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Peter John Sandiford

The third place as an evolving concept for hospitality researchers and managers

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the concept of the Third Place, critically evaluating its theoretical foundations and continued relevance to social analysis and hospitality, arguing that it can contribute to scholarly understanding of human sociability and community, as well as inspiring service providers. The paper explores actual and potential hospitality applications from researcher and practitioner perspectives, also considering a possible hospitable symbiosis from a third place perspective. Its original definition, though providing an important foundation, is driven, in part, by subjective value judgments. The paper concludes that the conceptualization of third place requires broadening to include more places where people can socialize, away from first (home) and second (work) places, without delimiting this definition ideologically. This reconceptualization implies, rather than prescribes, informality, neutrality and inclusiveness within this convivial environment, with community maintenance as a primary outcome.

Key words: Third Place; Local Community; Neighborhood; Hospitality Management; Symbiotic Hospitality.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of third place has captured the imagination of commentators, researchers and managers since Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) recognized the importance of places where people socialize away from work and home (the two other places). Inspired by Henry James' Great Good Place, Oldenburg continued his analysis, exploring whether such 'haven[s] of rest and recuperation' (James, 1948, cited in Oldenburg, 2013,p.7), have survived societal change. Oldenburg's third place helped revitalize interest in role of social interaction within human communities and academics and practitioners have discussed, applied and developed Oldenburg's work, experimenting conceptually with ideas such as virtual third places (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), even expanding the typology to include fourth places (Fleener, 2005; Miller, 2014; Wenner, 1998).

Although Oldenburg's work inspires interest across disciplines, such as libraries (Harris, 2007), online gaming (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), museums (Slater & Koo, 2010), supermarkets (Zweibach, 2006) and hospitality (Lee & Severt, 2017; Tumanan & Lansangan 2012; Wong & Rosenbaum 2012; Wu et al, 2014), researchers often seem to give relatively little attention to the community role that Oldenburg attributes to third places (Williams & Hipp, 2018) and hospitality researchers sometimes overemphasize what Williams and Hipp (2018,p.77), refer to as a 'somewhat strict definition of third places constrained by Oldenburg's (1999) guiding criteria'. Many researchers rely heavily on these criteria to position their work, often at the expense of the broader social and community aspects of third places.

This paper revisits the conceptualization and application of the third place, especially within hospitality research, questioning whether the third place remains relevant today and if it is appropriately defined for meaningful application by a sophisticated scholarly and managerial

audience. This also responds to Roberts and Shea's (2017) call for greater hospitality theorisation, especially relating to 'local community dining' (2017,p.395), where its application seems particularly pertinent, although its implications do extend well beyond restaurants. After introducing Oldenburg's ideas, the paper relates third place to the wider and hospitality literature, leading to a discussion of applications to research and practice. It concludes with a discussion of its ongoing contribution to our understanding of human sociability and hospitality.

OLDENBURG'S THIRD PLACE

Oldenburg argues that community relations are facilitated by interaction within securely convivial environments, where 'good citizens... relax and laugh in each other's company' (Oldenburg, 1999,p.ix). Focusing largely on the USA, he suggests that people need places away from the demands of home (first place) and work (second place). Such places offer the 'core settings of an informal public life' (1999,p.15) around which neighborhoods and communities develop. He suggests that third places tend to be unplanned/accidental and are becoming harder to find, in part due to suburbanization and a decline in neighborhood spaces where people can gather informally.

Oldenburg (1999,ch.2) elaborated on the character of third places through seven key criteria:

- Neutral ground (offering a comfortable welcome, with only 'a whiff of danger', Simon, 2009 p.102).
- A social leveler (minimizing external socio-political divisions).
- Conversation is the main activity (frivolous, light-hearted, idle, eloquent talk reinforces sociability).

- Regular customers (offering stability, but newcomers are welcomed and can become regulars).
- A low profile (modest, unpretentious spaces that become ordinary and routine in users' lives).
- A playful mood (the safety suggested by light-hearted conversations and low profile encourages more, longer visits,).
- Home-away-from-home (paradoxically homeliness offers a refuge from actual home).

These criteria are often applied by researchers to confirm whether somewhere qualifies as a third place (e.g. Tumanan & Lansangan 2012). However, this can seem more of a mechanistic exercise than an exploration of the relevance and implications of the concept. For example, Laing and Royle (2013,p.39) conclude that customer experiences in bookshops 'often fall short of those qualities which Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) found to be integral to a third place'. They particularly focus on Oldenburg and Brissett's (1982,p.269) assertion that 'people gather primarily to enjoy each other's company' in third places. However, it is clear that bookshops can serve as third places, as Oldenburg (1999) himself acknowledges in his own revised third place character/criteria (listed immediately above), which omitted this criterion, although still implying its value. This conceptual development was reinforced when he included bookstores as key third places (Oldenburg, 1999).

