

**T H E  
G R E A T  
G O O D  
P L A C E**

**CAFÉS, COFFEE SHOPS,  
BOOKSTORES, BARS,  
HAIR SALONS, AND  
OTHER HANGOUTS AT THE  
HEART OF A COMMUNITY**

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## CHAPTER I

# *The Problem of Place in America*

A number of recent American writings indicate that the nostalgia for the small town need not be construed as directed toward the town itself: it is rather a "quest for community" (as Robert Nisbet puts it)—a nostalgia for a compassable and integral living unit. The critical question is not whether the small town can be rehabilitated in the image of its earlier strength and growth—for clearly it cannot—but whether American life will be able to evolve any other integral community to replace it. This is what I call the problem of place in America, and unless it is somehow resolved, American life will become more jangled and fragmented than it is, and American personality will continue to be unquiet and unfulfilled.

MAX LERNER

*America as a Civilization*  
1957

THE ENSUING YEARS have confirmed Lerner's diagnosis. The problem of place in America has not been resolved and life *has* become more jangled and fragmented. No new form of integral community has been found; the small town has yet to greet its replacement. And Americans are not a contented people.

What may have seemed like the new form of community—the automobile suburb—multiplied rapidly after World War II. Thirteen million plus returning veterans qualified for single-family dwellings requiring no down payments in the new developments. In building and equipping these millions of new private domains, American industry found a major alternative to military production and companionate

marriages appeared to have found ideal nesting places. But we did not live happily ever after.

Life in the subdivision may have satisfied the combat veteran's longing for a safe, orderly, and quiet haven, but it rarely offered the sense of place and belonging that had rooted his parents and grandparents. Houses alone do not a community make, and the typical subdivision proved hostile to the emergence of any structure or space utilization beyond the uniform houses and streets that characterized it.

Like all-residential city blocks, observed one student of the American condition, the suburb is "merely a base from which the individual reaches out to the scattered components of social existence."<sup>1</sup> Though proclaimed as offering the best of both rural and urban life, the automobile suburb had the effect of fragmenting the individual's world. As one observer wrote: "A man works in one place, sleeps in another, shops somewhere else, finds pleasure or companionship where he can, and cares about none of these places."

The typical suburban home is easy to leave behind as its occupants move to another. What people cherish most in them can be taken along in the move. There are no sad farewells at the local taverns or the corner store because there are no local taverns or corner stores. Indeed, there is often more encouragement to leave a given subdivision than to stay in it, for neither the homes nor the neighborhoods are equipped to see families or individuals through the cycle of life. Each is designed for families of particular sizes, incomes, and ages. There is little sense of place and even less opportunity to put down roots.

Transplanted Europeans are acutely aware of the lack of a community life in our residential areas. We recently talked with an outgoing lady who had lived in many countries and was used to adapting to local ways. The problem of place in America had become her problem as well:

After four years here, I still feel more of a foreigner than in any other place in the world I have been. People here are proud to live in a "good" area, but to us these so-called desirable areas are like prisons. There is no contact between the various households, we rarely see the neighbors and certainly do not know any of them. In Luxembourg, however, we would frequently stroll down to one of the local cafés in the evening, and there pass a very congenial few hours in the company of the local fireman, dentist, bank employee or whoever happened to be there at the time.

There is no pleasure to be had in driving to a sleazy, dark bar where one keeps strictly to one's self and becomes fearful if approached by some drunk.

Sounding the same note, Kenneth Harris has commented on one of the things British people miss most in the United States. It is some reasonable approximation of the village inn or local pub; our neighborhoods do not have it. Harris comments: "The American does not walk around to the local two or three times a week with his wife or with his son, to have his pint, chat with the neighbors, and then walk home. He does not take out the dog last thing every night, and break his journey with a quick one at the Crown."<sup>2</sup>

The contrast in cultures is keenly felt by those who enjoy a dual residence in Europe and America. Victor Gruen and his wife have a large place in Los Angeles and a small one in Vienna. He finds that: "In Los Angeles we are hesitant to leave our sheltered home in order to visit friends or to participate in cultural or entertainment events because every such outing involves a major investment of time and nervous strain in driving long distances."<sup>3</sup> But, he says, the European experience is much different: "In Vienna, we are persuaded to go out often because we are within easy walking distance of two concert halls, the opera, a number of theatres, and a variety of restaurants, cafés, and shops. Seeing old friends does not have to be a prearranged affair as in Los Angeles, and more often than not, one bumps into them on the street or in a café." The Gruens have a hundred times more residential space in America but give the impression that they don't enjoy it half as much as their little corner of Vienna.

But one needn't call upon foreign visitors to point up the shortcomings of the suburban experiment. As a setting for marriage and family life, it has given those institutions a bad name. By the 1960s, a picture had emerged of the suburban housewife as "bored, isolated, and preoccupied with material things."<sup>4</sup> The suburban wife without a car to escape in epitomized the experience of being alone in America.<sup>5</sup> Those who could afford it compensated for the loneliness, isolation, and lack of community with the "frantic scheduling syndrome" as described by a counselor in the northeastern region of the United States:

The loneliness I'm most familiar with in my job is that of wives and mothers of small children who are dumped in the suburbs and whose

husbands are commuters . . . I see a lot of generalized loneliness, but I think that in well-to-do communities they cover it up with a wealth of frantic activity. That's the reason tennis has gotten so big. They all go out and play tennis.<sup>6</sup>

A majority of the former stay-at-home wives are now in the labor force. As both father and mother gain some semblance of a community life via their daily escapes from the subdivision, children are even more cut off from ties with adults. Home offers less and the neighborhood offers nothing for the typical suburban adolescent. The situation in the early seventies as described by Richard Sennett is worsening:

In the past ten years, many middle-class children have tried to break out of the communities, the schools and the homes that their parents have spent so much of their own lives creating. If any one feeling can be said to run through the diverse groups and life-styles of the youth movements, it is a feeling that these middle-class communities of the parents were like pens, like cages keeping the youth from being free and alive. The source of the feeling lies in the perception that while these middle-class environments are secure and orderly regimes, people suffocate there for lack of the new, the unexpected, the diverse in their lives.<sup>7</sup>

The adolescent houseguest, I would suggest, is probably the best and quickest test of the vitality of a neighborhood; the visiting teenager in the subdivision soon acts like an animal in a cage. He or she paces, looks unhappy and uncomfortable, and by the second day is putting heavy pressure on the parents to leave. There is no place to which they can escape and join their own kind. There is nothing for them to do on their own. There is nothing in the surroundings but the houses of strangers and nobody on the streets. Adults make a more successful adjustment, largely because they demand less. But few at any age find vitality in the housing developments. David Riesman, an esteemed elder statesman among social scientists, once attempted to describe the import of suburbia upon most of those who live there. "There would seem," he wrote, "to be an aimlessness, a pervasive low-keyed unpleasure."<sup>8</sup> The word he seemed averse to using is *boring*. A teenager would not have had to struggle for the right phrasing.

Their failure to solve the problem of place in America and to provide a community life for their inhabitants has not effectively discouraged

the growth of the postwar suburbs. To the contrary, there have emerged new generations of suburban development in which there is even less life outside the houses than before. Why does failure succeed? Dolores Hayden supplies part of the answer when she observes that Americans have substituted the vision of the ideal home for that of the ideal city.<sup>9</sup> The purchase of the even larger home on the even larger lot in the even more lifeless neighborhood is not so much a matter of joining community as retreating from it. Encouraged by a continuing decline in the civilities and amenities of the public or shared environment, people invest more hopes in their private acreage. They proceed as though a house can substitute for a community if only it is spacious enough, entertaining enough, comfortable enough, splendid enough—and suitably isolated from that common horde that politicians still refer to as our “fellow Americans.”

Observers disagree about the reasons for the growing estrangement between the family and the city in American society.<sup>10</sup> Richard Sennett, whose research spans several generations, argues that as soon as an American family became middle class and could afford to do something about its fear of the outside world and its confusions, it drew in upon itself, and “in America, unlike France or Germany, the urban middle-class shunned public forms of social life like cafés and banquet halls.”<sup>11</sup> Philippe Ariès, who also knows his history, counters with the argument that modern urban development has killed the essential relationships that once made a city and, as a consequence, “the role of the family overexpanded like a hypertrophied cell” trying to take up the slack.<sup>12</sup>

In some countries, television broadcasting is suspended one night a week so that people will not abandon the habit of getting out of their homes and maintaining contact with one another. This tactic would probably not work in America. Sennett would argue that the middle-class family, given its assessment of the public domain, would stay at home anyway. Ariès would argue that most would stay home for want of places to get together with their friends and neighbors. As Richard Goodwin declared, “there is virtually no place where neighbors can anticipate unplanned meetings—no pub or corner store or park.”<sup>13</sup> The bright spot in this dispute is that the same set of remedies would cure both the family and the city of major ills.

