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The Impact of Third Places on Community Quality of Life

Leo W. Jeffres · Cheryl C. Bracken · Guowei Jian ·
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Abstract Older cities struggling with issues of survival focus on jobs and the economy, but competition requires all cities to pay attention to the quality of life that attracts residents. Creating such an inviting environment includes “third places” that foster community and communication among people outside of home and work, yet we have little empirical evidence that speaks to the subject, or their importance for a community’s quality of life. Here we report on a national U.S. survey that asked people to identify such places in their community, producing a wide variety of “third places” that ranged from the most popular community centers, coffee shops and restaurants to parks and malls. While a few relationships are found between population/diversity and the popularity of particular third places, the most important result confirms a hypothesized relationship between perceptions that third places are accessible in their community and the perceived quality of life.

Keywords Third places · Communication · Community quality of life ·
Urban Communication · Constructed Environment

Older cities struggling with issues of survival focus on jobs and the economy, but there’s also recognition that today’s competition requires all cities to pay attention to the quality of life that attracts young professionals and entrepreneurs (Audirac and Fitzgerald 2003; Lambiri et al. 2007). Urban centers around the world see themselves as competing for residents and tourists through unique attractions and leisure activities (Clark et al. 2002; Young et al. 2006).¹

¹Paskaleva-Shapira (2007) notes that tourist cities need to create an appeal to all stakeholders—tourists, businesses and citizens—to be competitive. The importance of local tourism through arts festivals also is a factor (Quinn (2005).

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This economic competition among cities depends in part on attracting what Florida (2002a, 2002b, 2005a, 2005b, 2008) calls the “creative class,” more highly-paid innovative thinkers such as writers, entertainers, artists and engineers, who are the key to urban regeneration. These individuals fuel the “creative economy” with innovation that generates jobs and hope for older industrial cities. However, these relatively young people (aged 18 to 50) are not only highly educated but also mobile and attracted to environments that have few problems, tolerate “bohemians,” and provide opportunities for leisure and amenities consistent with a high quality of life. In this mix, attractive “public spaces” and the built environment would seem to be necessary ingredients for a desirable quality of life. Here we will focus on this potential link between public places and the perceived quality of life available in the community.

Research on the quality of urban life began when concern arose over the secondary effects on American society of national governmental programs (Andrews 1986; Schuessler and Fisher 1985). Among urban scholars today, the focus shifts to how planners and policy makers can create an environment conducive to economic development (While et al. 2004). Quality of life research should be front and center in this process of evaluating people’s relationship to their environment.

Urban planners and designers contribute to this dialogue about the future through multidisciplinary contributions that range from “life style centers” that are the domain of commercial interests to public spaces that are the responsibility of officials and government (Marans 2003; Pacione 2003; van Kamp et al. 2003). Changing definitions of the quality of life and the marketing of cities as places to live have led to popular rankings of cities. This media attention has framed policy-making discussions in many U.S. cities (McCann 2004).

The concern about urban centers cannot ignore the search for community. While many people select a home for its resale value or neighborhood schools, others seek community, a place to connect with others, where they feel at home. Among long-term residents, the social network is important for neighborhood participation (Dekker 2007). And that brings us to “communication,” which links people to each other and their community.

Communication scholars have much to contribute to this concern about spaces and activities, though their participation has been minimal so far. Our lives are acted out in three broad contexts: homes, the private spaces of individuals and families; workplaces, that generate economic resources; and “third places” that are neither home nor work. Someone’s workplace is someone else’s “third place,” but the distinction is not some absolute categorization but the function it serves.

“Third places,” as defined by Oldenburg (1989), are the “great, good places” that foster community and communication among people outside of home and work, the first and second places of daily life. Third places are the bars and coffee shops, the beauty salons and barbershops, bowling alleys and recreation centers, public places where people meet, congregate, and communicate. As Das (2008) notes, both objective and subjective factors are important for people’s quality of life, and “third places” are part of the “constructed environment” that contribute to objective conditions of living. Even economists now recognize that the “quality of life” is an “economic good,” with multiple dimensions (Lambiri et al. 2007). Kearney (2006) found that opportunities by residents to visit nearby shared space affected neighborhood satisfaction.

