

University Libraries as Third Place

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### Abstract

#### Introduction

The concept of *third place* was introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (2001) as a place that is "...a setting beyond home and work (the "first" and "second" places respectively) in which people relax in good company and do so on a regular basis" (p.2). Previous research (Banning, Clemons, McKelfresh, and Waxman, 2006) indicated that coffee shops top the list of third places selected by students. A quick search for topics addressing "coffee shops" and "higher education" in library databases placed revealed a lively discussion around the question of whether collegiate libraries should provide coffee shops within the library environment.

The purpose of this research was to provide insight and practical perspectives into the needs of university students concerning places to gather, develop community, and find restoration on the college campus; specifically libraries. Guidelines for the design of library third places are offered.

#### Review of Literature

There are several factors that have contributed to the discussion of library coffee shops. With research materials available via the Internet, many libraries have seen a decrease in the number of users coming into the library (Gust & Haka, 2006). Many libraries have explored design options to make the library more welcoming and appealing (Gust & Haka, 2006; Lefebvre, 2002; Houlihan, 2005). Horan (2000) offered advice for institutions to accommodate emerging technologies. He stated that transitions often require a "recombination" of services that reflect changes in society.

Lawsen (2004) suggested one of these re-combinations might include the addition of a coffee shop within the library, which has both financial and social implications.

The university library has the ability to serve as a foundation of the community as well as a third place (Lawsen, 2004). Like all good third places, libraries can provide a place for companionship and relaxation, while enriching the community and public life in general. Lawsen (2004) stated, "They [libraries] each welcome members of their particular communities regardless of age and economic status and provide them with access to information, services, and a responsive, usually safe, environment" (p. 126).

### **Methodology**

What type of third places do students prefer? Where are they located? How are they used by the student? What makes a third place attractive to a student? Forty-four students were sent into the field to document the location and physical characteristics of their "third place. A six step procedure was used in this qualitative study.

### **Findings**

When examining the location of the third places, eighty percent of students indicated that their favorite third place was off campus (see Table I). These places were overwhelmingly coffee shops and restaurants. The major functions served by their third places included socializing, relaxation, eating and drinking, "getting away", and doing homework (see Table II). Along with seeing friends, they reported seeing familiar strangers, those people who they see regularly, but only know by face. Almost a quarter (23%) of students visited their third place every day, 25% visited more than once per week, and 23% visited once per week. Collapsing these categories revealed that 71% of students visit their third place at least once per week (see Table 3).

Preferred design features included wood flooring, comfortable chairs, furniture that could be rearranged as needed, light levels appropriate to the tasks undertaken in the space, pleasant coffee and food smells, views to the outside, and ambient characteristics that could be characterized as “warm” atmosphere.

### **Discussion and Summary**

Findings from this study indicate third places chosen by today’s students meet some of the characteristics of third places as defined by Oldenburg (1989, 2001). These functions, as they relate to the library, have been discussed by other researchers as well and include providing the opportunity to develop a sense of place, with an emphasis on community (Rizzo, 2002); providing an atmosphere conducive to the way students now study, research, and communicate (Houlihan, 2005); providing an ultimate community center (Gust & Haka, 2006); and to facilitate social cohesion (Mullins and Linehan, 2006).

Students need a place to relax and restore their energies to balance the overwhelming complexities of multiple roles and responsibilities. They need places to be rejuvenated. If they are living on campus, it is desirable that the campus provide such areas of escape or respite.

## ***University Libraries as Third Place***

### **Introduction**

University campuses in the United States can be physically large or small, yet all of them possess a society and culture within their perimeter. Research indicates that retention of the students beyond the first year is linked to the student's personal identification with their institution which is enhanced when a sense of community is created with their roommates, sports clubs, and/or classmates (McKelfresh, Clemons, Banning, 2006). [lkw1]Although the ability to establish oneself in a community is impacted by many factors, proximity and the ability for serendipitous encounters are key factors in forming friendships (Deasy, 1985), which can lead to feelings of attachment (Altman and Lowe, 1992).