Meantime, new generations are encouraged to shun a community

life in favor of a highly privatized one and to set personal aggrandizement above public good. The attitudes may be learned from parents but they are also learned in each generation's experiences. The modest housing developments, those *unexclusive* suburbs from which middle-class people graduate as they grow older and more affluent, teach their residents that future hopes for a good life are pretty much confined to one's house and yard. Community life amid tract housing is a disappointing experience. The space within the development has been equipped and staged for isolated family living and little else. The processes by which potential friends might find one another and by which friendships not suited to the home might be nurtured outside it are severely thwarted by the limited features and facilities of the modern suburb.

The housing development's lack of informal social centers or informal public gathering places puts people too much at the mercy of their closest neighbors. The small town taught us that people's best friends and favorite companions rarely lived right next door to one another. Why should it be any different in the automobile suburbs? What are the odds, given that a hundred households are within easy walking distance, that one is most likely to hit it off with the people next door? Small! Yet, the closest neighbors are the ones with whom friendships are most likely to be attempted, for how does one even find out enough about someone a block and a half away to justify an introduction?

What opportunity is there for two men who both enjoy shooting, fishing, or flying to get together and gab if their families are not compatible? Where do people entertain and enjoy one another if, for whatever reason, they are not comfortable in one another's homes? Where do people have a chance to get to know one another casually and without commitment before deciding whether to involve other family members in their relationship? Tract housing offers no such places.

Getting together with neighbors in the development entails considerable hosting efforts, and it depends upon continuing good relationships between households and their members. In the usual course of things, these relationships are easily strained or ruptured. Having been lately formed and built on little, they are not easy to mend. Worse, some of the few good friends will move and are not easily replaced. In time, the overtures toward friendship, neighborliness, and a semblance of community hardly seem worth the effort.



*In the Absence of an Informal Public Life*

We have noted Sennett's observation that middle-class Americans are not like their French or German counterparts. Americans do not make daily visits to sidewalk cafés or banquet halls. We do not have that third realm of satisfaction and social cohesion beyond the portals of home and work that for others is an essential element of the good life. Our comings and goings are more restricted to the home and work settings, and those two spheres have become preemptive. Multitudes shuttle back and forth between the "womb" and the "rat race" in a constricted pattern of daily life that easily generates the familiar desire to "get away from it all."

A two-stop model of daily routine is becoming fixed in our habits as the urban environment affords less opportunity for public relaxation. Our most familiar gathering centers are disappearing rapidly. The proportion of beer and spirits consumed in public places has declined from about 90 percent of the total in the late 1940s to about 30 percent today.<sup>14</sup> There's been a similar decline in the number of neighborhood taverns in which those beverages are sold. For those who avoid alcoholic refreshments and prefer the drugstore soda fountain across the street, the situation has gotten even worse. By the 1960s, it was clear that the soda fountain and the lunch counter no longer had a place in "the balanced drug store."<sup>15</sup> "In this day of heavy unionization and rising minimum wages for unskilled help, the traditional soda fountain should be thrown out," advised an expert on drugstore management. And so it has been. The new kinds of places emphasize fast service, not slow and easy relaxation.

In the absence of an informal public life, people's expectations toward work and family life have escalated beyond the capacity of those institutions to meet them. Domestic and work relationships are pressed to supply all that is wanting and much that is missing in the constricted life-styles of those without community. The resulting strain on work and family institutions is glaringly evident. In the measure of its disorganization and deterioration, the middle-class family of today resembles the low-income family of the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> The United States now leads the world in the rate of divorce among its population. Fatherless children comprise the fastest-growing segment of the infant population. The strains that have eroded the traditional family configu-

ration have given rise to alternate life-styles, and though their appearance suggests the luxury of choice, none are as satisfactory as was the traditional family when embedded in a supporting community.

It is estimated that American industry loses from \$50 billion to \$75 billion annually due to absenteeism, company-paid medical expenses, and lost productivity.<sup>17</sup> Stress in the lives of the workers is a major cause of these industrial losses. Two-thirds of the visits to family physicians in the United States are prompted by stress-related problems.<sup>18</sup> "Our mode of life," says one medical practitioner, "is emerging as today's principal cause of illness."<sup>19</sup> Writes Claudia Wallis, "It is a sorry sign of the times that the three best-selling drugs in the country are an ulcer medication (Tagamet), a hypertension drug (Inderal), and a tranquilizer (Valium)."<sup>20</sup>

In the absence of an informal public life, Americans are denied those means of relieving stress that serve other cultures so effectively. We seem not to realize that the means of relieving stress can just as easily be built into an urban environment as those features which produce stress. To our considerable misfortune, the pleasures of the city have been largely reduced to consumerism. We don't much enjoy our cities because they're not very enjoyable. The mode of urban life that has become our principal cause of illness resembles a pressure cooker without its essential safety valve. Our urban environment is like an engine that runs hot because it was designed without a cooling system.

Unfortunately, opinion leans toward the view that the causes of stress are social but the cures are individual. It is widely assumed that high levels of stress are an unavoidable condition of modern life, that these are built into the social system, and that one must get outside the system in order to gain relief. Even our efforts at entertaining and being entertained tend toward the competitive and stressful. We come dangerously close to the notion that one "gets sick" in the world beyond one's domicile and one "gets well" by retreating from it. Thus, while Germans relax amid the rousing company of the *bier garten* or the French recuperate in their animated little bistros, Americans turn to massaging, meditating, jogging, hot-tubbing, or escape fiction. While others take full advantage of their freedom to associate, we glorify our freedom *not* to associate.

In the absence of an informal public life, living becomes more expen-

sive. Where the means and facilities for relaxation and leisure are not publicly shared, they become the objects of private ownership and consumption. In the United States, about two-thirds of the GNP is based on personal consumption expenditures. That category, observes Goodwin, contains "the alienated substance of mankind."<sup>21</sup> Some four *trillion* dollars spent for individual aggrandizement represents a powerful divisive force indeed. In our society, insists one expert on the subject, leisure has been perverted into consumption.<sup>22</sup> An aggressive, driving force behind this perversion is advertising, which conditions "our drive to consume and to own whatever industry produces."<sup>23</sup>

Paragons of self-righteousness, advertisers promulgate the notion that society would languish in a state of inertia but for their efforts. "Nothing happens until somebody sells something," they love to say. That may be true enough within a strictly commercial world (and for them, what else is there?) but the development of an informal public life depends upon people finding and enjoying one another outside the cash nexus. Advertising, in its ideology and effects, is the enemy of an informal public life. It breeds alienation. It convinces people that the good life can be individually purchased. In the place of the shared camaraderie of people who see themselves as equals, the ideology of advertising substitutes competitive acquisition. It is the difference between loving people for what they are and envying them for what they own. It is no coincidence that cultures with a highly developed informal public life have a disdain for advertising.<sup>24</sup>

The tremendous advantage enjoyed by societies with a well-developed informal public life is that, within them, poverty carries few burdens other than that of having to live a rather Spartan existence. But there is no stigma and little deprivation of experience. There is an engaging and sustaining public life to supplement and complement home and work routines. For those on tight budgets who live in some degree of austerity, it compensates for the lack of things owned privately. For the affluent, it offers much that money can't buy.

The American middle-class life-style is an exceedingly expensive one—especially when measured against the satisfaction it yields. The paucity of collective rituals and unplanned social gatherings puts a formidable burden upon the individual to overcome the social isolation that threatens. Where there are homes without a connection to commu-

nity, where houses are located in areas devoid of congenial meeting places, the enemy called boredom is ever at the gate. Much money must be spent to compensate for the sterility of the surrounding environment. Home decoration and redecoration becomes a never-ending process as people depend upon new wallpaper or furniture arrangements to add zest to their lives. Like the bored and idle rich, they look to new clothing fashions for the same purpose and buy new wardrobes well before the old ones are past service. A lively round of after-dinner conversation isn't as simple as a walk to the corner pub—one has to host the dinner.

The home entertainment industry thrives in the dearth of the informal public life among the American middle class. Demand for all manner of electronic gadgetry to substitute vicarious watching and listening for more direct involvement is high. Little expense is spared in the installation of sound and video systems, VCRs, cable connections, or that current version of heaven on earth for the socially exiled—the satellite dish. So great is the demand for electronic entertainment that it cannot be met with quality programming. Those who create for this insatiable demand must rely on formula and imitation.