These “third places” may take many forms, and, while observers and scholars have written many essays on their form and their importance, we have no scholarly contributions that ascertain the public’s perception of such spaces, and whether they contribute to the quality of life in their communities. This paper will report on such an effort.

Third Places as Centers of Community

One of the long-running hit television shows of the 1980s and early 1990s was *Cheers*, a situation comedy about a Boston tavern. The setting was a perfect example of Oldenburg’s third place. The regulars were a racially homogeneous but socio-economically diverse group who laughed, told stories, confided problems, drank moderately, and blew off steam from the pressures of home and work. The theme song summed up both the series and the ideal third place as where you can go and everybody knows your name.²

Not every community or neighborhood has a “Cheers,” where that perfect social experience exists, but many communities have places that are near-equivalents. The recreation center where neighbors meet for aqua aerobics classes, the church where most of the parishioners have ties with each other, the McDonald’s where the gang meets for morning coffee, all have at least some of the characteristics of an ideal “third place.”

Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) note that, “Third places exist outside the home and beyond the ‘work lots’ of modern economic production. They are places where people gather primarily to enjoy each other’s company” (p. 269). Third places function as unique public spaces for social interaction, providing a context for sociability, spontaneity, community building and emotional expressiveness. Third places also serve as a means of “keeping in touch with reality” through intimate personal ties outside the home and workplace (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982, p. 280).

Oldenburg (1989) outlines some of the specific characteristics of third places: 1) They are on neutral ground. All are welcome, and no one plays “host”; 2) They are a leveler; people of different socio-economic strata attend; 3) Conversation is the main activity. Even though the setting may be a place for drinking, or exercising, or playing a game, talking is always present; 4) They are accessible; there are no physical, policy, or monetary barriers to entrance; 5) They are a home away from home. There are “regulars” who find the atmosphere comfortable enough to “root” them there; 6) The mood is playful, laughter is often heard, and wit is prized.

Oldenburg believes that these are the essential characteristics of third places because they engender the unique communication experiences and sociological

² The lyrics of the theme from the television show, *Cheers*, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name” are: Making your way in the world today takes everything you’ve got. Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot. Wouldn’t you like to get away? Sometimes you want to go. Where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name. You wanna go where people know, people are all the same. You wanna go where everybody knows your name.”

benefits associated with these places. The benefits serve not only community residents but also the community at large.

For an individual, the third place offers stress relief from the everyday demands of both home and work. It provides the feeling of inclusiveness and belonging associated with participating in a group's social activities, without the rigidity of policy or exclusiveness of club or organization membership.

For the greater community, the third place strengthens community ties through social interaction. It can foster commitment to local politics via informed public discourse. It also provides a feeling of safety and security by being publicly accessible and promoting open and visible interaction (Soukup 2006). As Oldenburg himself states, "Third places are nothing more than informal public gathering places."

Since communities themselves vary on so many dimensions, we might expect that the sites where people go to communicate outside their homes and work also would vary. To what extent do they share the characteristics Oldenburg believes are the ideal ingredients for "third places." Tolbert et al. (2002) found that non-metro small towns had more third places and more associations than metro small towns. The following research questions are offered:

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of "third places" the general public identifies as sites where they go to interact?

Research Question 2: Does the type of third place available to community residents vary by the type of community in which they live? (urban, suburban, rural)?