Oldenburg's ideas were never unique. Contemporaneously, Krippendorf (1984,p.82-85) outlined a remarkably similar thesis of urban space, exploring 'the inhospitable home and the divided life.' Seeing human space as increasingly fragmented, his analysis explored work, housing and recreation. He identified a 'tragic development', where 'home is no longer a retreat... because it has become inhospitable and unhomely' (1984,p.85). Although differing

somewhat from Oldenburg's thesis, both researchers emphasize the importance of hospitableness whether intentionally provided or associated with another function, as in accidental hangouts (bookshops, barbershops) where hanging-out is not the original purpose; indeed proprietors can perceive this as interfering with their business. Similarly, Oldenburg largely defines third place by purpose (community building/maintenance) and method/approach (facilitating conviviality, represented by his character criteria).

Questioning Oldenburg's Thesis of Place

Oldenburg presents a well-rehearsed, if impressionistic, personal journey, including examples of *good* and *bad* social spaces. Making such value judgements is not unusual in social research, although representing a significant scholarly limitation. He uses various subjective descriptors, such as 'happy gathering places' (1999,p.iv), raising questions of why third places *must* be happy and what 'happy' actually means. He often judges places with polarized generalizations; his preferred examples (e.g. German-American beer gardens or English pubs) are portrayed as convivially *good*, while modern American bars contribute to social 'malaise' (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). This also implies value judgements about the intoxicants consumed in such places (intoxicants such as alcohol, coffee, tea or tobacco, although not essential in third places, are often consumed there).

In relation to alcohol, he sees drunkenness as problematic, differentiating between modes of consumption and associated behaviors within particular premises, reminiscent of Hogarth's moralizing engravings *Gin Lane* and *Beer Alley*. These portrayed gin as destructive and beer as cozily convivial (both engravings feature related premises—pubs and gin palaces).

Similarly, Oldenburg's moralizing typology portrays 'deadly' American tavern customers

with ‘unhappy looks’ and atmospheres edging ‘toward despair’ (1999,p.169), while third place taverns abound with ‘chatter’ and laughter (1999,p.173-4). He acknowledges that his view of English pubs is largely ‘backward looking’, celebrating a questionable heyday ‘as inherited from Victorian times’ (1999,p.143), suggesting many London pubs were ‘ruined’ in the 1940s-1950s by “‘Bright Young People’...typified by “trousered women of Chelsea and Bloomsbury”.’ This presents another judgmental, situationally ironic analysis, praising pubs for inclusiveness, while advocating greater exclusivity—excluding *trousered* women. This returns to the idea of ‘good citizens’ (Oldenburg, 1999,p.ix), initially seeming a rhetorical device. However, on further reading, it suggests that third places are for *good* people and activities, while *bad* ones need exclusion—another value judgement about human goodness.

Oldenburg continues to delimit third place by insisting ‘any third place is pretty much as I’ve described it, or it is not a third place’ (1999,p.84), essentially claiming sole ownership of the concept. His analysis appears particularly narrow when explaining which spaces are *not* third places, whether seeing fast food restaurants as ‘nonplaces’ (Oldenburg, 1999,p.205), scoffing ‘at the notion of Starbucks as a third place’ (Simon, 2009,p.101) or dismissing the idea of virtual/electronic third places as ludicrous (Oldenburg, 2013b). However, concepts and theories can develop constructively beyond their creator’s influence. For example Crick’s (2011) Jamaican study, suggested the need for a broader, culturally nuanced definition as ‘any place where people regularly meet for relaxation outside of home or work’, although perhaps even relaxation could be another narrow criterion.

Community and third places

Oldenburg's account of the decline of American community resonates with a wider tendency to view society through a community lost lens (Cole, 2013; Sampson, 2012), often appearing influenced more by nostalgia than sociological evidence. Responding to this perspective, Carroll (2014,p.9-10) suggested that 'Community has no doubt declined in some respects, but it is just as important to see it as changing and evolving... to understand how community has been transformed, and...perhaps, even improved in some respects'. He warns against dismissing new forms of community by nostalgically yearning for idealized past communities, cautioning against intersubjectively judging communities as *good* or *bad*. For example, the notion that the French Revolution was sparked in a contemporary third place, the Parisian Café Foy (Billington, 1981), could be seen as either constructive or destructive of community depending on your view of the Revolution—Jacobins would view it very differently to Royalists. Oldenburg's own perspective resonates with community lost through his idealized view of past institutions, such as Victorian pubs, and of American social change. He argues that urban planners have 'been hostile to an informal public life' (Oldenburg, 1999,p.ix). However, such interference is nothing new; political establishments have long seen informal public gatherings as threatening public order and power relations. For example, pubs have long been regulated and even coffee houses were regulated—even suppressed—in seventeenth and eighteenth century London (Pinkus, 1995,p.822) and Turkey (Robinson, 1972,p.39).