Everyone old enough to drive finds it necessary to make frequent escapes from the private compound located amid hundreds of other private compounds. To do so, each needs a car, and that car is a means of conveyance as privatized and antisocial as the neighborhoods themselves. Fords and "Chevys" now cost from ten to fifteen thousand dollars, and the additional expenses of maintaining, insuring, and fueling them constitute major expenditures for most families. Worse, each drives his or her own car. About the only need that suburbanites can satisfy by means of an easy walk is that which impels them toward their bathroom.

In the absence of an informal public life, industry must also compensate for the missing opportunity for social relaxation. When the settings for casual socializing are not provided in the neighborhoods, people compensate in the workplace. Coffee breaks are more than mere rest periods; they are depended upon more for sociable human contact than physical relaxation. These and other "time-outs" are extended. Lunch hours often afford a sufficient amount of reveling to render the remainder of the working day ineffectual. The distinction between work-

related communications and "shooting the breeze" becomes blurred. Once-clear parameters separating work from play become confused. The individual finds that neither work nor play are as satisfying as they should be.

The problem of place in America manifests itself in a sorely deficient informal public life. The structure of shared experience beyond that offered by family, job, and passive consumerism is small and dwindling. The essential group experience is being replaced by the exaggerated self-consciousness of individuals. American life-styles, for all the material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation, and a high price tag. America can point to many areas where she has made progress, but in the area of informal public life she has lost ground and continues to lose it.

Unlike many frontiers, that of the informal public life does not remain benign as it awaits development. It does not become easier to tame as technology evolves, as governmental bureaus and agencies multiply, or as population grows. It does not yield to the mere passage of time and a policy of letting the chips fall where they may as development proceeds in other realms of urban life. To the contrary, neglect of the informal public life can make a jungle of what had been a garden while, at the same time, diminishing the ability of people to cultivate it.

In the sustained absence of a healthy and vigorous informal public life, the citizenry may quite literally forget how to create one. A facilitating public etiquette consisting of rituals necessary to the meeting, greeting, and enjoyment of strangers is not much in evidence in the United States. It is replaced by a set of strategies designed to avoid contact with people in public, by devices intended to preserve the individual's circle of privacy against any stranger who might violate it. Urban sophistication is deteriorating into such matters as knowing who is safe on whose "turf," learning to minimize expression and bodily contact when in public, and other survival skills required in a world devoid of the amenities. Lyn Lofland notes that the 1962 edition of *Amy Vanderbilt's New Complete Book of Etiquette* "contains not a single reference to proper behavior in the world of strangers."<sup>25</sup> The cosmopolitan promise of our cities is diminished. Its ecumenic spirit fades with our ever-increasing retreat into privacy.

*Toward a Solution: The Third Place*

Though none can prescribe the total solution to the problem of place in America, it is possible to describe some important elements that any solution will have to include. Certain basic requirements of an informal public life do not change, nor does a healthy society advance beyond them. To the extent that a thriving informal public life belongs to a society's past, so do the best of its days, and prospects for the future should be cause for considerable concern.

Towns and cities that afford their populations an engaging public life are easy to identify. What urban sociologists refer to as their interstitial spaces are filled with people. The streets and sidewalks, parks and squares, parkways and boulevards are being used by people sitting, standing, and walking. Prominent public space is not reserved for that well-dressed, middle-class crowd that is welcomed at today's shopping malls. The elderly and poor, the ragged and infirm, are interspersed among those looking and doing well. The full spectrum of local humanity is represented. Most of the streets are as much the domain of the pedestrian as of the motorist. The typical street can still accommodate a full-sized perambulator and still encourages a new mother's outing with her baby. Places to sit are abundant. Children play in the streets. The general scene is much as the set director for a movie would arrange it to show life in a wholesome and thriving town or city neighborhood.

Beyond the impression that a human scale has been preserved in the architecture, however, or that the cars haven't defeated the pedestrians in the battle for the streets, or that the pace of life suggests gentler and less complicated times, the picture doesn't reveal the *dynamics* needed to produce an engaging informal public life. The secret of a society at peace with itself is not revealed in the panoramic view but in examination of the average citizen's situation.

The examples set by societies that have solved the problem of place and those set by the small towns and vital neighborhoods of our past suggest that daily life, in order to be relaxed and fulfilling, must find its balance in three realms of experience. One is domestic, a second is gainful or productive, and the third is inclusively sociable, offering both the basis of community and the celebration of it. Each of these realms of human experience is built on associations and relationships

appropriate to it; each has its own physically separate and distinct places; each must have its measure of autonomy from the others.

What the panoramic view of the vital city fails to reveal is that the third realm of experience is as distinct a place as home or office. The informal public life only seems amorphous and scattered; in reality, it is highly focused. It emerges and is sustained in *core settings*. Where the problem of place has been solved, a generous proliferation of core settings of informal public life is sufficient to the needs of the people.

Pierre Salinger was asked how he liked living in France and how he would compare it with life in the United States. His response was that he likes France where, he said, everyone is more relaxed. In America, there's a lot of pressure. The French, of course, have solved the problem of place. The Frenchman's daily life sits firmly on a tripod consisting of home, place of work, and another setting where friends are engaged during the midday and evening *aperitif* hours, if not earlier and later. In the United States, the middle classes particularly are attempting a balancing act on a bipod consisting of home and work. That alienation, boredom, and stress are endemic among us is not surprising. For most of us, a third of life is either deficient or absent altogether, and the other two-thirds cannot be successfully integrated into a whole.

Before the core settings of an informal public life can be restored to the urban landscape and reestablished in daily life, it will be necessary to articulate their nature and benefit. It will not suffice to describe them in a mystical or romanticized way such as might warm the hearts of those already convinced. Rather, the core settings of the informal public life must be analyzed and discussed in terms comprehensible to these rational and individualistic outlooks dominant in American thought. We must dissect, talk in terms of specific payoffs, and reduce special experiences to common labels. We must, urgently, begin to defend these Great Good Places against the unbelieving and the antagonistic and do so in terms clear to all.

The object of our focus—the core settings of the informal public life—begs for a simpler label. Common parlance offers few possibilities and none that combine brevity with objectivity and an appeal to common sense. There is the term *hangout*, but its connotation is negative and the word conjures up images of the joint or dive. Though we refer to the meeting places of the lowly as hangouts, we rarely apply the term to yacht clubs or oak-paneled bars, the “hangouts” of the “better

people." We have nothing as respectable as the French *rendez-vous* to refer to a public meeting place or a setting in which friends get together away from the confines of home and work. The American language reflects the American reality—in vocabulary as in fact the core settings of an informal public life are underdeveloped.

For want of a suitable existing term, we introduce our own: the third place will hereafter be used to signify what we have called "the core settings of informal public life." The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work. The term will serve well. It is neutral, brief, and facile. It underscores the significance of the tripod and the relative importance of its three legs. Thus, the first place is the home—the most important place of all. It is the first regular and predictable environment of the growing child and the one that will have greater effect upon his or her development. It will harbor individuals long before the workplace is interested in them and well after the world of work casts them aside. The second place is the work setting, which reduces the individual to a single, productive role. It fosters competition and motivates people to rise above their fellow creatures. But it also provides the means to a living, improves the material quality of life, and structures endless hours of time for a majority who could not structure it on their own.

Before industrialization, the first and second places were one. Industrialization separated the place of work from the place of residence, removing productive work from the home and making it remote in distance, morality, and spirit from family life. What we now call the third place existed long before this separation, and so our term is a concession to the sweeping effects of the Industrial Revolution and its division of life into private and public spheres.

The ranking of the three places corresponds with individual dependence upon them. We need a home even though we may not work, and most of us need to work more than we need to gather with our friends and neighbors. The ranking holds, also, with respect to the demands upon the individual's time. Typically, the individual spends more time at home than at work and more at work than in a third place. In importance, in claims on time and loyalty, in space allocated, and in social recognition, the ranking is appropriate.



In some countries, the third place is more closely ranked with the others. In Ireland, France, or Greece, the core settings of informal public life rank a *strong* third in the lives of the people. In the United States, third places rank a weak third with perhaps the majority lacking a third place and denying that it has any real importance.

The prominence of third places varies with cultural setting and historical era. In preliterate societies, the third place was actually foremost, being the grandest structure in the village and commanding the central location. They were the men's houses, the earliest ancestors of those grand, elegant, and pretentious clubs eventually to appear along London's Pall Mall. In both Greek and Roman society, prevailing values dictated that the *agora* and the *forum* should be great, central institutions; that homes should be simple and unpretentious; that the architecture of cities should assert the worth of the public and civic individual over the private and domestic one. Few means to lure and invite citizens into public gatherings were overlooked. The forums, colosseums, theaters, and amphitheaters were grand structures, and admission to them was free.