The university library has the potential to serve as one of the key gathering places for students on campuses today. First year students are a captive audience as many higher education institutions in the United States require all freshman to live on campus in residence halls. Many freshmen students do not have personal vehicles to commute off campus and therefore, look for places to create a sense of community in their near environment. They seek a place to relax and communicate with each other away from their residence hall rooms and places of employment.

Although libraries have the potential to serve as gathering places for students, the changing role of the library over the last twenty years has caused libraries to explore new ways to meet the needs and ever-evolving interests to students (Childs, 2006). As more information is available via the internet, libraries have had to reinvent themselves

(Gust & Haka, 2006). One of the recent trends has been the emergence of coffee shops in the library (Waxman, Clemons, Banning, & McKelfresh, 2007).

The purpose of this research was to provide insight and practical perspectives into the needs of university students concerning places to gather, develop community, and find restoration on the college campus; specifically libraries. The authors are [[kw2]interior designers, and university professors, familiar with the student population, the campus library, and the interior design attributes that allow the library to serve the needs of the students. From this perspective, guidelines for designing the interiors of campus library coffee shops are offered.

### **Review of Literature**[[kw3]

Historically, the academic library has been central to the mission of the university. Not only have libraries served as repositories for knowledge, but they have also served as gathering places for students and scholars. Benefits continue to exist for users. Research has indicated that school libraries, or even the presence of a library in the community, can enhance student academic performance (Line, 1990; Lance, 1994; Lance & Russell, 2004) and recent studies have positively linked students' success in college to their ability to retrieve information (Zmuda & Harada, 2008; Poll, 2006).

Early libraries were dedicated to housing collections, which resulted in somewhat static, physical buildings (Freeman, 2005). [LW4]Today, students can access library information from their laptop via a variety of places including dorm rooms, dining halls, or off-campus coffee shops. One of the dilemmas, however, is that with research materials available via the Internet many libraries have seen a decrease in the number of users coming into the library (Gust & Haka, 2006).

The need to draw students and faculty back to the library has resulted in creative new approaches to making the library more welcoming and appealing. Many libraries are renovating or otherwise making changes to their buildings with the goal of encouraging walk-in traffic and creating spaces in which students can relax in the company of others (Gust & Haka, 2006; Lefebvre, 2002; Houlihan, 2005). Boone (2003) identified this shift as a phenomenon and stated that libraries are moving from “a monastery full of books and journals for scholars to marketplaces competing for clients by offering a different array of services”. Awards for library design have been offered by organizations such as the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) to encourage good, quality design that meets the needs of the end-users. Although there are checklists and books to guide design of the library buildings (Sannwald, 2009), recommendations are related to wireless networking, treatment of special collections, and energy/water efficiency rather than enhancing the interior environment.

In light of this paradigm shift, many libraries are adding coffee shops, comfortable furniture, meeting rooms, technology labs, and are hosting non-library events within the facility (e.g. Library of Congress event schedule). Many universities are also introducing academic services and art programs such as tutoring, advising, writing centers, group and collaborative study spaces, author readings, and art shows within the walls of the library (Carlson, 2001). In discussing the changes in libraries, Horan (2000) stated that these transitions often require a “recombination” of services that reflect changes in society. Lawsen (2004) suggested one of these re-combinations might include the

addition of a coffee shop within the library, which has both financial and social implications.

Over the past several years, libraries have had to compete with coffee shops and bookstores such as *Borders* and *Barnes and Nobles* for walk-in users (Gust & Haka, 2006). *Starbucks*, both in the United States and China (Fang, 2008), have gone so far as to use the term “third place” in their marketing to designate their establishments as places where people can sit for any length of time undisturbed, gather together often, feel safe and secure, and feel a sense of belonging. This concept of *third place*, introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (2001), is a place that offers a “...a setting beyond home and work (the “first” and “second” places respectively) in which people relax in good company and do so on a regular basis” (p.2). [lkw5]

Research (Banning, et al., 2006) indicated that coffee shops top the list of third places selected by students. Cafes and shops project a culture where “coffee is only [the] carrier, [lkw6]which delivers a unique atmosphere to customers” (Fang, 2008, p. 2). Services provided by the café areas of these establishments often provide free Internet, comfortable furniture, coffee, and an assortment of snacks. In addition, some branches in China are beginning to offer “mini-concerts” for local musicians to introduce music as the “organic part of the Third Place” (Fang, 2008, p. 2).