Oldenburg's idealization of Victorian pubs is somewhat reminiscent of Engels' (1943,p.51) analysis of the contemporary British laborer; finding home-life 'comfortless, damp, dirty, repulsive; he has urgent need of recreation, he must have something to make work worth his trouble, to make the prospect of the next day endurable'. Engels suggested that their only refuge was the pub, differentiating it from work and home spaces. However, this does not

suggest the idealized community that Oldenburg describes, rather the pub provides *men* escape from an unpleasant environment ‘forgetting for an hour or two the wretchedness and burden of life’ (Engels 1943,p.51), through alcohol and sociability. However, whether visiting a Turkish coffee house or a Victorian pub, such leisured sociability could potentially contribute to community spirit, whether adjudged *good* or not.

Human interaction can be paradoxical; in their analysis of modern tribalism, Morris and Marsh (1988,p.10) observed that a ‘sense of communality both binds the members of a tribe together and distances them from non-members’. Thus, communal cohesion can encourage distrust of outsiders. Such dualisms of interaction as socially inclusive-exclusive, or safe-dangerous, is central to third places. As people interact within increasingly complex spaces and contexts in modern society, physical and psychological safety are important; the unpredictability of strangers’ and acquaintances’ behavior exacerbates social anxiety. Social intercourse can feel safer in neutral environments of mutually assured safe hospitality, whether contacting complete strangers (Bolchazy, 1977), or meeting casual acquaintances and neighbors—‘friends with a small-f’ (Sandiford & Divers, 2014,p.93), whose behavior is less predictable than close friends and family. This is especially so when third places are supervised by sensitized managers/employees, behavioral norms are internalized by users and/or reinforced by formal regulation. Rosenbaum et al (2007,p.45) demonstrated how staff offer social support within commercial third places, fitting Oldenburg’s concern for community building/maintenance by offering isolated individuals communal inclusion. Rosenbaum et al (2007,p.53) express surprise when respondents perceived such relationships as weaker than ‘noncommercial relationships’, although this does resonate with Sandiford and Divers’ (2014,p.93) ‘friends with a small f’, as close friends and family do not *need* third places to meet. This illustrates the variety of third places’ social functions and demonstrates a

potential inclusiveness—few places cater *only* for the lonely, rather providing opportunities for them to interact with the less lonely; although friends and families *can* meet there, it may provide the only opportunity to meet less-close acquaintances and neighbors.

BLURRING OF PLACE/SPACE AND ASSOCIATED ACTIVITY.

Like many concepts, the third place seems deceptively simple, initially. However, further analysis soon uncovers its complexity—any analysis of third places is necessarily complicated by contextual blurring. One person's first place may be another's third or second place. Commercial third places are workplaces and even homes (if living-in)—even a domestic dinner party host offers a sort of third place to guests. Such distinctions are commoditized by employers who encourage employees to perceive customers as guests visiting their home, with customers offered a home-away-from-home. A further, example of such blurring is demonstrated by Verhoeve's (2013) championing of coffee shops as comfortable workplaces *for customers*. Whether this as an example of broader work-life imbalance or an innovative addition to work flexibility, third places increasingly offer space to catch-up on work-related tasks. Such developments require a less rigid conceptualization of place/space than suggested by Oldenburg's (1999, p.294-295) citation of Roger Barker: 'if the person is in church, he "acts church." If he's in a post office, he "acts post office".' Such generalizations do not recognize contextual differences (cultural or individual)—few churches are exactly the same, even within a single denomination—in the same way that many different activities and behaviors can be observed in any pub, café, bookshop or other third place.

Another field of study that has embraced Oldenburg's ideas is that of *online community*. For example, Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) apply third place to online gaming environments. At times their analysis seems defensive, almost presupposing criticism from Oldenburg at such an idea. However, this application offers face validity; although possibly diluting or broadening the concept, this need not be problematic. Including virtual space in any conceptualization has implications beyond basic definitions—do third places *need* to exist physically? After all Henry James', 1948, *Great Good Place* is often interpreted as a dreamscape, rather than physical place. However, some do argue 'physical tangibility' (Cole 2013,p.74) is crucial to third place users, suggesting that social media cannot compensate for its loss. Oldenburg (2013,p.9) also revisited this issue, arguing that people 'do not pick the people they associate with in a real third place', but do so, online. However, this seems counter-intuitive if customers select a pub, bar, hairdresser or café *because* of the expected clientele. Both contexts provide an opportunity to meet like-minded people while also offering the unpredictably 'broadening experience' of meeting and interacting with chance customers.