Third places have never since been as prominent. Attempts at elegance and grand scale continued to be made but with far less impact. Many cultures evolved public baths on a grand scale. Victorian gin palaces were elegant (especially when contrasted to the squalor that surrounded them). The winter gardens and palm gardens built in some of our northern cities in the previous century included many large and imposing structures. In modern times, however, third places survive without much prominence or elegance.

Where third places remain vital in the lives of people today, it is far more because they are prolific than prominent. The geographic expansion of the cities and their growing diversity of quarters, or distinct neighborhoods, necessitated the shift. The proliferation of smaller establishments kept them at the human scale and available to all in the face of increasing urbanization.

In the newer American communities, however, third places are neither prominent nor prolific. They are largely prohibited. Upon an urban landscape increasingly hostile to and devoid of informal gathering places, one may encounter people rather pathetically trying to find some spot in which to relax and enjoy each other's company.

Sometimes three or four pickups are parked under the shade near a

convenience store as their owners drink beers that may be purchased but not consumed inside. If the habit ever really catches on, laws will be passed to stop it. Along the strips, youths sometimes gather in or near their cars in the parking lots of hamburger franchises. It's the best they can manage, for they aren't allowed to loiter inside. One may encounter a group of women in a laundromat, socializing while doing the laundry chores. One encounters parents who have assumed the expense of adding a room to the house or converting the garage to a recreation room so that, within neighborhoods that offer them nothing, their children might have a decent place to spend time with their friends. Sometimes too, youth will develop a special attachment to a patch of woods not yet bulldozed away in the relentless spread of the suburbs. In such a place they enjoy relief from the confining over-familiarity of their tract houses and the monotonous streets.

American planners and developers have shown a great disdain for those earlier arrangements in which there was life beyond home and work. They have condemned the neighborhood tavern and disallowed a suburban version. They have failed to provide modern counterparts of once-familiar gathering places. The gristmill or grain elevator, soda fountains, malt shops, candy stores, and cigar stores—places that did not reduce a human being to a mere customer, have not been replaced. Meantime, the planners and developers continue to add to the rows of regimented loneliness in neighborhoods so sterile as to cry out for something as modest as a central mail drop or a little coffee counter at which those in the area might discover one another.

Americans are now confronted with that condition about which the crusty old arch-conservative Edmund Burke warned us when he said that the bonds of community are broken at great peril for they are not easily replaced. Indeed, we face the enormous task of making "the mess that is urban America" suitably hospitable to the requirements of gregarious, social animals.<sup>26</sup> Before motivation or wisdom is adequate to the task, however, we shall need to understand exactly what it is that an informal public life can contribute to both national and individual life. Therein lies the purpose of this book.

Successful exposition demands that some statement of a problem precede a discussion of its solution. Hence, I've begun on sour and unpleasant notes and will find it necessary to sound them again. I would have preferred it otherwise. It is the solution that intrigues and

delights. It is my hope that the discussion of life in the third place will have a similar effect upon the reader, just as I hope that the reader will allow the bias that now and then prompts me to substitute Great Good Place for third place. I am confident that those readers who have a third place will not object.

## CHAPTER 2

# *The Character of Third Places*

THIRD PLACES the world over share common and essential features. As one's investigations cross the boundaries of time and culture, the kinship of the Arabian coffeehouse, the German *bierstube*, the Italian *taberna*, the old country store of the American frontier, and the ghetto bar reveals itself. As one approaches each example, determined to describe it in its own right, an increasingly familiar pattern emerges. The eternal sameness of the third place overshadows the variations in its outward appearance and seems unaffected by the wide differences in cultural attitudes toward the typical gathering places of informal public life. The beer joint in which the middle-class American takes no pride can be as much a third place as the proud Viennese coffeehouse. It is a fortunate aspect of the third place that its capacity to serve the human need for communion does not much depend upon the capacity of a nation to comprehend its virtues.

The wonder is that so little attention has been paid to the benefits attaching to the third place. It is curious that its features and inner workings have remained virtually undescribed in this present age when they are so sorely needed and when any number of lesser substitutes are described in tiresome detail. Volumes are written on sensitivity and encounter groups, on meditation and exotic rituals for attaining states of relaxation and transcendence, on jogging and massaging. But the third place, the people's own remedy for stress, loneliness, and alienation, seems easy to ignore.

With few exceptions, however, it has always been thus. Rare is the chronicler who has done justice to those gathering places where community is most alive and people are most themselves. The tradition is

the opposite; it is one of understatement and oversight. Joseph Addison, the great essayist, gave the faintest praise to the third places of his time and seems to have set an example for doing so. London's eighteenth-century coffeehouses provided the stage and forum for Addison's efforts and fired the greatest era of letters England would ever see. And there was far more to them than suggested by Addison's remarks: "When men are thus knit together, by a Love of Society, not a Spirit of Faction, and don't meet to censure or annoy those that are absent, but to enjoy one another: When they are thus combined for their own improvement, or for the Good of others, or at least to relax themselves from the Business of the Day, by an innocent and cheerful conversation, there may be something very useful in these little Institutions and Establishments."<sup>1</sup>

The only "useful something" that the typical observer seems able to report consists of the escape or time out from life's duties and drudgeries that third places are said to offer. Joseph Wechsberg, for example, suggests that the coffeehouses of Vienna afford the common man "his haven and island of tranquility, his reading room and gambling hall, his sounding board and grumblng hall. There at least he is safe from nagging wife and unruly children, monotonous radios and barking dogs, tough bosses and impatient creditors."<sup>2</sup> H. L. Mencken offered the same limited view of the places on our side of the Atlantic, describing the respectable Baltimore tavern of his day as "a quiet refuge" and a "hospital asylum from life and its cares."<sup>3</sup>

But there is far more than escape and relief from stress involved in regular visits to a third place. There is more than shelter against the raindrops of life's tedium and more than a breather on the sidelines of the rat race to be had amid the company of a third place. Its real merits do not depend upon being harried by life, afflicted by stress, or needing time out from gainful activities. The escape theme is not erroneous in substance but in emphasis; it focuses too much upon conditions external to the third place and too little upon experiences and relationships afforded there and nowhere else.

Though characterizations of the third place as a mere haven of escape from home and work are inadequate, they do possess a virtue—they invite *comparison*. The escape theme suggests a world of difference between the corner tavern and the family apartment a block away, between morning coffee in the bungalow and that with the gang at the

local bakery. The contrast is sharp and will be revealed. The *raison d'être* of the third place rests upon its differences from the other settings of daily life and can best be understood by comparison with them. In examining these differences, it will not serve to misrepresent the home, shop, or office in order to put a better light on public gathering places. But, if at times I might lapse in my objectivity, I take solace in the fact that public opinion in America and the weight of our myths and prejudices have never done justice to third places and the kind of association so essential to our freedom and contentment.

### *On Neutral Ground*

The individual may have many friends, a rich variety among them, and opportunity to engage many of them daily *only* if people do not get uncomfortably tangled in one another's lives. Friends can be numerous and often met only if they may easily join and depart one another's company. This otherwise obvious fact of social life is often obscured by the seeming contradiction that surrounds it—we need a good deal of immunity from those whose company we like best. Or, as the sociologist Richard Sennett put it, “people can be sociable only when they have some protection from each other.”<sup>4</sup>

In a book showing how to bring life back to American cities, Jane Jacobs stresses the contradiction surrounding most friendships and the consequent need to provide places for them. Cities, she observed, are full of people with whom contact is significant, useful, and enjoyable, but “you don't want them in your hair and they do not want you in theirs either.”<sup>5</sup> If friendships and other informal acquaintances are limited to those suitable for private life, she says, the city becomes stultified. So, one might add, does the social life of the individual.

In order for the city and its neighborhoods to offer the rich and varied association that is their promise and their potential, there must be *neutral ground* upon which people may gather. There must be places where individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable. If there is no neutral ground in the neighborhoods where people live, association outside the home will be impoverished. Many, perhaps most, neighbors will never meet, to say nothing of associate, for there is no place for them to do so. Where neutral ground is available it makes

possible far more informal, even intimate, relations among people than could be entertained in the home.