Although the research indicates this is a relatively new concept as it relates to library design, a review of literature on the topic of coffee shops in higher education revealed a trend surrounding the addition of coffee shops into the college library environment. The literature included many case studies with suggestions on how best to incorporate the coffee shop to create interior spaces that serve as “third places”.

Decades of research tell us that interior spaces impact how we work, live, and recreate (Deasy, 1985). They shape our activities and our behavior, our attitudes and our efficiencies. How can libraries design interior spaces that not only “promote knowledge sharing and knowledge generation” but also a sense of community, trust, and collaboration – particularly for freshmen who may need to develop the habit of visiting the library their first year? One answer may lie in the concept of “third place.”

[1kw7]

If libraries mimicked the third place characteristics suggested by Oldenburg (1989), they would have

- Informal gathering places (e.g. café) to foster relationships, human contact, and friendships
- Homey feeling (rather than magnificent and solemn (Fang, 2008))
- Identifiable artifacts/signposts that encourage sense of community and civic pride
- Spaces to encourage sociability instead of isolation
- Color and light to create a regularly, visited destination

(Several successful library designs that service their communities created by Globus Design Associates can be seen in Figures 1-3)[1kw8].

The university library has the ability to serve as a foundation of the community as well as a third place (Lawsen, 2004). Like all good third places, libraries can provide a place for companionship and relaxation, while enriching the community and public life in general. Lawsen (2004) stated, “They [libraries] each welcome members of their

particular communities regardless of age and economic status and provide them with access to information, services, and a responsive, usually safe, environment” (p. 126).

Current trends seem to suggest that the addition of a coffee shop to the library community has potential benefits to students. This paper will explore the characteristics of coffee shops that are preferred by college students. From this data, design recommendations will be offered that will enable these coffee shops to best serve their clientele. These design characteristics will address how the interiors invite students to not only visit once, but make it a destination point regularly used throughout their time on campus?

## **Methodology**

To answer the questions regarding what students are looking for in third places we asked the following questions. What type of third places do students prefer? Where are they located? How are they used by the student? What makes a third place attractive to a student?

In a report on third places and the campus environment (Banning, et al., 2006), researchers suggested a procedure for gathering student input on their third place preferences. This six step procedure included (1) convening a group of students to send out into the field, (2) asking them to spend time in their favorite third place, (3) asking them to fill out a structured questionnaire as well as complete field notes regarding the space, (4) asking them to photograph the space, (5), convening the students for discussion, and (6) and then analyzing this data so it may be useful to those designing and redesigning campus facilities. In this study, 45 students from a lower-division interior design class at Colorado State University were asked to follow the

procedures listed above. These students were chosen because most were full-time students, and the majority lived on campus. The research team felt students with these characteristics could provide insight regarding the design of the campus facilities available to them. Because they were interior design students, the research team felt they would be well-equipped to take detailed field notes regarding their third place environments. The study took place during spring semester, 2007. The questionnaire and field notes recorded by the students addressed the central questions of what spaces constituted their third places, the location of those spaces, the activities in which they participated while there, the factors that contributed to their selection of those places, and the important design features of those third places. Forty-four responses were usable. The sample is not large, and utilized students from Colorado State University alone, therefore findings may not be generalized to other campuses. This study was designed as an exploratory study with the goal of providing insight into the place preferences of students.

The second part of the study included field observations of libraries at Colorado State University and Florida State University. Both universities have recently added portable coffee areas to the library services. Members of the research team served as observers to better understand how students used spaces in the library, specifically areas surrounding coffee carts. In addition, library administrators were interviewed to better understand their views regarding the addition of these coffee carts, as well as the impact this has had on student use of the library. The following information is a summary of these findings.

