

## 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.