If third places are as important a part of community life as observers believe, then neighborhoods/communities with third places should be more desirable. If there is no place in a community for people to meet and casually talk, does the community suffer? Is the quality of life, or the perceived quality of life, in a neighborhood affected by the availability of third places? Frumkin (2003) and Baum and Palmer (2002) associate third places with public health. Tolbert (2005) says that local social and economic institutions—local businesses, civic organizations and churches—buffer communities from external, often global forces, and that the presence of local firms is positively associated with "third places," social capital and voter turnout. Grant et al. (2004) found that industrial plants with absentee management emit significantly fewer toxins in communities with more associations, churches and "third places." Tolbert et al. (2002) found that the presence of more "third places" was associated with greater civic welfare in both metro and non-metro small towns. The following hypothesis is offered:

Hypothesis 1: Communities with "third places" for interacting outside home and work will be perceived as having a higher quality of life.

Methods

A national telephone survey using a CATI system was conducted in late 2005 and early 2006 using a probability sample of U.S. households that yielded 477 respondents. The survey was introduced as the Civic Project, with an emphasis on

communities and technology. The 20-minute survey had a cooperation rate of about 27%, comparable to that achieved by surveys of similar length, e.g., Kempf and Remington (2007) report a steady decline in response rates for telephone surveys at a University of Michigan survey center, dropping from 72% in 1979 to a low of 48% in 2003. Following are the measures of concepts.

Third Places Many of the quality of place measures include “third places” but they are aggregated and not linked to opportunities for communication as Oldenburg suggests (e.g., Florida 2002c). Respondents were given the following open-ended questions to tap third places where residents would likely engage in communication: “What are the opportunities for communication in public places in your neighborhood, for example, places where people might chat informally or where friends and neighbors might go for a conversation?” Follow up probes, “any others?,” continued until there were no more answers. Responses were then coded into categories and three indices were constructed to classify places that reflect 1) an emphasis on eating and drinking; 2) outside public and inside private neighborhood locations for congregating; and 3) centers and organizations that would attract residents.

Perceived Quality of Life Two items tapped people’s perceptions of the quality of life available in their community and neighborhood: “How would you rate the overall quality of life available in the community where you live on a 0–10 scale, where 0 is the worst possible and 10 is the best possible?” A second item asked, “How would you rate the overall quality of life available in your specific neighborhood on the same 0–10 scale, where 0 is the worst possible and 10 is the best possible?”

Social Categories The traditional items were used to ascertain respondents’ gender, age, education, ethnicity, marital status, and household income.

Community Characteristics Residents were asked which of the following choices best describes where they live: in a central city neighborhood of a metropolitan area, in a near-by suburb of a metro area, in a more distant suburb of a metro area, in a fair-sized city outside a metro area, in a small town outside a metro area, or in the country. Respondents were also asked for their zipcode, which was matched with the most recent census data on population and various characteristics.

Results

The first research question asked what are the characteristics of third places the general public identifies as sites where they go to interact in their communities. Table 1 summarizes the responses. Perhaps the most surprising finding is the number (29% of respondents) who can’t think of anyplace in their community to go. The most frequently cited “third places” were coffee shops, cited by 13% of the sample. While many cited the generic coffee shop, numerous gave specific names, from Starbucks to Pricilla’s Coffee Shop or the Java River Coffee House. Restaurants also ranged from the local diner to six citations of McDonalds. Community centers, churches, parks and outdoor recreation spots also drew numerous nominations. Down the list somewhat

Table 1 Third places cited by respondents

Type of Third Place	Number of responses
None, no where, don't know	139
Community centers, town meetings	66
Coffee shops	64
Restaurants and cafes	58
Churches	49
Parks and outdoor recreation	39
Neighborhood outdoors, streets, neighbors' yards	39
Neighborhood inside, homes, apartments, party room	38
Clubs and organizations	35
Libraries	32
Shopping centers, stores, malls, and markets	27
Schools, colleges, universities	23
Bars and pubs	17
Recreation centers, YM/WCA, pool, movies, bingo	17
Neighborhood parties, block parties, cookouts, barbecues	14
Senior centers	11
Media, online, newsletters, newspapers, phone, bulletin boards	10
Many places	7
Other, miscellaneous	6
Hair salons, barber and beauty shops	3
Work	2
City area, downtown	2

are clubs, bars and public recreation centers. All of these reflect many of the characteristics of third places identified by Oldenburg (1989): neutral ground, open to all status groups,³ conversation is a major activity, and accessibility.