## **Findings**<sup>[1kw9]</sup>

Following the emersion of students into their third places, an analysis was done to answer the research questions. One of the most interesting findings found that 80% of students indicated that their favorite third place was off campus (see Table 1). The two most popular third places were coffee shops and restaurants. When asked what functions these spaces served, students indicated socializing, relaxation, eating and drinking, “getting away”, and doing homework were the most common (see Table 2). In addition to seeing friends, they reported seeing familiar strangers, those people who they see regularly, but only know by face. The presence of familiar strangers has the ability to enhance the connection patrons feel to a place (Waxman, 2006) The research also addressed the frequency with which students visited their third places with almost a quarter (23%) of students visiting their third place every day, 25% visiting more than once per week, and 23% visiting once per week. When these categories were collapsed, it was revealed that 71% of students visit their third place at least once per week (see Table III). Clearly, these are important spaces to students.

[1kw10]When asked about the design features of these places, students preferred wood flooring, comfortable chairs, furniture that could be rearranged as needed, light levels appropriate to the tasks undertaken in the space, pleasant coffee and food smells, views to the outside, and ambient characteristics that could be characterized as “warm” atmosphere.

### **Guidelines for Designing a Library Coffee Shop**

The following guidelines for designing the coffee shop were based on recommendations by Waxman (2004; 2006) following detailed interviews and observations of coffee shops, and modified for the library environment (Waxman,

Clemons, Banning, & McKelfresh, 2007<sup>[1kw11]</sup>). Although available space and spatial configurations in libraries may vary, the following design guidelines provide a framework for both the evaluation of existing, as well as the design of new library coffee shops. The guidelines include:

Layout: Patrons prefer to select seats that allow them to anchor themselves to walls or other architectural features and establish temporary territories. The concept of anchoring creates a feeling of shelter or security. These features can simply be walls or walls with windows, partial walls or dividers, or even large planters. Designers can take advantage of space along walls for locating seating that may offer this shelter. Seating next to walls with windows provides two highly desirable features, the ability to feel anchored in a space while, at the same time, enjoying a view. The opportunity to be anchored or sheltered by the architectural features of the space, yet still view the coffee shop, people watch, and see people coming and going is desirable.

Flooring: Flooring should be easy to clean, non-slip, have colors or patterns that camouflage dirt and spills that may arise whenever food or drink is served. This study found that wood flooring was found most often in third places preferred by students. This may present an acoustic problem in library coffee shops if the space is open to other areas of the library.

Seating: A variety of seating types was recommended by the participants of this study. Some patrons come to coffee shops alone, and

prefer to sit alone, while others come in groups and look for seating that will accommodate the number in their party. Some people prefer large comfortable chairs or sofas, while others desire to sit at tables and use laptops. Tables that provide space for books and laptops, combined with comfortable chairs, encourage lingering. Smaller tables that make it harder to spread out books, along with less comfortable chairs, discourage lingering. Any upholstered furniture should be selected that will camouflage soiling and could either be vinyl, leather, or fabric with pattern or texture. Chairs should be light-weight to allow patrons to move themselves if desired.

Tables: Square or rectangular tables are easy to group together and work better in accommodating multiple individuals. If the management philosophy includes welcoming patrons who linger, tables should be large enough to spread out a newspaper or books (2' x 3' range). If the management does not support lingering, then smaller, round tables would discourage lengthy stays and larger groups to congregate.

Service Counter: Some coffee shops are designed in such a way that they accommodate seating along the counter where coffee is served. This seating allows patrons to interact with the staff and provides seating for those wishing to sit alone.

Lighting: Lighting is especially important in coffee shops where reading is a common activity. Adequate light to read can include task lighting near seats or fixtures strategically placed over seating. Dimmer

switches can alter light as needs change between night and day or as eyes fatigue with use over time. Artificial lighting should be warm in color range. Natural light from windows is also good for reading; however glare control would be required.

Aroma: Aroma was very important to patrons and can be enhanced by venting desirable smells into the coffee shop, or even out to areas where people are passing by. This study found students reacted positively to the smell of coffee and baked goods.