Although most of Oldenburg's preferred third places are associated with commercial operations (pubs, bookshops, hairdressers), there are non-commercial alternatives such as public libraries (Harris, 2007), museums (Slater & Koo, 2010) or parklands (Henneberger, 2002,p.13). Oldenburg originally rejected libraries as third places (1999,p.203), due to 'exacting, complicated, and expensive internal requirements'. This argument is less convincing in many modern libraries, which often embrace conviviality and informality, offering children's play areas, conversation, refreshments and even music. However, even when library rules were stricter, accidental social usage could be observed, notably in the popular media. For example, the long-running UK television situation comedy *Last of the*

Summer Wine (2002) featured three older men self-empowering through appropriation and mischievous social use of their public library and other places, breaking and gently mocking officious institutional rules. Although comedic fiction, this does portray a clientele rebelliously adopting a rule-oriented space for informal sociability, suggesting a need to be less proscriptive in discounting potential third places. Such spaces can also help us explore informal community norms and unintended consequences. For example, public parks may also be adopted by less *reputable* communities as another example of self-empowerment, adopting them as third place hangouts, particularly at night, to the extent that others may avoid them. This would suggest a lack of alternative third places for marginalized individuals and groups, who, through necessity, resort to the few fully public spaces to gather together.

It is not surprising that some have seen the next natural progression of Oldenburg's ideas as identifying *fourth* places, given the rigidity of his criteria. One of the problems here is that different authors have defined fourth places differently. For example:

1. Wenner (1998,p.303) conceptualizes fourth places as postmodern 'hypermediated' and 'uniquely "super-gendered" public space', such as sports bars.
2. Fleener (2005) sees the fourth place, as retail premises where highly engaged and like-minded customers gather, such as Apple stores. Members' self-selection, based on shared consumption and interest, is the key differentiator from third place.
3. Miller (2014,p.17) defines the fourth place as the 'digital/technological or virtual equivalent of the "Third Place"', focusing particularly on digital memorials and monuments.

All these conceptualizations are intriguing, especially if taking a narrow view of *third* place. However, such multiple definitions of fourth place contribute to conceptual confusion; not only is there little consistency—each differs from the others—but they all overlap the original

meaning of third place, more like different types of third place than something altogether dissimilar: Wenner's (1998) *fourth* place is essentially a postmodern type of third place; Fleener (2005) suggests another commercial venue for third place communing; Miller (2014) transfers third place into virtual space, which, as shown earlier, others already define as a third place.

APPLICATIONS OF THIRD PLACE IN HOSPITALITY

Hospitality researchers do find inspiration in Oldenburg's (1999) work (e.g. Lee & Severt, 2017; Rosenbaum, 2009; Tumanan & Lansangan 2012; Wong & Rosenbaum 2012; Sandiford & Divers, 2014; Wu et al, 2014), demonstrating its continuing relevance and its most famous practical application is surely Howard Schultz's vision for the Starbucks chain. In addition to such explicit applications, it soon becomes clear that its relevance extends to other concepts and practices, which will be introduced here. As shown earlier, researchers often assess whether a particular institution or space fits Oldenburg's third place criteria. For example, Tumanan and Lansangan's study of place attachment (2012) concluded that their Filipino coffee shops satisfied many of these criteria. Although their study demonstrates the continued influence of his work, arguably it presents a slightly distracted view of the third place thesis, bypassing its key community role (Williams & Hipp, 2018) and recounts his original criteria rather uncritically, when greater consideration of function (community implications) may have enriched their analysis of customer behavior and attitudes. More recently, Wu, et al. (2014) presented a more conceptually sophisticated application in their exploration of customer territoriality. Although their analysis also pays little attention to Oldenburg's view of third place function, it is less limited by his definitional criteria; their study both questions

(implicitly) and develops the concept to facilitate a more critical spatial analysis of customer behavior in third places.

Starbucks' championing of third place also requires some consideration, as the highest-profile hospitality operation associated, if controversially, with Oldenburg's ideas. As already suggested, Oldenburg was uncomfortable with Schultz's adoption of a third-place inspired strategy. Even Schultz acknowledged that Starbucks was 'not yet an ideal Third Place' (Schultz & Yang, 1997,p.120), given space restrictions and emphasis on takeaway orders. However, he observed that 'Americans are so hungry for a community that some of our customers began gathering in our stores', echoing Oldenburg's (1999) original emphasis on neighbourhood and accidental adoption, encouraging him to enlarge premises and facilitate customer lingering. As Ritzer (2008,p.224) points out, when considering the idea of *Starbuckization* in relation to his *McDonaldization* thesis of society, despite an apparent lack of seating, the few comfortable armchairs and sofas contribute to an *appearance* of comfort and welcome, complemented by 'unpaid actors' occupying them, thus even those, collecting take-away coffee, can experience some of the homeyness offered. This idea resonates with Oldenburg's (1999) own suggestion that third place regulars can actually attract new customers and encourage newcomers to become regulars themselves.

