3.14 The third place setting for public life: hairbraiding salon

civic functions that were previously – by necessity – conducted in the public realm, have increasingly transferred to the private. Entertainment, access to information, shopping, financial services, and even voting, can increasingly be undertaken from the home using modern technologies, in particular the internet. This, on top of increasingly dramatic rises in personal mobility, has in many places led to decline in the 'local', 'small-scale' and 'public' and to a growth in the 'regional', large-scale' and 'private' as venues for public life. Thus Sennett (1977) has long argued that individual lives are increasingly private and that, as a result, public culture has declined.

This tendency may simply necessitate a broadening of the definition of public space, to incorporate some of the new forms of semi-public space that have been emerging. Banerjee (2001: 19–20), for example, has suggested that urban designers should concern themselves with broader notions of public life rather than just physical public space, reflecting the new reality that much public life exists in private spaces 'not just in corporate theme parks, but also in small businesses such as coffee shops, bookstores and other such third places'. For him, these spaces support and enable social interaction, regardless of their ownership.

This notion of 'third places' was originally advanced by Oldenburg (1999) who argued that because contemporary domestic life often takes place in isolated nuclear families, and work life, with the spread of new technologies, increasingly in a solitary manner, people need other social realms to live a fulfilled life. For him, this 'informal' public life, although seemingly more scattered than it was in the past, is in fact highly focused in a number of third place settings – cafés, book stores, coffee shops, bars, hair salons and other small private hangouts (Figure 3.14). These places host the encounters from the accidental to the organised and regular, and have become fundamental institutions of mediation between the individual and society, possessing a number of common features. They are:

- neutral ground, where individuals can come and go as they please;
- highly inclusive, accessible and without formal criteria of membership;
- low profile and taken for granted;

- open during and outside of office hours;
- characterised by a playful mood;
- psychologically supportive and comfortable places of conversation, and therefore also of political debate.

One might argue that these features also characterise (or should characterise) public space, but also that these third spaces are, again, nothing new; the British pub, French café, or American bar providing examples from the past that remain significant third places in the present. Today these have been supplemented with other forms of third place; the shopping centre, health clubs, video rental stores, and a surfeit of new leisure spaces.

VIRTUAL SPACE

What is new is the growth of virtual spaces – chat rooms, virtual worlds, radio phone-ins, and the like – that some have argued will supplant our need to meet and interact in traditional public space, and will eventually lead to new forms of urbanism (see discussion in Aurigi 2005: 17–31). Leaving on one side the most extreme predictions of the 'techno-determinists' of an end to urban life, some of the most thoughtful writers in the field have concluded that the nature of cities as we understand them today will be challenged and must eventually be reconceived, especially as '[c]omputer networks become as fundamental to urban life as street systems' (Mitchell 1995: 107). Others have argued that the new technologies, rather than undermining traditional cities, actually act to reinforce their role as IT applications are largely metropolitan phenomena, whilst those who work in these fields increasingly wish to live and work in places that bring them into contact with others in the field, and which meet their quality of life aspirations (Graham and Marvin 1999: 97).

Conversely, therefore, the quality of public space may become more rather than less important. In reality, the true impact of the new technologies on city form and public space has yet to be seen, but the fact that face-to-face communication remains the preferred mode of interaction for business as well as for private activities suggests that public space may not be as threatened by the new technologies as was once thought (Castells 1996; Sassen 1994). The expanded role of third places seems to confirm this.

Invented space

Some of the most frequent critiques of the new forms of public space are associated with the perceived loss of authenticity and growth of