Acoustics: Background music that still allows reading and conversation to take place often works well in coffee shops. Background music provides “white” noise to mask conversations and provides acoustical privacy for patrons. When designing the library coffee shop, the location of the coffee shop relative to the adjacent areas of the library would dictate the type of music (if any) that could be provided.

Views: Patrons appreciate being able to see seasons change and time pass; hence views to the out-of-doors is preferred. Seats along windows are typically the most popular. If views to the outside are not possible, views or vistas to other parts of the coffee shop or into the library can enhance the space as well.

Visual Appeal: Many students responded that their favorite third places felt “warm” and welcoming. Warmth can be incorporated into a space in many ways including interior finish materials (flooring, walls, color, and texture) and lighting (light sources that emit warm spectrum

light). Waxman (2004) found that many patrons used the words cozy and warm when favorably describing physical attributes they preferred. Soft textures have tactile benefits as well as sound absorption properties.

Art: Art supplied by local artists is an easy way to enliven the space and connect with artists in the community. Students who participated in this study mentioned the artwork in their third places as an important element, although it varied greatly in genre. A campus library would likely have access to student art work and could incorporate art into the space while providing a service to student artists looking for places to exhibit. Some coffee shops even provide “art openings” with receptions featuring the artist.

Access to Reading Material: Coffee shops in bookstores or libraries provide the opportunity for patrons to browse through books and magazines. The opportunity to enjoy a beverage while relaxing with some reading material is highly desirable for many people. People enjoy the opportunity for intellectual growth that can take place while relaxing with a book or magazine.

## **Discussion and Summary**

Findings from this study indicate third places chosen by today’s students meet some of the characteristics of third places as defined by Oldenburg (1989, 2001). These functions, as they relate to the library, have been discussed by other researchers as well and provide the opportunity to develop a sense of place, with an emphasis on community (Rizzo, 2002) and an atmosphere conducive to the way students now study,

research, and communicate (Houlihan, 2005). These suggestions may also assist the library in providing an ultimate community center (Gust & Haka, 2006) to facilitate social cohesion (Mullins and Linehan, 2006).

Other ideas used now by coffee shops that libraries may want to investigate are loyalty rewards (VIP cards, point cards), free wifi, sustainable practices (e.g. recycling modules), and personalization techniques for their users (e.g. swipe cards/ auto ordering).

If students do not habitually visit the campus library, opportunities exist to develop new behaviors with campus-bound freshmen. This habit may link to library-attending behaviors after graduation and therefore, carry into community usage and family units. Students need a place to relax and restore their energies to balance the overwhelming complexities of multiple roles, work, and responsibilities. They need places to be rejuvenated and socially bind with their university and peers; a place to explore, imagine, think, learn, play and reflect (Habib, 2006). Libraries need to encourage enhanced sociability instead of isolation; to serve as a place of respite and escape. Library books, CDs and DVD's are merely the products not the experience that can enhance a third place that welcomes all ages and segments of the community.

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Figure 1. Ocean County Library, Toms River, NJ Globus Design Associates.



Figure 2. Chester Library, Chester, NJ. Globus Design Associates.



Figure 3. Ocean County Library, Toms River, NJ. Globus Design Associates.



**Table 1. Third Place Preferences by College Students**

Type of Third Place	On Campus	Off Campus
Coffee Shops	1	14
Restaurants	0	11
Bookstores	0	3
Student Unions	4	0
Recreation Centers	2	0
Student Services Centers	2	0
Other	0	7
Total	9	35
Total Percentage n=44	20%	80%

**Table 2. Major Functions of Third Places for College Students**

Activity	Number*	Percentage*
Place to Socialize	31	70%
Place to Relax	18	41%
Place to Enjoy Food and Drink	18	41%
Place to "Get Away"	14	32%
Place to do Homework	10	23%

\*More than one answer was possible; n=44

**Table 3. Frequency of Visit to Third Places**

Frequency	Percentage
Every day	23
More than once a week	25
Once a week	23
Several times a month	25
About once a month	4

n=44