

Read the newspaper article. Then choose the best answer for each question.

The New Third Places

If you're lucky, you live near a coffeehouse, barber shop, or general store where you can visit anytime, linger, and come into contact with people. I'm talking about the kind of place you see people you know and people you don't, and no one makes you leave until you're ready.

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg called them "Third Places" in his 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*. He wrote that Third Places (not work, not home) are "the heart of a community's social vitality, the grassroots* of democracy." But in the United States, he wrote, we've almost lost them, as people spend more time in cars, in shopping malls, or at home in front of a screen.

Earlier this month I spent a couple of days in Toronto, Canada, at a conference for the Information Architecture Institute, which drew hundreds of bright and creative people interested in the human mind, information technology, and how they intersect. One expert spoke about Oldenburg, and

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☐ too much time spent at work
☐ too much time spent driving and watching television
☐ not enough time spent at the mall
3. What kind of people attended the conference for the Information Architecture Institute?
☐ architects

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proposed that our online interactions are now fulfilling the function of Third Places in our lives.

Well, no. This essay is a defense of the value of real places where real people encounter one another, and the often ignored but significant role these places play in the life of our cities and towns. People can, of course, maintain relationships online and over the phone, and of course electronic communication plays a large role in these times when distance doesn't seem to matter. But this kind of communication does not work the same way as Oldenburg's Third Places.

A Third Place exists in the three-dimensional world inhabited by the bodies of human beings. Sure, at any hangout, what people talk about may sound a lot like what they write in their online journals. But being in another human's physical presence changes the relationship. You hear tones of voice and regional accents, and you notice whether their teeth are straight or their shoes are shabby. You may even smell them—for better or

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worse.

Not infrequently, when I meet politicians or other public figures whose opinions I completely disagree with, they turn out to be personable and likeable people. Meeting in person isn't likely to change my views—or theirs—but seeing someone in person shifts the relationship. Studies find that anywhere from 65 to 93 percent of our communication with others is nonverbal—through tone of voice, small expressions, and body language. That's why diplomats meet in person. It's why the president sits down with foreign leaders. And it's one of the reasons that real places—real public places—matter. "Deprived of these settings," Oldenburg wrote in his introduction to *The Great Good Place*, "people remain lonely within their crowds."

Most of the time, it's easy to mingle only with people with whom you agree. Ask people about any controversial issue of the day, and many of them will tell you that most people agree with them—no matter which side they're on. They get this

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impression from their personal friends and from the people they choose to talk to online. Research shows that people in groups in which all agree tend to become more extreme in their views, while people in groups that disagree become more moderate. So, as more of us retreat into our self-selected opinion bubbles, and more of our public discussions move online, where those opinion bubbles grow ever more extreme, public debate gets more hostile.

By contrast, if you're lucky enough to have a Third Place, you run into all kinds of people there, people who may not be like you at all except in their liking for this place. Most likely you'll have at least a small, polite interaction with them. Those in-person encounters are essential to life in a city. As both Oldenburg and urbanist writer Jane Jacobs knew, the seemingly insignificant human exchanges among people who aren't close enough to be "friends" or "family" and need not be invited home to dinner are one of the undervalued characteristics of urban

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life. Jacobs wrote that while cities are full of people with whom contact is enjoyable, "You don't want them in your hair and they do not want you in theirs, either." In her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs went on to discuss the relationship of people living in cities: "The presence of great numbers of people gathered together in cities should not only be frankly accepted as a physical fact... they should also be enjoyed as an asset and their presence celebrated..."

In the two decades since Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place* was published, some developers and planners have incorporated his observations into their work and have attempted to create "vibrant urban villages." A few are indeed urban, or villages, or upon occasion, vibrant. But too many have the artificial feel of a shopping mall center court instead of the plain, unassuming character of a true Third Place.

One evening years ago, I sat on the steps of the fountain in the piazza at the heart of Rome's Trastevere neighborhood. The

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piazza was filled with humanity: families, children, tourists, workmen, waiters moving among restaurant tables, men in suits hurrying past. Some people were not so reputable-looking. One man dug through the trash bin. A few slept on the ground. No shopping mall security guards would have allowed that range of humanity. Yet their presence created exactly the little touch of chaos and danger that makes a city exciting.

Random, but civilized, humanity brings to life a public space as well as a Third Place. And it's no exaggeration to say that transactions of the sort that occur in a true Third Place—peaceable and in person—make civilization what it is. Maybe I'm wrong, and someday we'll recall, together, how electronic communication brought us together, and helped us solve poverty and conquer injustice.

But somehow I just don't see it.

*grassroots: the ordinary people in society, rather than the leaders

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