Social reformers as a rule, and planners all too commonly, ignore the importance of neutral ground and the kinds of relationships, interactions, and activities to which it plays host. Reformers have never liked seeing people hanging around on street corners, store porches, front stoops, bars, candy stores, or other public areas. They find loitering deplorable and assume that if people had better private areas they would not waste time in public ones. It would make as much sense, as Jane Jacobs points out, to argue that people wouldn't show up at testimonial banquets if they had wives who could cook for them at home.<sup>6</sup> The banquet table and coffee counter bring people together in an intimate and private social fashion—people who would not otherwise meet in that way. Both settings (street corner and banquet hall) are public and neutral, and both are important to the unity of neighborhoods, cities, and societies.

If we valued fraternity as much as independence, and democracy as much as free enterprise, our zoning codes would not enforce the social isolation that plagues our modern neighborhoods, but would require some form of public gathering place every block or two. We may one day rediscover the wisdom of James Oglethorpe who laid out Savannah such that her citizens lived close to public gathering areas. Indeed, he did so with such compelling effect that Sherman, in his destructive march to the sea, spared Savannah alone.

### *The Third Place Is a Leveler*

Levelers was the name given to an extreme left-wing political party that emerged under Charles I and expired shortly afterward under Cromwell. The goal of the party was the abolition of all differences of position or rank that existed among men. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the term came to be applied much more broadly in England, referring to anything "which reduces men to an equality."<sup>7</sup> For example, the newly established coffeehouses of that period, one of unprecedented democracy among the English, were commonly referred to as levelers, as were the people who frequented them and who relished the new intimacy made possible by the decay of the old feudal order.

Precursors of the renowned English clubs, those early coffeehouses were enthusiastically democratic in the conduct and composition of their habitués. As one of the more articulate among them recorded, "As you have a hodge-podge of Drinks, such too is your company, for each man seems a Leveller, and ranks and files himself as he lists, without regard to degrees or order; so that oft you may see a silly Fop, and a wonder Justice, a griping-Rock, and a grave Citizen, a worthy Lawyer, and an errant Pickpocket, a Reverend Nonconformist, and a canting Mountebank; all blended together, to compose an Oglio of Impertinence."<sup>8</sup> Quite suddenly, each man had become an agent of England's newfound unity. His territory was the coffeehouse, which provided the neutral ground upon which men discovered one another apart from the classes and ranks that had earlier divided them.

A place that is a leveler is, by its nature, an inclusive place. It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion. There is a tendency for individuals to select their associates, friends, and intimates from among those closest to them in social rank. Third places, however, serve to *expand* possibilities, whereas formal associations tend to narrow and restrict them. Third places counter the tendency to be restrictive in the enjoyment of others by being open to all and by laying emphasis on qualities not confined to status distinctions current in the society. Within third places, the charm and flavor of one's personality, irrespective of his or her station in life, is what counts. In the third place, people may make blissful substitutions in the rosters of their associations, adding those they *genuinely enjoy and admire to those less-preferred individuals* that fate has put at their side in the workplace or even, perhaps, in their family.

Further, a place that is a leveler also permits the individual to know workmates in a different and fuller aspect than is possible in the workplace. The great bulk of human association finds individuals related to one another for some objective purpose. It casts them, as sociologists say, in roles, and though the roles we play provide us with our more sustaining matrices of human association, these tend to submerge personality and the inherent joys of being together with others to some external purpose. In contrast, what Georg Simmel referred to as "pure sociability" is precisely the occasion in which people get together for no other purpose, higher or lower, than for the "joy,



vivacity, and relief" of engaging their personalities beyond the contexts of purpose, duty, or role.<sup>9</sup> As Simmel insisted, this unique occasion provides the most democratic experience people can have and allows them to be more fully themselves, for it is salutary in such situations that all shed their social uniforms and insignia and reveal more of what lies beneath or beyond them.

Necessarily, a transformation must occur as one passes through the portals of a third place. Worldly status claims must be checked at the door in order that all within may be equals. The surrender of outward status, or leveling, that transforms those who own delivery trucks and those who drive them into equals, is rewarded by acceptance on more humane and less transitory grounds. Leveling is a joy and relief to those of higher and lower status in the mundane world. Those who, on the outside, command deference and attention by the sheer weight of their position find themselves in the third place enjoined, embraced, accepted, and enjoyed where conventional status counts for little. They are accepted just for themselves and on terms not subject to the vicissitudes of political or economic life.

Similarly, those not high on the totems of accomplishment or popularity are enjoined, accepted, embraced, and enjoyed despite their "failings" in their career or the marketplace. There is more to the individual than his or her status indicates, and to have recognition of that fact shared by persons beyond the small circle of the family is indeed a joy and relief. It is the best of all anodynes for soothing the irritation of material deprivation. Even poverty loses much of its sting when communities can offer the settings and occasions where the disadvantaged can be accepted as equals. Pure sociability confirms the more and the less successful and is surely a comfort to both. Unlike the status-guarding of the family and the czarist mentality of those who control corporations, the third place recognizes and implements the value of "downward" association in an uplifting manner.

Worldly status is not the only aspect of the individual that must not intrude into third place association. Personal problems and moodiness must be set aside as well. Just as others in such settings claim immunity from the personal worries and fears of individuals, so may they, for the time being at least, relegate them to a blessed state of irrelevance. The temper and tenor of the third place is upbeat; it is cheerful. The purpose is to enjoy the company of one's fellow human beings and to

delight in the novelty of their character—not to wallow in pity over misfortunes.

The transformations in passing from the world of mundane care to the magic of the third place is often visibly manifest in the individual. Within the space of a few hours, individuals may drag themselves into their homes—frowning, fatigued, hunched over—only to stride into their favorite club or tavern a few hours later with a broad grin and an erect posture. Richard West followed one of New York's "pretty people" from his limousine on the street, up the steps, and into the interior of Club 21, observing that "by the time Marvin had walked through the opened set of doors and stood in the lobby, his features softened. The frown was gone, the bluster of importance had ebbed away and had been left at the curb. He felt the old magic welling up."<sup>10</sup>

In Michael Daly's tragic account of young Peter MacPartland (a "perfect" son from a "perfect" family) who was accused of murdering his father, there is mention of a place, perhaps the only place, in which MacPartland ever found relief from the constant struggling and competition that characterized his life. On Monday evenings, a friend would go with him to Rudy's, a working-class tavern, to watch "Monday Night Football." "It was Yale invading a working-class bar," said the friend. "It was like his first freedom of any kind. He thought it was the neatest place in the world."<sup>11</sup> Mere escape can be found in many forms and does not begin to account for transformations such as these.

### *Conversation Is the Main Activity*

Neutral ground provides the place, and leveling sets the stage for the cardinal and sustaining activity of third places everywhere. That activity is conversation. Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging. The joys of association in third places may initially be marked by smiles and twinkling eyes; by hand-shaking and back-slapping, but they proceed and are maintained in pleasurable and entertaining conversation.

A comparison of cultures readily reveals that the popularity of conversation in a society is closely related to the popularity of third places. In the 1970s, the economist Tibor Scitovsky introduced statistical data confirming what others had observed casually.<sup>12</sup> The rate of pub visita-

tion in England or café visitation in France is high and corresponds to an obvious fondness for sociable conversation. American tourists, Scitovsky notes, "are usually struck and often morally shocked by the much more leisurely and frivolous attitude toward life of just about all foreigners, manifest by the tremendous amount of idle talk they engage in, on promenades and park benches, in cafés, sandwich shops, lobbies, doorways, and wherever people congregate." And, in the pubs and cafés, Scitovsky goes on to report, "socializing rather than drinking is clearly most people's main occupation."

American men of letters often reveal an envy of those societies in which conversation is more highly regarded than here, and usually recognize the link between activity and setting. Emerson, in his essay on "Table Talk," discussed the importance of great cities in representing the power and genius of a nation.<sup>13</sup> He focused on Paris, which dominated for so long and to such an extent as to influence the whole of Europe. After listing the many areas in which that city had become the "social center of the world," he concluded that its "supreme merit is that it is the city of conversation and cafés."

In a popular essay on "The American Condition," Richard Goodwin invited readers to contrast the rush hour in our major cities with the close of the working day in Renaissance Italy: "Now at Florence, when the air is red with the summer sunset and the campaniles begin to sound vespers and the day's work is done, everyone collects in the piazzas. The steps of Santa Maria del Fiore swarm with men of every rank and every class; artisans, merchants, teachers, artists, doctors, technicians, poets, scholars. A thousand minds, a thousand arguments; a lively intermingling of questions, problems, news of the latest happening, jokes; an inexhaustible play of language and thought, a vibrant curiosity; the changeable temper of a thousand spirits by whom every object of discussion is broken into an infinity of sense and significations—all these spring into being, and then are spent. And this is the pleasure of the Florentine public."<sup>14</sup>

The judgment regarding conversation in our society is usually two-fold: we don't value it and we're not good at it. "If it has not value," complained Wordsworth, "good, lively talk is often contemptuously dismissed as talking for talking's sake."<sup>15</sup> As to our skills, Tibor Scitovsky noted that our gambit for a chat is "halfhearted and . . . we have failed to develop the locale and the facilities for idle talk. We lack the

stuff of which conversations are made."<sup>16</sup> In our low estimation of idle talk, we Americans have correctly assessed the worth of much of what we hear. It is witless, trite, self-centered, and unreflective.