For some communities in our study, the streets and neighbors' yards represent opportunities to gather and communicate, suggesting that the "street corner society" still persists in some form. McTavish and Salamon (2001) found that 72% of households in a mobile home park reported feeling a sense of community either on their street or directly adjacent to their home. Libraries and senior centers are public meeting centers for groups that share some common ground, the former cited by 7% of the sample. Clubs and organizations, cited by 7% of the sample, included restricted locations such as country clubs and homeowners associations, to neighborhood groups, "our Grange hall" and civic clubs. Thus, while Americans may be "bowling alone" more often (Putnam 2000), many still gather together for fellowship or seeking the common good.

³ In a study of urban café guests in Norway, Traeen and Rossow (1994) note that people come together for common purposes regardless of social rank.

However, some of the “third places” are on commercial ground—shopping centers, stores and malls, cited by 6% of the sample, and hair salons, barber and beauty shops. Some 5% cited schools or universities and similar numbers cited events rather than locations—neighborhood parties, cookouts, block parties and barbecues.

Two responses rejected the notion of “third places” entirely, citing homes or “virtual spaces.” Thus, some 8% cited private spaces such as their neighbors’ homes, or on their stoop or front porch.⁴ And “virtual” or mediated spaces were cited by 2% of the sample: media, online, bulletin boards, newsletters, newspapers, or over the phone.⁵ Some aspects of communication over the Internet mirror one of the criteria for third places, the leveling nature of online communication (perhaps through anonymity), accessibility, “conversation” as the primary activity, and neutral ground.⁶

These results suggest several lines of inquiry that would require a larger data set to pursue. Thus, what types of residents are attracted to public vs. private third places? To what extent are programmed and institutional settings more significant for different generations—fraternal and ethnic halls serving older residents while rib fests and wine tastings attract younger residents. Furthermore, where does cost enter the equation and what should communities do to serve residents across the seasons?

The second research question asked if the type of third place available to community residents differed by the type of community in which they live, e.g., urban, suburban, rural. Table 2 provides a breakdown of third places cited by residents in each type of community. Overall patterns are statistically significant for only three places, although two others approach significance. Thus, residents living in central city neighborhoods, in the country and in fair-sized non metro cities are more likely to claim there are no such places relative to respondents living in suburbs and small towns. And restaurants and cafes are cited least often by central city residents, most often by those in small towns outside metro areas, with the others in between. Neighborhood events, block parties, and cookouts are cited most often by fair-sized non-metro city residents and those in distant suburbs, but seldom in the other types of communities. Community centers are more popular in near-by suburbs and least popular in more distant suburbs, with the other areas in between. And citations of outside venues, streets, in yards were cited more frequently by those living in fair-sized non-metro cities, then country residents and least often by central city and nearby suburb residents.

There are diverse ways to combine the categories to reflect dimensions Oldenburg (1989) says characterize third places. We combined coffee shops, bars and pubs, restaurants and cafes into a category representing many of these dimensions (neutral ground, open to all strata, conversation is the main activity, they’re accessible except for some monetary barrier, and the atmosphere is comfortable); these venues are

⁴ In analyzing a Tel-Aviv café, Shapira and Navon (1991) note that public spaces can become private spaces and vice versa.

⁵ Mass media usage, especially community newspaper reading, has been found to “encourage community participation, create community identity, serve as a forum for public affairs, increase public knowledge of their community, and allow the community to solve problems” (Jeffres and Lee 2002, p. 115).

⁶ Smith (2003) notes that synchronous computer-mediated communication has several major benefits that include increased equity of participation among students, increased quantity of learner output, and increased quality of learner output. Thus, the characteristics of virtual communication also reflect aspects of third places that attract people.