Schultz and Yang (1997,p.281) argue that Starbucks coffee shops 'add value' to the local community as 'an instant gathering spot', seeing this as integral to their mission. They recognise that not everyone agrees with this, which itself highlights subjective conceptual tensions regarding different types of community, harkening back to Oldenburg's view of *good* community. Such community value, could even be interpreted as a type of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), as suggested in Sandiford and Divers' (2014) application of

third place to English pubs. Simon's (2009) analysis of Starbucks as third places moderates between Schultz's and Oldenburg's perspectives, concluding that Starbucks offers 'less belonging and fewer real connections than they do a quick cup of coffee and a predictable and safe meeting place, a retreat from the world and from other people' (Simon,2009,p.82-3). Thus, arguably, Starbucks does not fit Oldenburg's original criteria. However, it seems foolish to dismiss Starbucks' offering out of hand—especially given the latter part of Simon's quotation. Rather, taking a broader view of the concept seems sensible, especially if it encourages hospitality providers to champion conviviality and pay more attention to the neighbourhood they serve. Taking this further, Starbucks' application of third place, as reported by Schultz and Yang (1997), demonstrates the concept's relevance to researchers in brand analysis and development. They show principles of third place are inextricably linked to the Starbucks brand. Thus, our understanding of related ideas such as brand community (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002)—another type of community—could be enhanced by considering the role of third places within such communities, in a similar way to Oldenburg's original focus on neighbourhood communities, or Steinkuehler and Williams' (2006) online communities.

From a hospitality perspective, there is a long tradition of third-place institutionalization. Such places were valued long before Starbucks and Oldenburg. For example, Kümin (2005,p.16) shows how in the Medieval Bernese Oberland, 'publicans' acted like 'civil servants'; they were formally elected, the public had 'a right of access to' their premises and they were responsible for 'order and the reporting of suspicious activities'. Such explicit rights of access combined with private premises are rarely present in modern commercial third-places, though inspirational cases of voluntary provision of *hospitality* beyond financial gain are found in the commercial hospitality sector (e.g. sanctuary offered by hotels in

disaster contexts, such as during the 2013 unrest in Turkey, Özel, 2013). Thus, planned/intentional third places are not necessarily wholly focused on financial gain, nor do they necessarily relate to the negative sociality suggested by Oldenburg.

A key dichotomy of the third place phenomenon is that although some institutions may encourage third place usage of their premises, even finding strategic inspiration there, as do Starbucks, others may actively seek to minimize this (Oldenburg, 1999,p.204). Oldenburg particularly celebrates unplanned third places that people ‘invaded, took over, commandeered, or otherwise appropriated... never intended to serve as social centers’ (1999,p.204), especially if managers actively discourage it. This is where Hospitality organizations could provide a constructive perspective, as the services they offer are entwined with the welcoming ideal of third places; indeed, it could be argued that many generate income *as* third places, whether explicitly or implicitly. Thus, a third place perspective could help managers and researchers alike better understand the complexities of customer usage patterns and interactions in a wide variety of Hospitality contexts, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

Enriching Hospitality Research

This section moves beyond explicit applications of third place in hospitality research and considers how other research could benefit from such application. Three studies are presented and briefly re-explored through a third place lens; none of these cases explicitly refer to third place, yet all resonate with the concept and it is not difficult to imagine Oldenburg’s likely response to the contexts and scenarios presented here.

Mini-case 1

Miao and Mattila (2013) investigated the role of psychological distance in restaurant customer interactions with each other, based on the idea that ‘the presence of other customers becomes an important part of the consumption experience’ (2013,p.81) within what they refer to as customerscapes. Their two experimental studies explore how customer-customer interactions result in ‘spontaneous emotional responses, symbolic emotional responses, emotion-regulation strategies, and encounter satisfaction’ that affect the ‘overall customer experience’ (2013,p.77).

Mini-case 2

Asatryan and Oh (2008) explored how far restaurant customers experience feelings of belongingness to, and even psychological ownership of, hospitality businesses. They link this with customer regularity, often seen as evidence of loyalty, drawing attention to the link between customers’ ‘active participation/involvement in the dining experience’ (208,p.378) and psychological ownership, demonstrating the importance of such customer feelings for restaurant marketing.

Mini-case 3

Line and Hanks (2018) explore the impacts of customers’ boredom and attachment to restaurants, focusing particularly on possible switching (between restaurants) behaviour. Intriguingly they cite Oldenburg (1999) on a number of occasions, though without engaging with third place explicitly. One of their key observations uncovers the idea that ‘both attachment and boredom arise through repeat exposure’ (2018,p.15).

All three mini-cases explore hospitality from different viewpoints. The first focuses on customer interactions, the second explores relationships with restaurant brands and the third analyses the role of place itself. Although none of the authors explicitly mention third place, all the studies would probably be further illuminated by its application.