If conversation is not just the main attraction but the *sine qua non* of the third place, it must be better there and, indeed, it is. Within its circles, the art of conversation is preserved against its decline in the larger spheres, and evidence of this claim is abundant.

Initially, one may note a remarkable compliance with the rules of conversation as compared to their abuse almost everywhere else. Many champions of the art of conversation have stated its simple rules. Henry Sedgwick does so in a straightforward manner.<sup>17</sup> In essence, his rules are: 1) Remain silent your share of the time (more rather than less). 2) Be attentive while others are talking. 3) Say what you think but be careful not to hurt others' feelings. 4) Avoid topics not of general interest. 5) Say little or nothing about yourself personally, but talk about others there assembled. 6) Avoid trying to instruct. 7) Speak in as low a voice as will allow others to hear.

The rules, it will be seen, fit the democratic order, or the leveling, that prevails in third places. Everyone seems to talk just the right amount, and all are expected to contribute. Pure sociability is as much subject to good and proper form as any other kind of association, and this conversational style embodies that form. Quite unlike those corporate realms wherein status dictates who may speak, and when and how much, and who may use levity and against which targets, the third place draws in like manner from everyone there assembled. Even the sharper wits must refrain from dominating conversation, for all are there to hold forth as well as to listen.

By emphasizing style over vocabulary, third place conversation also complements the leveling process. In the course of his investigations into English working-class club life, Brian Jackson was struck by the eloquence of common working people when they spoke in familiar and comfortable environments.<sup>18</sup> He was surprised to hear working people speak with the "verve and panache" of Shakespearian actors. I observed much the same artistry among farmers and other workers in Midwestern communities who could recite, dramatically, verse after verse of poetry, reduce local cockalorums to their just proportions, or argue against school consolidation in a moving and eloquent style.

In Santa Barbara there is a tavern called The English Department,

which is operated by a man who was banished from the English department at the local university for reasons that august body never saw fit to share with him. He'd spent most of his adult life listening to talk. He had listened in seminars, classrooms, offices, and hallways of various English departments. But the tavern, he found, was better; it was *living*. "Listen to these people," he said of his customers. "Have you ever heard a place filled like this? . . . And they're all interested in what they're saying. There's genuine inquiry here."<sup>19</sup> In a moment of candor, a past president of a professional association in one of the social sciences told an audience that it had been his experience that most academic departments effectively "rob their students of their Mother wit." The owner of The English Department had made the same discovery. In contrast, third places are veritable gymnasiums of Mother wit.

The conversational superiority of the third place is also evident in the harm that the bore can there inflict. Those who carry the despicable reputation of being a bore have not earned it at home or in the work setting proper, but almost exclusively in those places and occasions given to sociability. Where people expect more of conversation they are accordingly repulsed by those who abuse it, whether by killing a topic with inappropriate remarks or by talking more than their share of the time. Characteristically, bores talk more loudly than others, substituting both volume and verbosity for wit and substance. Their failure at getting the effect they desire only serves to increase their demands upon the patience of the group. Conversation is a lively game, but the bore hogs the ball, unable to score but unwilling to pass it to others.

Bores are the scourge of sociability and a curse upon the "clubbable." In regard to them, John Timbs, a prolific chronicler of English club life, once cited the advice of a seasoned and knowledgeable member: "Above all, a club should be large. Every club must have its bores; but in a large club you can get out of their way."<sup>20</sup> To have one or more bores as "official brothers" is a grizzly prospect, and one suggesting an additional advantage of inclusive and informal places over the formal and exclusive club. Escape is so much easier.

Conversation's improved quality within the third place is also suggested by its temper. It is more spirited than elsewhere, less inhibited and more eagerly pursued. Compared to the speech in other realms, it is more dramatic and more often attended by laughter and the exercise

of wit. The character of the talk has a transcending effect, which Emerson once illustrated by an episode involving two companies of stagecoach riders *en route* to Paris. One group failed to strike up any conversation, while the other quickly became engrossed in it. "The first, on their arrival, had rueful accidents to relate, a terrific thunderstorm, danger, and fear and gloom, to the whole company. The others heard these particulars with surprise—the storm, the mud, the danger. They knew nothing of these; they had forgotten earth; they had breathed a higher air."<sup>21</sup> Third place conversation is typically engrossing. Consciousness of conditions and time often slips away amid its lively flow.

Whatever interrupts conversation's lively flow is ruinous to a third place, be it the bore, a horde of barbaric college students, or mechanical or electronic gadgetry. Most common among these is the noise that passes for music, though it must be understood that when conversation is to be savored, even Mozart is noise if played too loudly. In America, particularly, many public establishments reverberate with music played so loudly that enjoyable conversation is impossible. Why the management chooses to override normal conversation by twenty decibels is not always obvious. It may be to lend the illusion of life among a listless and fragmented assembly, to attract a particular kind of clientele, because management has learned that people tend to drink more and faster when subjected to loud noise, or simply because the one in charge likes it that way. In any case, the potential for a third place can be eliminated with the flip of a switch, for whatever inhibits conversation will drive those who delight in it to search for another setting.

As there are agencies and activities that interfere with conversation, so there are those that aid and encourage it. Third places often incorporate these activities and may even emerge around them. To be more precise, conversation is a *game* that mixes well with many other games according to the manner in which they are played. In the clubs where I watch others play gin rummy, for example, it is a rare card that is played without comment and rarer still is the hand dealt without some terrible judgment being leveled at the dealer. The game and conversation move along in lively fashion, the talk enhancing the card game, the card game giving eternal stimulation to the talk. Jackson's observations in the clubs of the working-class English confirm this. "Much time," he

recorded, "is given over to playing games. Cribbage and dominoes mean endless conversation and by-the-way evaluation of personalities. Spectators are never quiet, and every stage of the game stimulates comment—mostly on the characteristics of the players rather than the play; their slyness, slowness, quickness, meanness, allusions to long-remembered incidents in club history."<sup>22</sup>

Not all games stimulate conversation and kibitzing; hence, not all games complement third place association. A room full of individuals intent upon video games is not a third place, nor is a subdued lounge in which couples are quietly staring at backgammon boards. Amateur pool blends well into third place activity generally, providing that personality is not entirely sacrificed to technical skill or the game reduced to the singular matter of who wins. Above all, it is the latitude that personality enjoys at each and every turn that makes the difference.

The social potential of games was nicely illustrated in Laurence Wylie's account of life in the little French village of Peyranne. Wylie had noted the various ways in which the popular game of *boules* was played in front of the local café. "The wit, humor, sarcasm, the insults, the oaths, the logic, the experimental demonstration, and the ability to dramatize a situation gave the game its essential interest."<sup>23</sup> When those features of play are present, the game of *boules*—a relatively simple one—becomes a full-fledged and spirited social as well as sporting event. On the other hand, "Spectators will ignore a game being played by men who are physically skilled but who are unable to dramatize their game, and they will crowd around a game played by men who do not play very well but who are witty, dramatic, shrewd, in their ability to outwit their opponents. Those most popular players, of course, are those who combine skill with such wit."

To comprehend the nature of the third place is to recognize that though the cue stick may be put up or the pasteboards returned to their box, the game goes on. It is a game that, as Sedgwick observed, "requires two and gains in richness and variety if there are four or five more . . . it exercises the intelligence and the heart, it calls on memory and the imagination, it has all the interest derived from uncertainty and unexpectedness, it demands self-restraint, self-mastery, effort, quickness—in short, all the qualities that make a game exciting."<sup>24</sup> The game is conversation and the third place is its home court.

*Accessibility and Accommodation*

Third places that render the best and fullest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there. To have such a place available whenever the demons of loneliness or boredom strike or when the pressures and frustrations of the day call for relaxation amid good company is a powerful resource. Where they exist, such places attest to the bonds between people. "A community life exists," says the sociologist Philip Slater, "when one can go daily to a given location and see many of the people he knows."<sup>25</sup>

That seemingly simple requirement of community has become elusive. Beyond the workplace (which, presumably, Slater did not mean to include), only a modest proportion of middle-class Americans can lay claim to such a place. Our evolving habitat has become increasingly hostile to them. Their dwindling number at home, seen against their profusion in many other countries, points up the importance of the accessibility of third places. Access to them must be *easy* if they are to survive and serve, and the ease with which one may visit a third place is a matter of both time and location.