Table 2 Percentages of residents citing third places by type of community

	Central city metro neigh.	Nearby suburb in metro area	Distant suburb in metro area	Fair-sized non-metro city	Small town outside metro area	In the country	Chi-Sq.
Coffee shops	12%	16.5%	12.5%	11.6%	14.3%	11.5%	n.s.
Bars, pubs	4.1%	2.8%	0	2.3%	3.8%	.34%	n.s.
Churches	9.5%	11%	16.7%	7%	9.5%	10.3%	n.s.
None, no where	41.9%	25.7%	22.9%	37.2%	21%	32.2%	12.5**
Restaurants, cafes	4.1%	10.1%	12.5%	11.6%	20%	12.6%	11.0**
Clubs, organizations	6.8%	6.4%	14.6%	7%	6.7%	5.7%	n.s.
Community centers, Meetings	13.5%	22.0%	6.3%	11.6%	10.5%	12.6%	9.8*
Senior centers	1.4%	3.7%	0	2.3%	2.9%	2.3%	n.s.
Parks	9.5%	7.3%	6.3%	11.6%	11.4%	3.4%	n.s.
Stores, malls, markets	5.4%	5.5%	6.3%	4.7%	3.8%	9.2%	n.s.
Recreation centers, Y's, movies, pools, bingo	1.4%	6.5%	2.1%	4.7%	3.8%	2.3%	n.s.
Work	1.4%	0	0	0	1%	0	n.s.
Libraries	4.1%	9.2%	6.3%	11.6%	6.7%	4.6%	n.s.
Schools, colleges	6.8%	1.8%	6.3%	2.3%	4.8%	6.9%	n.s.
Beauty salons, barbers	1.4%	1%	0	0	1%	0	n.s.
Outside, streets, yards	4.1%	4.6%	10.4%	16.3%	7.6%	12.6%	9.8*
Inside neigh., homes, apts., party rooms	6.8%	11.9%	8.3%	2.3%	6.7%	9.2%	n.s.
Neigh. parties, block parties, cookouts	1.4%	1.8%	6.3%	11.6%	1.9%	1.1%	15.4***
Media, web, newsletters, Phone, paper, bulletin bd.	0	1.8%	4.2%	4.7%	1%	3.4%	n.s.
Many places	0	1.8%	2.1%	0	3.8%	0	n.s.
City area	0	1%	2%	0	0	0	n.s.
Miscellaneous, other	1.4%	1.8%	2.1%	2.3%	1%	0	n.s.
N=	74	109	48	43	105	87	466

The figures in each cell represent the percentage of residents in each type of community citing specific third places. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

probably one of the most popular forms of leisure-time activity engaged in by people today, and they require no coordination with others for the most part; we label this, “Eating, Drinking & Talking.” A second category has many of the same ingredients but focuses on organized social activity—combining churches, clubs and organizations, community centers and meetings, and senior centers; this is the category most relevant for Putnam’s (2000) emphasis on organizational involvement; we label this, “Organized Activity.” A third category stresses outside venues, parks or just meeting on streets or in yards; we label this, “Outside Venues.” And a fourth category focuses on the commercial vs. public nature of the venue, grouping coffee shops, bars and pubs, restaurants and cafes, stores, malls, shopping centers and markets, beauty salons and barber shops; we label this, “Commercial Venues.” A

breakdown of these larger groups of places shows differences by type of community, but none of the differences are statistically significant (see Table 3).

The three population measures were examined in relation to the citation of different types of “third places” listed in Table 1. Community population is correlated with citing only one category, neighborhood inside, homes, apartments, party room ($r=.12, p<.02$). County population was correlated with citing the city area itself ($r=.20, p<.001$) and the correlation with citing neighborhood parties, block parties, cookouts, barbecues approached statistical significance ($r=.09, p<.08$). The metropolitan population was correlated with citation of three kinds of third places: clubs and organizations ($r=.10, p<.05$), the city area itself ($r=.15, p<.003$), and neighborhood parties, block parties, cookouts, barbecues ($r=.14, p<.006$). When Putnam (2000) decried the lack of civic engagement and loss of community life in America over the past few decades in his “Bowling Alone” hypothesis, he focused on the decline in organizational membership as a measure of “social capital.” Yet here we find that it is precisely this context as “third places” that is correlated with metropolitan population. Maybe people are joining less, but organizations are more likely to be cited as places residents meet and talk in larger metro areas.

