

Rebuilding the Social Space: The Revitalization of Third Spaces in Post-Pandemic  
Communities

Honors Thesis

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**Abstract**

This thesis aims to investigate the loss in contemporary society of community-centered “third spaces” and examine how architectural design can reintroduce and sustain them. Third spaces have been a hidden power playing a critical role in sustaining social cohesion and community identity, however, modern research indicates an exponential decline in these spaces due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research culminated and in this paper will extensively contribute to the development of a 60,000+ square foot senior capstone project, grounding the design in evidence-based design strategies that will prioritize accessibility, inclusivity, and social engagement.

The methodology used in this paper includes a comprehensive scholarly review of existing literature and theories as well as a voluntary survey examining the following: generational perspectives on social space, an analysis of post-pandemic behavioral shifts, and preferred remedies and designs in typical users of the space. Additionally, three observational case studies were conducted ranging from methods of direct observation to secondary sources to truly understand how a modern user interacts with labeled “third spaces”. Research also considers an in-depth examination of how well each case study utilizes the design theories discussed.

This study has found that there is a substantial dissatisfaction in community spaces. Factors contributing to this are influenced by generational divergences severely intensified by the pandemic, economic barriers decreasing the ability to have non-commercialized practices, and an increased reliance on digital platforms for social connection. These factors have significantly reshaped social behaviors, particularly among younger generations. In turn, this has shifted design preferences and comfortability more towards outdoor spaces that escape the tension of an

interior environment. Design preferences have also shifted to include more flexible structure, free flowing circulation, and areas that create experiences rather than uphold tradition. This research will contribute to the field of interior architecture by identifying how the upcoming generation facilitates meaningful connection post-pandemic, reintroduce weak-ties, and support common interaction people are hesitant to approach. This thesis also will explore how to design strategies that favor the surrounding community and make society a much more pleasant and comfortable environment.

The term “third space” was first coined by Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place* where he described these areas as a “home away from home,” a place that was not work and was not home (Oldenburg 1989). These environments were accessible and functioned as neutral ground where people from different backgrounds and cultures could freely step outside of their daily routines and simply exist amongst one another, creating a community identity. They primarily offer opportunities for conversation and the comfort of shared experiences; however, they are inherently multifaceted and personalized to a user which is why they are so complex in theory. A third space has no defined structure nor environment and could range from small indoor spaces such as cafes and libraries to vast parks and hiking trails (Oldenburg 2023). They are defined less by their physical characteristics and more by the social experiences they can facilitate and create. There are eight characteristics Ray Oldenburg outlined that comprises a third space:

1. **Neutral Ground:** Occupants have no obligation to be there and are not required due to financial, political, or legal reasons.
2. **Leveler:** There is no importance on an individual's socioeconomic status nor are there any prerequisites for entering.
3. **Conversation:** The main activity, although it is not required to be the only one.
4. **Accessibility:** Accommodating to a diverse array of occupants and can be easily reached through transportation means.
5. **Regulars:** Set the tone of the place and help attract newcomers through making them feel welcomed or like they belong.
6. **A Low Profile:** Aesthetically wholesome with no grandiose feel.

7. **A Playful Mood:** Branding and design is wholesome and promotes a sense of inclusion and belonging. Conversation is witty and banter is highly valued.
8. **A Home Away From Home:** The space possesses the same warmth and sense of identity they would receive in their own homes.

Despite being transient in nature, third spaces are a critical core to societal well being. Research has shown that these areas strengthen users' social networks which are closely linked to their mental and physical health, as well as their economic mobility (Girod and Burrowes 2024). Due to their low-pressure atmospheres they encourage the development of weak-tie relationships which are essentially low-emotional-intensity interactions such as casual or distant connections. This can be found in acquaintances, neighbors, or even former colleagues (Borowski and Stathopolous 2023). Weak-tie relationships are essential to society for their ability to give a user novel information, diverse perspectives, and allow for interpersonal opportunities outside of one's inner circle which contributes to personal growth overall (Granovetter 1973). Additionally, participation in a third space fosters civic engagement which contributes to an individual's ability to feel valued within their community and give them a broad sense of social cohesion (Girod and Burrowes 2024). Humans are inherently social creatures, and we value mechanisms that strengthen our common rapport and community of being. Third spaces are informal sites of cultural exchange and dialogue that one cannot derive from a forced or professional interaction. They create a safe environment where we can build our interpersonal soft skills and create a collective experience. There is societal necessity for third spaces, and we have been continuously reaping the consequences of their decline. When communities such as ours fail to build or preserve accessible gathering places, our social familiarity diminishes and anxiety around interacting with others can increase (Livni 2025).