Traditionally, third places have kept long hours. England's early coffeeshouses were open sixteen hours a day, and most of our coffee-and-doughnut places are open around the clock. Taverns typically serve from about nine in the morning until the wee hours of the following morning, unless the law decrees otherwise. In many retail stores, the coffee counters are open well before the rest of the store. Most establishments that serve as third places are accessible during both the on and off hours of the day.

It must be thus, for the third place accommodates people only when they are released from their responsibilities elsewhere. The basic institutions—home, work, school—make prior claims that cannot be ignored. Third places must stand ready to serve people's needs for sociability and relaxation in the intervals before, between, and after their mandatory appearances elsewhere.

Those who have third places exhibit regularity in their visits to them, but it is not that punctual and unflinching kind shown in deference to the job or family. The timing is loose, days are missed, some visits are brief, etc. Viewed from the vantage point of the establishment, there is a



fluidity in arrivals and departures and an inconsistency of membership at any given hour or day. Correspondingly, the activity that goes on in third places is largely unplanned, unscheduled, unorganized, and unstructured. Here, however, is the charm. It is just these deviations from the middle-class penchant for organization that give the third place much of its character and allure and that allow it to offer a radical departure from the routines of home and work.

As important as timing, and closely related to it, is the location of third places. Where informal gathering places are far removed from one's residence, their appeal fades, for two reasons. Getting there is inconvenient, and one is not likely to know the patrons.

The importance of proximate locations is illustrated by the typical English pub. Though in the one instance its accessibility has been sharply curtailed by laws that cut its normal hours of operation in half, it has nonetheless thrived because of its physical accessibility. The clue is in the name; pubs are called locals and every one of them is somebody's local. Because so many pubs are situated among the homes of those who use them, people are there frequently, both because they are accessible and because their patrons are guaranteed the company of friendly and familiar faces. Across the English Channel sociable use of the public domain is also high, as is the availability of gathering places. Each neighborhood, if not each block, has its café and, as in England, these have served to bring the residents into frequent and friendly contact with one another.

Where third places are prolific across the urban topography, people may indulge their social instincts as they prefer. Some will never frequent these places. Others will do so rarely. Some will go only in the company of others. Many will come and go as individuals.

### *The Regulars*

The lure of a third place depends only secondarily upon seating capacity, variety of beverages served, availability of parking, prices, or other features. What attracts the regular visitor to a third place is supplied not by management but by the fellow customers. The third place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars. It is the regulars who give the

place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there.

Third places are dominated by their regulars but not necessarily in a numerical sense. It is the regulars, whatever their number on any given occasion, who feel at home in a place and set the tone of conviviality. It is the regulars whose mood and manner provide the infectious and contagious style of interaction and whose acceptance of new faces is crucial. The host's welcome, though important, is not the one that really matters; the welcome and acceptance extended on the other side of the bar-counter invites the newcomer to the world of third place association.

The importance of a regular crowd is demonstrated every day throughout America in licensed drinking establishments that *don't* have a loyal patronage. The patrons sit spaced apart from one another. Many appear to be hunching over some invisible lead ball of misery sitting on their laps. They peel labels off beer bottles. They study advertising messages on matchbooks. They watch afternoon television as though it were of compelling interest. The scene is reminiscent of the "end of the world ambience" described by Henry Miller in his depressing description of American "joints."<sup>26</sup> There is an atmosphere of lethargy, if not genuine despair. Most of the hapless patrons, one may be sure, enter not only to have a drink but also to find the cheer that ought to be drink's companion. Seeking to gain respite from loneliness or boredom, they manage only to intensify those feelings by their inability to get anything going with one another. They are doomed, almost always, for if silence is not immediately broken by strangers, it is rarely broken at all. This dismal scene is not found in third places or among those who have third places. Those who become regulars need never confront it.

Every regular was once a newcomer, and the acceptance of newcomers is essential to the sustained vitality of the third place. Acceptance into the circle is not difficult, but it is not automatic either. Much of what is involved may be learned by observing the order of welcome to third places. Most enthusiastically greeted is the returning prodigal, the individual who had earlier been a loyal and accepted regular but whom circumstances had, in more recent months, kept away. This individual is perhaps the only one likely to get more than his democratic share of attention. After all, he's been away and there is much to ask and tell him. Next in order of welcome is the regular making his

anticipated appearance. The gang was counting on his arrival and greets him accordingly. He is followed by the stranger or newcomer who enters in the company of another regular. Then come strangers in pairs and, at the bottom of the order, is the lone stranger, whose acceptance will take the longest.

Yet, it is the lone stranger who is most apt to become a regular. What he must do is establish trust. More than anything else, it is the element of trust that dictates the strength of the welcome. Strangers accompanied by regulars are vouched for. Strangers in pairs seem all right to one another at least and usually engage in such talk as will further attest to their acceptability. The lone stranger, however, has little to back him up. Though it is in the nature of inclusive groups to welcome new players to the game of conversation, it is also in their nature to want to know and trust those with whom they are talking. Since public life in America is relatively devoid of those connecting rituals that in other cultures serve to ensure the introductions of strangers, the order of welcome is doubly important.

How, then, does the lone stranger become a part of the group? It is not difficult, but it takes time because of the kind of trust that must be established. It is not the kind of trust on which banks base credit ratings or that between combat soldiers whose lives depend on each other. It's more like the trust among youngsters playing unsupervised sandlot baseball. Those who show up regularly and play a fairly decent game become the regulars. Similarly, the third place gang need only know that the newcomer is a decent sort, capable of giving and taking in conversation according to the modes of civility and mutual respect that hold sway among them, and the group needs some assurance that the new face is going to become a familiar one. This kind of trust grows with each visit. Mainly, one simply keeps reappearing and tries not to be obnoxious. Of these two requirements for admission or acceptance, regularity of attendance is clearly the more important.

Viewed from the newcomer's vantage point, third place groups often seem more homogeneous and closed to outsiders than they are. Those not yet a part of them seldom suspect their abundant capacity to accept variety into their ranks. Elijah Anderson was able to write a penetrating analysis of a black third place because this middle-class university student was accepted by the regular and relatively uneducated company of a lower-class ghetto bar.<sup>27</sup> In England, the public bar within

the multiroomed public house is reserved for working-class patrons and is off limits to the well-dressed who can afford the fancier rooms. But, as one observer reports, "Once you have been in a few times you can go whenever you like."<sup>28</sup> Such examples are indicative of the character of inclusive places where the membership takes as much delight in admitting unlikely members as exclusive places do in making certain that newcomers meet proper and narrow qualifications.

### *A Low Profile*

As a physical structure, the third place is typically plain. In some cases, it falls a bit short of plain. One of the reasons it is difficult to convince some people of the importance of the third place is that so many of them have an appearance that suggests otherwise. Third places are *unimpressive looking for the most part*. They are not, with few exceptions, advertised; they are not elegant. In cultures where mass advertising prevails and appearance is valued over substance, the third place is all the more likely *not* to impress the uninitiated.

Several factors contribute to the characteristic homeliness of third places. First, and recalling Emerson's observation, there are no temples built to friendship. Third places, that is, are not constructed as such. Rather, establishments built for other purposes are commandeered by those seeking a place where they can linger in good company. Usually, it is the older place that invites this kind of takeover. Newer places are more wedded to the purposes for which they were built. Maximum profits are expected and not from a group of hangers-on. Newer places also tend to emerge in prime locations with the expectation of capitalizing on a high volume of transient customers. Newer places are also more likely to be chain establishments with policies and personnel that discourage hanging out. Even the new tavern is not nearly as likely to become a third place as an older one, suggesting that there is more involved than the purpose for which such places are built.

Plainness, or homeliness, is also the "protective coloration" of many third places. Not having that shiny bright appearance of the franchise establishment, third places do not attract a high volume of strangers or transient customers. They fall short of the middle-class preference for cleanliness and modernity. A place that looks a bit seedy will usually repel the transient middle-class customer away from home and protect

those inside from numerous intrusions by one-time visitors. And, if it's a male third place in which women are not welcome, a definite seediness still goes a long way toward repelling the female customer. Many otherwise worn and aging structures, I should point out, are kept meticulously clean by owners devoted to the comfort and pleasure of their customers. It is the first impression of the place that is at issue here.