Case three does imply some level of third place awareness, given multiple citations of Oldenburg, albeit broadly. One such citation supports their suggestion that strong place attachment 'usually results from visiting the location over time' (2018,p.4), probably in relation to Oldenburg's focus on regular customers as 'the single essential element of a third place' (Oldenburg, 1999,p.174), somewhat undermining his own otherwise rigid criteria. He sees this not just as habit cultivating attachment to the place, but about how regulars greet other regulars, newcomers and strangers, because 'every regular was once a newcomer' (1999,p.74). This also resonates with case two, when Asatryan and Oh (2008,p.377) suggest that customers' psychological ownership of a place is influenced by 'greater customer involvement in co-creation of a dining experience through participation as well as feelings of belonging and identification with the restaurant'. This is central to Oldenburg's (1999) analysis of regular customers in third places and their self-empowerment when adopting such places for their convivial purposes.

Case one takes a slightly different perspective, exploring psychological differences between customers. The authors report puzzlement because 'participants reported greater symbolic emotional responses when the psychological distance from other customers was distant' (Miao & Mattila, 2013,p.87). If viewing the restaurants as third places, this would be less puzzling, given their *levelling* role where 'friends with a small-f' (Sandiford & Divers, 2014,p.93), who have fewer external ties, value the opportunity to interact comfortably and

safely. The customers' role, whether regular or newcomer, is crucial to Oldenburg's thesis, not least in situations where customers self-empower to adopt space for themselves.

Similarly, third places are likely to inspire high levels of attachment, whether representing a hospitable, welcoming and levelling servicescape or extending into a sense of ownership of the place (Asatryan & Oh, 2008) due to habitual and engaged patronage. This also extends to Case three's thin line between attachment and boredom for regular customers. Again, application of third place here adds value, analytically and organisationally. Oldenburg's mixture of familiar and comfortable regularity with an element of unpredictability, or 'whiff of danger' (Simon, 2009 p.102), helps understand this thin line, suggesting another level of paradox if customers, managers and service employees always know what's *going to* happen, while never fully knowing what's *about to* happen.

The next section moves on from individual hospitality contexts, exploring a broader hospitality arena and drawing together different types of third place.

Symbiotic Hospitality: an Under-Researched Third Place Application

It is unsurprising that Oldenburg (1999) referred to bookstores as *great good places* (third places) in his book's title and cover photograph. What is surprising is that he did not pursue this particular example in the text. It could be enlightening to read his thoughts about the bookshop-coffee shop partnerships that have developed since. Many commercial bookstores now offer refreshments, sometimes collaborating with chains such as Starbucks and Costa, striving to complement and exploit bookstores as hangouts, to both parties' advantage. After all, bookshops 'provide a place of relaxation and restoration for many' (Laing & Royle, 2013,

p.39) and combining this with food and beverage based hospitality enhances the hangout qualities of both café and bookstore. This reinforces the blurring between accidental (customer-led) development of third places and planned commoditization by businesses to better serve their mutual customers. Such commoditization interests researchers who can see it as exploitative or alienating; scholars such as Lashley and Morrison, (2013) have explored the trends and tensions of commercializing the core human activity of being hospitable.

Arguably, the ideas behind the third place have already had considerable impact in the High Street, beyond the traditional context of stand-alone hospitality outlets. Non-hospitality places (at least from the perspective of a hospitality industry that is often defined as including commercial organizations whose *primary* focus is providing food, beverages and/or accommodation) with the potential to become third places, can encourage symbiotic relationships. Thus, hairdressers, bookshops and even some libraries can offer refreshments, reinforcing their hangout status and community role (Harris, 2007). Despite the development of such symbiosis, whether based on alliances or diversification, there is little research, like Lee and Severt's (2017) work on hospitality in care communities, into this apparent trend within the hospitality literature. This is surprising given its potential commercial and social significance. For example, supermarkets have been identified as potential third places offering 'a place beyond home and work that nurtures social interaction' and an opportunity 'to personalize the shopping experience' (Zweibach, 2006). Although seeing supermarkets as third places may seem unconvincing, many larger supermarkets do offer in-house refreshments, as do other retailers, where anyone can gather and hang-out.

Slater and Koo (2010) hinted at symbiosis in another third place context. When investigating the Tate Modern and the Southbank Centre galleries, they identified four user types/groups,

labelling them according to their use of gallery spaces. One group (“Place to see art”) visit for exhibitions and performances. The second (“Place to meet and hang out”) meet friends and spend time in the (symbiotic) cafés and bars. The third group (“Place to drop into”) use the gallery enroute to somewhere else. The fourth group, (“Third place”) use the galleries to study, for meetings, to read, escape and rejuvenate (2010,p.99). Here, they explicitly apply the third place (to the fourth group), although this is a little limiting, as the second and third groups do also include third place activities, crossing over into food and beverage provision.

