Natalie Konrad

Professor Griffin

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Third Place, First Priority

No eye contact, no interaction, no conversation here, only the rhythmic chanting of names and a desperate rush of people diving towards the counter to claim their order before running out of the building to continue their day. This is the face of the modern global coffee franchise, designed to optimize high customer turnover and profit. At first glance, this shift towards sterile and fast-paced corporate coffee shops seems to be central to the crisis surrounding our social infrastructure, a critique aligned with the original concept of the Third Place. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined a third place to be a space outside of the first place (home) and the second place (work) that serves as a democratic source of community life (18). In these spaces, conversation is the primary activity, and social status is evened by a shared sense of refuge (Beddington).

Traditionally, we view the loss of slow-paced cafe culture to corporate businesses as a contribution to, and honestly, the culprit of, social isolation. However, it is critical to look past simply the sterile aesthetic these places hold in order to see the reality of how they function based on their design choices. While the loss of cafe culture is a valid concern, we must ask, at what point do these modern logistics really just mean accessibility? It is easy to have an initial bias toward the unique soul found in local shops, however, in many ways, this can result from privilege. I, for example, walk through my favorite coffee shop with ease, my body knows exactly where to go without having to use really any cognitive effort. While I have the ability to

navigate irregular, non-standardized spaces without a second thought, that is not the case for everyone. Though independent coffee shops foster a more organic social infrastructure, the uniform architecture of corporate shops serves a key role in accessibility. This suggests that a hybrid model utilizing predictable spatial logic for cognitive and physical ease, standardized sensory elements, and intentional community connections is necessary for a truly equitable third place.

To fully comprehend the crisis of the modern third place, we must first bridge the gap between sociological intent and architectural and design execution. Oldenburg's definition of the third place relies mostly on the concept of the neutral ground, where "people may come and go just when they please and are beholden to no one" and overtime everyone "meets or otherwise learns about everyone in the neighborhood" (18). These spaces allow social markers (like class), which may in some other way be revealed in the outside world, to be leveled out, allowing conversation to become the primary activity. However, in the built environment, this neutrality is practically impossible if the architecture itself is not accessible. A space cannot serve as a democratic source of community life if its physical form in itself acts as a filter, welcoming the able-bodied while excluding those with physical or sensory needs. For a third place to be truly equitable, the leveling of social status must be preceded by the accessibility of the physical structure, guided by the far more specific frameworks of Universal Design and Inclusive Design.

Universal Design (UD), as a framework, seeks to create "products and environments [that] can be used by all people" (Carroll 60). However, as researcher Giuseppina Bencini notes, the mere existence of inclusivity discussions is often insufficient: "Despite laws, policies, and political visions to create cities and societies for all, barriers still exclude people from using buildings and public places" which means that it is in the hands of the designers to go beyond

just the baseline of UD, and put themselves in the shoes of people with disabilities (3). When applied to coffee shops, UD manifests as standardized counter heights, wider walkways or circulation paths, and a sense of wayfinding that comes intuitively. While it's easy to criticize the cookie-cutter nature of corporate coffee shops, this standardization does actually serve a purpose: a predictable space that lowers the cognitive and physical requirement for entry.

Predictability is central to the goals of "neutral ground." Without it, the third place risks becoming almost an exclusive club for only able-bodied people. Bencini warns that “[v]isions of a city for all are at risk of failing when densification and mixed areas are shaped without considering human diversity and UD values and goals” (8). In prioritizing these values, corporate design moves into the realm of Inclusive Design, which focuses on the full spectrum of the human experience. This ensures that those who struggle with certain sensory experiences or mobility constraints are not just accommodated in the final steps of the design phase (where many corners are cut), but are intentionally designed for from the beginning. Designing solely for the able-bodied population *does* exclude people, but designing with the minority at the forefront will only have the chance to positively affect the majority. In this light, the sterile consistency of the coffee franchise is actually an important commitment to ensuring that the social infrastructure of a city does not fail the very people it aims to serve, everyone.

The application of these frameworks in real life is most visible in the "Inclusive Spaces Framework" recently adopted by the Starbucks corporation. While their design attempt appears to be more on the "sterile” side, this standardization is an architectural tool for functionality, specifically for people with disabilities. With this standardized set of architectural guidelines that all new Starbucks cafes will be implementing and all current cafes will eventually be remodeled to implement, Starbucks is actively prioritizing the needs of “customers with visual and audible

impairment, wheelchair users, and more" (Fantozzi). Their solutions to increasing accessibility consists of a new "point of sales system with an adjustable angle that can be seen at multiple levels and heights, voice assist, screen magnification, menu item images and visual order confirmation," just to name a few (Fantozzi). Accessibility is treated here as a fundamental requirement rather than a luxury that will happen *only* if it's possible with an extra budget (never). Locally owned shops, often constrained by the existing structures of historic buildings or limited renovation budgets, may provide more soul, but they frequently struggle to achieve this level of deeply ingrained inclusivity. Thus, the corporate model demonstrates that architectural standardization, while first seeming like a lack of creativity, is a deliberate way to ensure the "neutral ground" remains physically navigable for the largest possible demographic.