Plainness, especially on the inside of third places, also serves to discourage pretention among those who gather there. A nonpretentious decor corresponds with and encourages leveling and the abandonment of social pretense. It is part of a broader fabric of nonpretention, which also includes the manner of dress. Regulars of third places do not go home and dress up. Rather, they come as they are. If one of them should arrive overdressed, a good bit of ribbing, not admiration or envy, will be his desert. In the third place, the "visuals" that surround individuals do not upstage them.

The plainness and modesty surrounding the third place is entirely fitting and probably could not be otherwise. Where there is the slightest bit of fanfare, people become self-conscious. Some will be inhibited by shyness; others will succumb to pretention. When people consider the establishment the "in" place to be seen, commercialism will reign. When that happens, an establishment may survive; it may even thrive, but it will cease to be a third place.

Finally, the low visual profile typical of third places parallels the low profile they have in the minds of those who frequent them. To the regular, though he or she may draw full benefit from them, third places are an ordinary part of a daily routine. The best attitude toward the third place is that it merely be an expected part of life. The contributions that third places make in the lives of people depend upon their incorporation into the everyday stream of existence.

### *The Mood Is Playful*

The persistent mood of the third place is a playful one. Those who would keep conversation serious for more than a minute are almost certainly doomed to failure. Every topic and speaker is a potential trapeze for the exercise and display of wit. Sometimes the playful spirit is obvious, as when the group is laughing and boisterous; other times it

will be subtle. Whether pronounced or low key, however, the playful spirit is of utmost importance. Here joy and acceptance reign over anxiety and alienation. This is the magical element that warms the insider and reminds the outsider that he or she is not part of the magic circle, even though seated but a few feet away. When the regulars are at play, the outsider may certainly know neither the characters nor the rules by which they take one another lightly. The unmistakable mark of acceptance into the company of third place regulars is not that of being taken seriously, but that of being included in the play forms of their association.

Johan Huizinga, grand scholar of play, would have recognized the playground character of the third place, for it was clear to him that play occurs in a place apart. Play has its playgrounds—"forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."<sup>29</sup>

The magic of playgrounds is seductive. Having been part of the play, the individual is drawn to where it took place. Not every game of marbles, Huizinga conceded, leads to the founding of a club, but the tendency is there. Why? Because the "feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, or mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. The club pertains to play as the hat to the head."<sup>30</sup> Many couples are certain to have known the feeling to which Huizinga alludes. They experience it when, in the course of many social events that are duller than they should be, a magic time occurs. It may be an impromptu gathering with no set activity at which everyone stays longer than intended because they are enjoying themselves and hate to leave. The urge to return, recreate, and recapture the experience is there. Invariably the suggestion is made, "Let's do this again!" The third place exists because of that urge.

### *A Home Away from Home*

If such establishments as the neighborhood tavern were nearly as bad as generations of wives have claimed them to be, few of the ladies should have found much reason to be concerned. The evil houses

would have fallen of their own foul and unredeeming character. In fact, however, third places compete with the home on many of its own terms and often emerge the winner. One suspects that it is the similarity that a third place bears to a comfortable home and not its differences that poses the greater threat. Aye, there's the rub—the third place is often more homelike than home.

Using the first and second definitions of *home* (according to my Webster's), the third place does not qualify, being neither 1) the "family's place of residence" or 2) that "social unit formed by a family living together." But the third definition of home as offering "a congenial environment" is more apt to apply to the average third place than the average family residence. The domestic circle can endure without congeniality, but a third place cannot. Indeed, many family nests are brutish places where intimacy exists without even a smattering of civility.

Obviously, there is a great deal of difference between the private residence and the third place. Homes are private settings; third places are public. Homes are mostly characterized by heterosocial relations; third places most often host people of the same sex. Homes provide for a great variety of activities, third places far fewer. Largely, the third place is what the home is not, yet, there clearly exists enough similarity to invite comparison.

Seeking traits of "homeness," I chanced upon a volume by the psychologist David Seamon. He set forth five criteria against which "homes away from home" can be assessed. Seamon's illustrative comments are confined to the private residence. Clearly, he did not anticipate a comparison such as this; that makes his criteria particularly useful and not biased toward public places.<sup>31</sup>

The home *roots* us, begins Seamon; it provides a physical center around which we organize our comings and goings. Those who have a third place will find the criterion applies. As a self-employed individual once told me with regard to his coffeeshop, "Other than home, this is the only place where I know I'm going to be every day at about the same time." If the individual has a third place, the place also "has him." In America, the third place does not root individuals as tightly as, say, in France, but it roots them nonetheless. Those who regularly visit third places expect to see familiar faces. Absences are quickly noted, and those present query one another about an absent member.

The third place cannot enforce the regularity of appearance of the individual, as can home or work. A woman from Arizona related to me an account of her third place while she was a single working woman in Chicago. It illustrates the expectations that emerge among third place regulars. She and several others had become friends out of the mutual accessibility and appeal offered by a corner drugstore and its short-order food service. "The store was more home than where we all lived," she said, "in the resident hotels, apartments, YWCA, or whatever. If one of the group missed a day, that was all right. If we didn't see someone for two days, someone went to check to make sure the person was all right."<sup>32</sup>

For most Americans, third places do not substitute for home to the extent that hers had. In some cases, however, they root them even more so. Matthew Dumont, an East Coast psychiatrist, once went "underground" to study a place he dubbed the Star Tavern, in a blighted area of his city. There he found that the bartender and his tavern were meeting the needs of homeless men far better than the local health and welfare agencies. The Star was not a home away from home for those men. It *was* home.<sup>33</sup>

Seamon's second criterion of "at-homeness" is appropriation, or a sense of possession and control over a setting that need not entail actual ownership. Those who claim a third place typically refer to it in the first person possessive ("Rudy's is our hangout"), and they behave there much as if they did own the place.

When visiting another's home, one is bound to feel a bit like an intruder no matter how cordial the host, whereas the third place engenders a different feeling. The latter setting is a public place, and the regular is not an outsider. Further, just as a mother realizes her contribution to the family, regulars realize their contributions to the sociable group. They are members in good and full standing, a part of the group that *makes* the place.

Often, the regular is extended privileges and proprietary rights denied transient or casual customers. A special place may be reserved, formally or informally, for the "friends of the house." Access through doors not normally used by the public may be granted. Free use of the house phone may be permitted. But whether tangible benefits and privileges accrue or not, appropriation increases with familiarity. The



more people visit a place, use it, and become, themselves, a part of it, the more it is theirs.

Third, contends Seamon, homes are places where individuals are regenerated or restored. Here, one must readily concede that third places are not recommended for the physically ill or exhausted. The home, if not the hospital, is required for them. But, in terms of the regeneration of the spirit, of unwinding, or of "letting one's hair down"—in terms of *social* regeneration—the third place is ideally suited. Many a dutiful wife and mother will confess that she feels most at home with her close friends at some comfortable snuggerly apart from her home and family.

The fourth theme of "at-homeness" is the feeling of being at ease or the "freedom to be." It involves the active expression of personality, the assertion of oneself within an environment. In the home, observes Seamon, this freedom is manifest in the choice and arrangement of furniture and other decor. In the third place, it is exhibited in conversation, joking, teasing, horseplay, and other expressive behaviors. In either case, it is a matter of leaving one's mark, of being associated with a place even when one is not there.

Finally, there is *warmth*. It is the least tangible of the five qualities Seamon associates with "at-homeness," and it is not found in all homes. Warmth emerges out of friendliness, support, and mutual concern. It radiates from the combination of cheerfulness and companionship, and it enhances the sense of being alive. On this account, the score is lopsided in favor of the third place for, although homes can exist without warmth, the third place cannot. While homes provide much that is necessary apart from warmth and friendliness, these are central to third place association that would quickly dissolve without them.

Seamon makes much of the relationship between the warmth of a room or other space and the use it gets. Unused places feel cold and unshared places lack warmth. Seamon is also aware of the sharp rise in "primary" or one-person households in the United States and wonders what impact the loss of warmth has on those individuals and on society. I share a similar concern over the decline of warmth-radiating third places in America's towns and cities, and I'd hazard a guess at the effect of this loss. Colder people!

*Summary*

Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile. Since the formal institutions of society make stronger claims on the individual, third places are normally open in the off hours, as well as at other times. The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in other spheres. Though a radically different kind of setting from the home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends.

Such are the characteristics of third places that appear to be universal and essential to a vital informal public life. I've noted each of them in turn without attempting to describe any net effects that these several characteristics may combine to produce. I turn my attention now to such effects.