Situating cafés and/or bars in galleries, bookstores, supermarkets or department stores is not a particularly new practice. As shown above, scholars in other disciplines have already begun exploring this symbiosis, so its absence from the hospitality literature is rather surprising, as it does present a potentially significant area of investigation.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The third place concept will only continue to offer scholarly value if it can evolve to contribute to our understanding of social interactions away from home and work. This contribution could include sociological understanding of different types of community and their members’ behavior when adopting places for their own social purposes. This paper suggests that the concept also can contribute to our understanding of the places themselves, whether commercially operated or not, providing researchers and managers with an additional lens for observing user behavior. The self-empowerment implied by the term *hangout*, as suggested earlier in relation to individuals’ appropriation of space not necessarily intended as third places, is central to our understanding of third places, much more so than

any proscriptive criteria. Thus, it is those who hang-out who decide which place becomes their third place, neither the managers that do not encourage them, nor those that *do*.

Similarly these users tend to self-define their behavior within these places, whether levelling or co-creating informal hierarchies.

This paper suggests that the purpose and value of a theoretical construct such as third place is less about debating whether something *is* a third place, than exploring the implications of third placedness for enterprises, their customers and the communities they serve. If we redefine third place, more neutrally, as *social space away from work and home*, and its function as *offering a socio-communal arena away from the activities primarily associated with those other places*, we do not dilute the value of Oldenburg's ideas. Rather, the concept is enhanced analytically. Researchers gain a framework for investigations concerned with human use of space without the encumbrance of intersubjective value judgements regarding the inherent *goodness* or otherwise of their activities. This broader view of the concept can be applied more widely, allowing for nuanced application. For this reason, third place can probably be seen, most constructively, as *primarily convivial space adopted by individuals and groups for the creation and reinforcement of relationships within and across various types of communities, away from places associated with work and home*. Oldenburg's other criteria would often contribute to scholarly research, but are not essential in every context, because, if we prescribe all Oldenburg's (1999) criteria, such as informality, neutrality, inclusiveness and leveling culture, there is less opportunity to explore different approaches to third place. So, a pub or café with a significant regular clientele provides a somewhat different research opportunity to one with higher levels of passing (non-regular) trade, yet both would be of interest when making sense of different types of customer and, indeed, different types of third place. Usage patterns and intended purposes vary widely, though it

seems reasonable to view most such interactions as potentially building and reinforcing community, whatever the place's ostensible or intended purpose.

Simplifying the definition of third place is not a retrograde step in its evolution. Rather it offers scholars and managers an opportunity to participate more actively in that evolution. This could seem paradoxical; simplifying a definition, or reducing limiting criteria from more rigid conceptualizations, actually offers more opportunity to explore the richness and complexity of the concept in future research. Ideas presented as essential criteria by researchers such as Oldenburg, can be reinterpreted as *possible* factors/dimensions when analyzing and comparing third places across different organizations, managers, service workers, customers and, indeed, the communities they serve. This is something that the depth and richness of qualitative investigation is particularly well served to do, with a broad-based conceptual lens serving as a guide, rather than a prescriptive rule book.

Figure 1

Figure 1 illustrates some of the tentative applications and conceptual developments considered in this paper. It presents a broadly evolutionary approach to the third place, whereby a single common ancestor (Oldenburg & Brisset's, 1982, original definition) feeds offshoots of application (as overlapping 'bubbles' across different contexts and disciplines—though these cannot be comprehensive in number or overlap) and conceptual refinements (represented by arrows) rather than following a single linear track. The three examples of fourth place, considered earlier, illustrate this evolutionary branching and highlight the danger of over-relying on a single, over-articulated conceptualization, representing competing, rather than complementary conceptualizations. Thus exploration of different

types of third places is preferable to cumbersome separation into additional places (fourth, fifth etc). Such an approach, based on the two descriptors suggested above, rather than a long list of criteria, would enable exploration of the place(s) in question, its users and/or the communities served, recognizing the diversity of these three elements. Thus, whether a Starbucks offers a group of friends a place to socialize, somewhere for others to read a newspaper or update social media, a meeting place for a businessperson or a meeting or an interview venue for researchers and journalists, may complicate our understanding of Starbucks' social function(s), but does *not* prevent application of third place in our analysis. Similarly, the contribution that academic concepts such as this can make to management thinking, in better understanding customers and how they utilize commercial hospitality space is also apparent; if offering a sociable alternative to home or workplace is the key defining factor, community reinforcement is likely to be implied in many/most contexts. This is where the inevitably hospitable nature of third places can particularly enrich our understanding of hospitality in practice.

One of the strengths of the third place concept is that, like the idea of hospitality itself, it has a breadth that extends beyond a single type of place. If we agree that third places in commercial hospitality premises are defined and created by customers rather than managers (who may facilitate, but cannot create them), it soon becomes clear that restaurants (Rosenbaum et al, 2007), pubs (Sandiford & Divers, 2014), cafés/coffee shops, whether chains (Schultz & Yang, 1997), or independent (Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012) and even casinos (Wong & Rosenbaum, 2012) can potentially be included. Thus, viewing restaurants, and behavior within restaurants, through a third place lens also contributes to Roberts and Shea's (2017,p.397) tentative theorizing of 'local community dining', adding to their ideas regarding purpose, management and regularity.