Next, the three population measures were examined in relation to the larger categories, but only one correlation was statistically significant: thus, the larger the population of the community in which people lived, the more likely respondents were to cite outside venues as “third places” where they and their friends would go to talk ($r=.10, p<.04$). Neither population of the county nor population of the metro area was significantly related.

If size isn’t a factor, perhaps the diversity of the community in which respondents live is important. Of the six individual diversity measures (occupation, racial-ethnic, age, education, income and marital status), only one was important: those who live in neighborhoods characterized by greater racial-ethnic diversity are less likely to cite either commercial venues ($r=-.15, p<.01$) or places where one eats-drinks-talks ($r=-.13, p<.02$) as “third places,” and they are more likely to say there’s nowhere to go ($r=.12, p<.03$). When the six diversity indices are added for a summary measure, the same two negative relationships appear (eat-drink-talk, $r=-.09, p<.10$; commercial venues, $r=-.11, p<.04$) but at a reduced level. And those in communities

Table 3 Percentages of residents citing four major categories of third places by type of community

	Central city metro neigh.	Nearby suburb in metro area	Distant suburb in metro area	Fair-sized non-metro city	Small town outside metro area	In the country	Chi-Sq.
Eat, drink, talk	17.6%	24.8%	20.8%	25.6%	31.4%	21.8%	n.s.
Organized activity	27.0%	35.8%	31.3%	20.9%	26.7%	26.4%	n.s.
Outside venues	13.5%	11.9%	16.7%	25.6%	17.1%	16.1%	n.s.
Commercial venues	21.6%	28.4%	22.9%	25.6%	35.2%	26.4%	n.s.

characterized by more overall diversity are more likely to say there are no such “third places,” though the correlation only approaches statistical significance ($r=.10$, $p<.08$).

Our hypothesis predicted that those living in communities with “third places” would claim a higher quality of life in the community and in their neighborhood. The hypothesis is supported by the data. Correlations were computed between citing the lack of “third places” and QOL assessments. Claiming there were no “third places” was negatively correlated with community quality of life assessment ($r=-.14$, $p<.01$) and neighborhood quality of life assessment ($r=-.20$, $p<.001$). Controlling for social categories (age, education, gender, white ethnicity, married marital status) reduced the magnitude of the relationships, but they still persisted (community QOL partial $r=-.10$, $p<.05$; neighborhood QOL partial $r=-.17$, $p<.001$). Adding the community population and summary diversity measures to controls reduced the correlation between community QOL and identifying third places below statistical significance (partial $r=-.10$, $p<.08$) but had no impact on the correlation of third places with neighborhood QOL (partial $r=-.17$, $p<.001$).

Discussion

Clearly, Americans find a variety of venues to meet and talk with friends and neighbors. While the coffee shop and restaurants are the most popular “third places” cited in our national survey, pubs, senior centers, parks and malls also appear on the list. Where one lives doesn’t seem to make much difference in the type of third places residents cite as locations where they go to talk. But a couple differences do appear; thus, restaurants and cafes are cited least often by central city residents, most often by those in small towns outside metro areas, with the others in between. And those living in central city neighborhoods, in the country or in fair-sized non metro cities are more likely to claim there are no “third places” in their communities relative to respondents living in suburbs and small towns.

