sprawl and the alienation accompanying it.

All virtual communities are different. Developers of virtual places should design communities and web sites that are both usable and that support sociability. Not all communities or web sites are alike in their purpose and the purpose of the new community should be clearly stated. Communities and sites are generally not static and

will change and evolve. On-line community developers need to observe what people are

doing or trying to do within the community. By doing this, the designer can build

support and trust with policies, and also build in new ways to keep users and newcomers

interested. Unlike a traditional off-line community, in a virtual community, a person is

leaving their body behind. A virtual community designer has to deal with the affects of

this phenomenon: although this is changing, there is not much evidence of individual

"presence" left during site visits. Finally, as on-line and off-line become increasingly

blurred, designers need to study guidelines used by traditional social planners that

encourage good social practices. It is inevitable that some types of policies and

management will be needed. The community's methods of access must be considered as

not everyone is working with the most recent technology. Along with information

design, it is very important that there is some mechanism for dialog support that will

encourage emotional involvement. Preece writes: "By better understanding the rules of

empathy...we can investigate and design tools to support empathic communication as

well as factual information exchange. Well-designed empathic communities will

improve the quality of life for thousands of people" (Preece, 1998, pp.32-43).

Horan (2000, p. 15) calls these empathic communities "meaningful places" or

"recombinant digital communities. This is similar to the familiar concept of sense of

place. Horan describes the digital sense of place in this way:

> The notion of meaningful places embodies the need to design digital
> places in a manner that respects the functional and symbolic associations
> that places often contain … Local libraries can consider how new and
> innovative designs can help them reassert their spatial and electronic
> presence in the community, including universal access to all community
> members – museums, schools, - to devise innovative electronic and
> physical "third-places (Horan, 2000, p.82).

Flexibility is a key facet of the digital universe as it is in the evolution of libraries

as virtual third places.

Libraries as Virtual Third Places

Technological advances like electronic information networks are changing many

things including the concept of community. Today, users from diverse cultural

backgrounds, computer expertise, and interests turn to virtual communities to reach

others. Many new communities serve a strong social function as well. What exactly

constitutes an on-line community and how the theory of geographical communities

relates to cyberspace is debatable, but for many non-commercial Internet users a virtual

community is similar to an old-fashioned pre-suburban neighborhood in that it is any

virtual space where people come together to get and give information or support and

where "distance or time are no longer serious barriers to communication" (Preece, 1998,

p.33).

Horrigan (2000, pp.3,8) defines two types of virtual communities: online

communities that "foster chatter and connection" and communities online that are

"Internet groups based in the community in which they [the users] live." An online

community may be loosely defined as a group of people who interact in cyberspace

together over time. A community online, however, is a community that exists offline,

and which uses cyberspace as part of community "life." There are also personal web

(home) pages, created as an Internet public face into the private life that an individual is

willing to share on-line. New words have rarely been introduced to describe these

creations. Traditional spatial/architectural metaphors are plentiful in the presentation of

information as citizens/netizens, knowingly or unknowingly, try to create a familiar sense

of place: a presence with mood, colors, atmosphere, that makes a person feel good to be

there. There are chat **rooms**, **home** pages, and web **addresses.**

Oldenburg (1989, p.42) describes the need for a traditional, physical "third

places," which "exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of

social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and major

vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality."

Horrigan (2000, p.3) writes: "in some ways, online communities have become *virtual*

third places. They are homes away from home where users can expand possibilities and

playfulness"

Kupersmith (1998, pp.58-67) builds on the earlier works of Ranganathan,

Crawford, and Gorman, and lays out implications for those designing catalogs, web sites,

and similar systems for libraries. His suggestions are as follows:

- If you do use a virtual-building metaphor, design and implement it appropriately for your user community. As architect Eliel Saarinen (1977) advised, "Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context." Just as with physical features, what works well in a public library may not fit a large research institution, and vice versa.

- Pay special attention to what the user experiences in the first few seconds of contact. Kristina Hooper (1986, p. 15) points out that the initial screen of a system, often compared to a facade, actually serves the more important function of an entranceway, where users receive their initial cues about what the structure contains and how to proceed.

- Take into account the dynamic nature of computer usage. People moving through your system will

> continue to learn about it as they exchange
> information with it, inputting commands and
> viewing displays.

- Heed the famous dictum of another architect, Mies
  Van der Rohe (1959): "God is in the details." For
  example, just as you would in a building, label web
  pages with clear titles, the name of the institution,
  and verbal or graphic navigation aids. In
  cyberspace, the signs are the structure.

Traditional libraries strive to foster service, social equality, and the appreciation of

human individuality and virtual libraries should try to do the same.

Conclusion

Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society Faculty Director

Charles Nesson greeted attendees at Harvard's Second International Conference on

Internet & Society with a challenge and a question: "The Net needs balance between

public and commercial space, just as in real space we need public schools and parks,

libraries and art museums, as well as corporations. Is Cyberspace to be a Commons or

just a Mall?" (1998) He urged attendees to take responsibility for maintaining a balance

between private and public interests on the Internet: "Now is the time to build global

parks in cyberspace--to open, nurture and maintain vibrant non-commercial spaces where

people can freely create, learn, and play." The spaces should be filled with all types of

people: entering, visiting, and returning.

By making virtual society usable and sociable, cyberspace designers can avoid the

failures of suburbia and create vibrant "neighborhoods" that are attractive and memorable

Solomon (1988, p.65) wrote: "Placelessness is a lousy feeling," and Kunstler concurs:

Americans wonder why their houses lack charm. The word *charm* may
seem fussy, trivial, vague. I use it to mean explicitly *that which makes our
physical surroundings worth caring about.* It is not a trivial matter, for we
are presently suffering on a massive scale the social consequences of
living in places that are not worth caring about. Charm is dependent on
connectedness, on continuities, on the relation of one thing to another … I
have mentioned the value of conversation and connectedness in our virtual
third places, but what may make them charming is that they, as web sites,
speak to something in us as individuals (Kunstler, 1993, p.168).

Where we are when we are on-line is as important as who we are, and how we get

there plays an interesting supporting role. Mobility is a key concept. Being mobile is

being able to move freely or be easily moved. A mobile home is a movable building that

people live in and which usually stays in one place, but it can be moved using a vehicle

or sometimes its own engine. A mobile phone is connected to the telephone system by

radio, rather than by a wire, and can therefore be used anywhere its signals can be

received. Mobility is an industry inevitability that will ultimately go beyond wireless

connectivity and communication and where current personal computer capabilities can be

taken anywhere. The consequences of this reconfiguration are immense. Future

advances in the ability to have synchronized voices, pictures, and motion in real-time will

cause the current virtual environment to become a more augmented reality with increased

face-to-face interaction. Improvements in video and audio technology will force us back

into presenting a sociable *real* "public face" in cyberspace. Current virtual communities

and web sites should continually be looking for opportunities to increase their range of

human experience. What are things you look for in selecting a place to live or "hangout?"

Third places, including libraries, need to extend their sense of public "place" and "face"

on-line.

Virtual libraries should try not to lose the virtues they have established as traditional third places and should strive to be the model of a virtual third place. The Internet is a door into the future, but it is also a place where memories are cherished as is readily apparent from the many genealogical, memorial, and historical web sites in existence. As library web sites are created and evolve, the library's sense of place as an institution that reflects our culture will become increasingly important, wanted, and needed. Much about connectedness and community on-line can be learned from the concept of third places and their importance in real life and cyberspace. The traditions inherent in libraries as physical third places provide predictions, projections, and inspirations for continued good service in the on-line presence of libraries.

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