Conversely, the breadth of the commercial hospitality sector also complicates any discussion of third place. If, as suggested here, we broaden our conceptualization to include convivial space beyond Oldenburg's (1999) original definition, the potential for application grows. For example, perhaps this could be widened from local community dining to include dining while traveling (Roberts & Shea, 2017), with subcultural context representing less obvious ideas of community. We could ask whether hotels and holiday resorts are third places—certainly a hotel bedroom may not offer much conviviality and even hotel public areas do not offer many guests (except for regular, long-stay guests or non-resident locals) habitual venues for them to develop into long-term regulars. Indeed the same can be said of many other hospitality operations where few if any customers could be seen as regulars—although such regularity would not necessarily be a precondition under the simpler conceptualization, above.

As demonstrated here, the third place concept can be applied to various disciplines beyond sociology, including museums (Slater & Koo, 2010), parklands (Henneberger, 2002,p.13), high street retail (Fleener, 2005), supermarkets (Zweibach, 2006), online communities (Steinkuehler & Williams (2006) and libraries (Harris, 2007). This demonstrates a breadth of relevance that has been recognized somewhat in our discipline, hospitality, though the concept could be used more widely to help understand customer interactions and consumption behaviors within commercial hospitality premises. This paper also draws attention to the significant, yet under-researched, area of cross-sector symbiosis where a third place lens has a particular contribution to make. Finally, it is also important to emphasise that simplification of Oldenburg's original conceptualization does not result in a more *simplistic* concept. Indeed, as with many scholarly ideas, this would paradoxically make it more sensitive to the complexity of hospitality and other relevant commercial and public sectors.

Implications for managers

Scholars are quick to point out that '[m]anaging customer experiences is among the key success factors in today's competitive hospitality business environment' (Miao & Mattila, 2013,p.90). Viewing semi-public spaces within commercial hospitality venues, whether or not with obvious community/neighbourhood based markets or habitually regular customer bases, as third places emphasizes the importance of customer influence on their operations. This draws management attention to the implications of a self-empowering clientele with motives beyond the consumption of carefully managed meal and other organised experiences. Such considerations also extend beyond basic business issues, into the realm of corporate social responsibility or drawing attention to the commercial implications of possible over-management of customer experience or over-segmentation of clientele, suggesting possible unintended consequences if third place activities are curtailed by management.

Managers of hospitable spaces are likely to find their work enriched by the concept, as did Howard Schultz. Recognizing that people often adopt space originally intended for another purpose, it would be unfortunate if managerial antipathy and action to prevent such usage leads to an inverse degeneration of purpose. Conversely, there may even be a danger if enterprising organizations seek to capitalize on a need for third places and over-formalize its offer in an existing hospitality third place, perhaps even discouraging existing customers who may believe its original informality is damaged by apparent commoditization. In both contexts, there is a blurred third place boundary, with customers using premises to escape, socialize, study and/or indeed work; both contexts also caution against carelessly excessive market segmentation which may exclude key individuals or groups. This also reinforces the

need for a broader conceptualization of third places, enabling managers to focus more on their unique spaces/places and the communities they serve.

Implications for researchers

This paper has explored and revisited the idea of third place from the perspective of commercial hospitality, within local communities and neighborhoods. Hospitality researchers could incorporate the concept in analyses of the customer experience, enriching our understanding of self-empowering customers within the social context of places serving food and beverages. Although this paper does include some of the many international contexts in which third places have been investigated beyond the USA, the UK, Europe and Australia, (i.e. the Philippines—Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012; Turkey—Özel, 2013; Jamaica—Crick, 2011; Macau—Wong, & Rosenbaum, 2012), there is also considerable scope for more cross-cultural investigations exploring the nature of third places across the globe.

It is also clear that there is an opportunity for more interdisciplinary investigation, or at least for hospitality scholars to recognise and explore the implications of third place for collaborative ventures, such as with libraries, bookstores, other retailers or even hospitals, which could potentially exploit and/or enhance the third placedness of both collaborators. Its position within the wider hospitality and tourism literature also poses researchers with an additional angle to explore. Once again, broadening the third place definition, as suggested here, would enable research to be tailored more to a particular context (organisational, disciplinary, place, community), without the unnecessary limitation of prescriptively value-laden criteria.

It remains unclear how the three *places* would best be applied to tourism-oriented hospitality. So, this paper concludes with one more question for consideration, namely, whether a hotel offers a literal home-away-from-home (temporary first place), a workplace for business travellers (temporary second place) or Henry James' 'great good place' itself (a third place, assuming regularity is not a required criterion); the regularity issue is further complicated when hotel chains provide very similar environments and regularity relates to a habitually familiar brand rather than a geographical location. Alternatively, the hotel could even be viewed as the elusive fourth place, due to its temporary nature.

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Figure 1. Examples of third place evolution and applications