Media today pay considerable attention to leisure opportunities, which are often used to characterize desirable locations. Thus, local newscasts seldom miss a chance to feature local festivals or residents enjoying outdoor venues, and prime-time television dramas are cast in “tourist” cities such as Miami and Las Vegas, which provide ample footage of public spaces. These images are likely to feed into the public’s perceptions of what’s desirable in their communities. When television and film became national media, they joined with retailers in erasing urban-rural differences in fashion and popular culture. It’s likely that similar effects would be found in how residents assess what’s desirable in the public and private spaces available in their communities. While this study cannot document how press coverage and media images shape perceptions of “third places,” it is an issue that deserves attention in future research.

An analysis of third places most popular by population and diversity measures reveals a surprising finding. Metropolitan population was correlated with citation of three kinds of third places: clubs and organizations, the city area itself, and neighborhood parties, block parties, cookouts, barbecues. Thus, despite Putnam’s (2000) often cited decline of civic engagement in America, particularly in

organizational membership, it is precisely this context as “third places” that is correlated with metropolitan population. Maybe people are joining less, but organizations are more likely to be cited as places residents meet and talk in larger metro areas. When community diversity was analyzed, we find negative relationships with citations of third places featuring eating-drinking-talking or those which are commercial venues, suggesting a lack of public spaces such as parks or, perhaps, a reluctance to frequent them for one reason or another (e.g., crime). Those in communities characterized by more overall diversity are more likely to say there are no such “third places.”

Our hypothesized relationship between the presence of third places and perceptions of the quality of life was supported by the data. Thus, regardless of where people go to meet and greet each other, the mere fact they feel they believe they have access to third places enhances their perceptions of the quality of life in their community. We would expect individual differences in the choices for third places, as well as an interaction with the built environment available to them. The quality of life literature suggests that people’s satisfaction with the quality of life in their community adjusts over time to fit the constraints people face (e.g., an aspiration-adjustment model, Inglehart and Rabier 1986; Michalos 1986); would we expect newcomers to communities to adjust what’s acceptable as third places for meeting and greeting or to expand their horizons, look further afield and reduce their assessments of their more immediate community’s quality of life? Wagner (2004) argues that cities vary in their level of civic capital, as policy-makers plan, start, maintain, repair or expand such third places as parks, community centers and other third places that affect the quality of life for residents. The concept of civic capital would appear to be a useful addition to the notion of social capital that researchers have found important (Putnam 2000). Elsewhere, Jeffres, Jian, & Yoon (2007) have advanced the concept of communication capital, which captures communication resources across contexts for civic engagement.

In addition, the data provide such a wide range of third places acceptable to Americans that we need to consider Lofland’s (1998) suggestion that we look at the “qualities of the place itself” for interaction and pleasures derived from its use. Have people changed in how they engage public life outside of home and work, a question Krizek (1995) raises. Also, though the acceptability of “Wal-Mart” as a third place may depend upon one’s political or philosophical inclinations, the reliance on “commercial” private venues for public interactions deserves more than cursory examination in a society where “visiting” as an activity has been replaced by dining and drinking. Third places may have begun as a simple metaphor for venues where “public life” is enacted, but the concept is useful for looking at the climate and context for interpersonal communication in America today. It’s more about communication than sociology.

Since the data were collected for this study, social networking has grown dramatically as people have joined online communities. This is a new phenomenon that some will pit against face-to-face interaction in public spaces, but a spot check of coffee shops and similar third places shows that many online participants carry on their “private” interaction in public spaces. In fact, the ability to logon in public spaces has become an amenity to attract customers and residents across contexts (Hart 2008; Wong 2007). Some researchers suggest that the Internet today allows

people to create new virtual social spaces unhampered by physical geography (Ducheneaut et al. 2004; Williams 2006), and, while the number of citations is small, the fact that numerous respondents suggested meeting on the Internet when asked where they would “go” for a conversation suggests that “virtual third places” are options for some. Thus, while the link between “third places” and communication may be important for a community’s quality of life, some of that interaction may occur online in public spaces. Opportunities for online communication across contexts also is an attraction to the “creative class” sought after by cities.

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