The architectural design often found in independent shops, which may include irregular floor levels, heavy manual doors that appear very nicely, or non-standard seating that feels cozy, is frequently romanticized as character. Yet, this character often relies on the privilege of easy navigation, an assumption that a person entering the space possesses the physical ability to maneuver through a non-standardized space with little to no stress or confusion. What one person perceives as tactile warmth may, for another, be a physical wall. As researchers Saymanlier et al. argue, a "sentimental consciousness" of a space is only possible when its physical features like texture, acoustics, and floor plan, respect the occupant's sensory and physical abilities (2579). If a communal table is too high for a wheelchair or the lighting is too dim for those with visual impairments, the neutral ground really is not neutral at all. It limits the user from forming the memories and place attachment necessary to feel a true sense of belonging.

Place attachment, place identity, and place dependence are all terms that describe the bonds people create to specific locations following their unique experiences and feelings in such places. This is what results from a truly equitable third place because “[b]y creating place identity, people consider themselves as a part of the space with precise standards or groups with common viewpoints with themselves” (Saymanlier et al, 2580). When a space consistently validates a person's presence and their unique values, the resulting place dependence creates a sense of connection that is vital for long-term community resilience and individual belonging. Conversely, in a corporate coffee shop, the highly standardized environment makes the space feel very placeless. When spaces are designed in a way that makes them nearly identical in every city, it prevents the development of place identity because people will never truly feel as if they are in the place they are, but instead a generic, globalized chain. True place dependence is impossible when the environment treats people as ghost customers, people who have ordered but aren’t even in the building yet. This has been increasing rapidly with mobile ordering being available at most chains, on top of the drive-thru logic that has existed for quite some time. Contrastingly, when a local shop consistently reflects the unique values or history of its neighborhood, it allows customers to transition from just being consumers to feeling like true members of a community, turning the coffee shop into the driver of a city's collective resilience and connection between one another, something we desperately need.

Furthermore, inclusivity in architecture must account for cognitive welfare, particularly for aging populations. A study by Jessica Finlay highlights how public places like coffee shops act as "buffers" against Alzheimer's disease and cognitive decline in older adults (4). For these populations, the high legibility and consistency found in corporate shops cannot be written off as just boring, but instead be understood as essential cognitive resources. The familiarity of a very

usual layout provides a sense of comfort and orientation that promotes social outings for those who might otherwise be alienated by the unique but sometimes confusing layouts of local shops. In this context, the commercialization of the coffee shop space provides "habitus" that, while sometimes can exclude people in a more social sense, offers a physical predictability that supports cognitive health (Gaudio 659). Just as we learn body language through experiences growing up, our bodies do the same thing with physical spaces. Over time, we subconsciously begin to understand the similarities between spaces and what actions we must do in each space. The habitus of a Starbucks, for example, dictates very specific movements and scripts that will be identical where one goes to a location in New York City or a small town in Ohio. In this way, for corporate coffee shops to become more of an equitable third place, they would maintain their graphics and some of the physical style, but alter the way people interact within the space. This could come from different staff training strategies (as they have already attempted by having staff write notes on customers cups) and providing more unique connections to their individual locations without altering spatial logic.

A place of refuge is arguably most defined by material choices, determining the sensory and psychological feeling within a space. Lisa Waxman identifies critical design choices that people value most, “cleanliness, appealing aroma, adequate lighting, comfortable furniture, and a view to the outside.” While corporate franchises utilize polished, non-porous surfaces for easy maintenance, these materials also provide clear, unobstructed paths for those with mobility aids. Conversely, the aesthetic of local shops, for example exposed brick and older wood, can create acoustic and physical chaos for a person with a disability. True refuge requires sound absorption and ergonomic seating because it creates a comfortable space for anyone. If a local shop fails at these basic variables, it fails as a third place.

Ultimately, the goal for the future of our urban social infrastructure should not be a choice between the "soulless" accessibility of the corporation and the "inaccessible" soul of the local shop. Instead, we must advocate for a hybrid combination. We need spaces that embrace the site-specific history and community warmth of local cafes while adopting the rigorous, standardized accessibility of Universal Design. When a patron enters a space and finds that their physical or sensory needs have been ignored, the experience is more than just inconvenient. It is “embarrassing and frustrating” (Carroll 60). These emotional factors are just as significant as physical ones. They show individuals that this space was not built with them in mind. True refuge is not found just because of the wood table the coffee shop has that’s vintage, but rather in knowing that anyone can sit at that table and can feel welcome, and that they truly have an inherent right to enjoy the space.

When a design is truly inclusive, it not only meets modern code, but it shows every member of a community, the elderly, the disabled, the people who have lived there forever, and the people who are just beginning their life in that city, that they are seen and that their presence is valued. We must actively seek out and utilize these third places, not just for the coffee, but to perform the necessary work of being a neighbor and a friend. By using these spaces, we validate the importance of social infrastructure. We must demand that our third places are both "accessible and inclusive," as Beddington notes, ensuring they are spaces where everyone can feel "at home" and "safe." We must put value on places that allow people to exist without urgency and ensure that this kind of inclusive environment remains the standard for the future of our cities.

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