## The Problem

In recent decades, sociologists and scholars have raised concerns about the decline of “third spaces.” In a journal by *The Week*, social statistics noted that Americans used to spend roughly 6.5 hours per week with friends, but between 2014 and 2019 that time had dropped by 37% falling to about 4 hours per week (Rao 2024). This shows that the shift of these declining spaces began long before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, resulting not from just a singular factor but rather an array of changes in generational social habits, technological developments, and economic pressures.

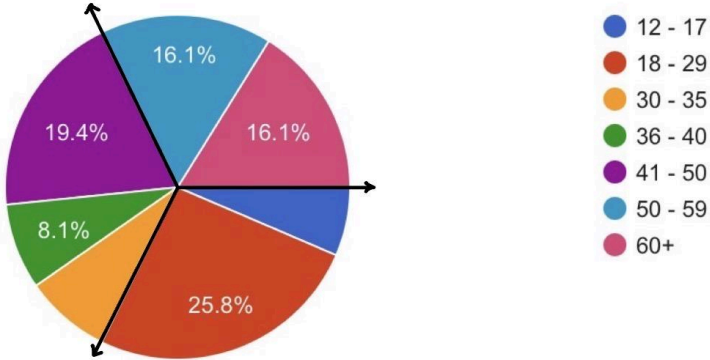
One significant factor dedicated to the decline of third spaces can be found in the United States tendency for intense work culture. This is characterized by long work hours, high productivity expectations, and an overwhelming emphasis on individual achievement. This “live to work” mentality is highly prominent in many working individuals’ lives; therefore, the desire to socialize or be energized for informal interaction becomes limited (Schor 1991). Deprioritization of leisure becomes normalized in such societies which in turn diminishes both the demand for and the viability of spaces dedicated solely to social interaction.

Looking into broader social shifts, the generational contrasts highly reflect the differences in how third spaces are perceived and experienced by the average user. To better understand these experiences an individual gains from the third space in the modern age, a survey was conducted to gather responses from participants with different backgrounds ranging from ages 17 to 60 years old. Part of this survey explored topics such as whether people feel they currently have access to a third space and how they define and use these environments to analyze if there were any stark differences between generations. Comparing these responses revealed pronounced differences between the younger and older generations when it came to what they viewed as a

third space if they had any at all. 43% of older respondents, mostly between the ages of 50-60, were more confidently able to identify a third space in their life. Contrastingly, only 25% of respondents identifying with Generation Z could identify a third space. Survey responses also revealed differences in how much time participants spent in their identified spaces and whether those visits were intentional or goal-oriented. Older respondents were recorded to have been spending longer periods of time in these spaces and were more likely to visit without a specific goal in mind. They were seen to mostly be utilizing the space for the intended usage of socializing or relaxing, aligning more closely with the traditional definition. In contrast, younger participants, particularly those in Generation Z, were recorded to spend less frequent time, if any, in such spaces and often described their visits as tied to a purpose including: studying, getting food, or meeting someone specific. This suggests that while younger individuals may still utilize third spaces, their engagement is more structured and goal-driven. This correlates with the change society is seeing, shifting away from the sole purpose of leisure time and to use spaces for more functional interactions. Similarly, the results showed a direct correlation to generation and perceived social constructs. The majority of older participants could identify a third space and felt no decline in the social atmosphere of modern society whereas the majority of younger participants not only could less identify a third space, but they felt more social changes. This was especially prominent when asking about behavioral patterns post-pandemic, most younger believed social patterns have immensely changed. Retrospectively, most older individuals could feel no social change post-pandemic. There was a clear association with being able to identify a third space and the perceived social environment surrounding an individual.

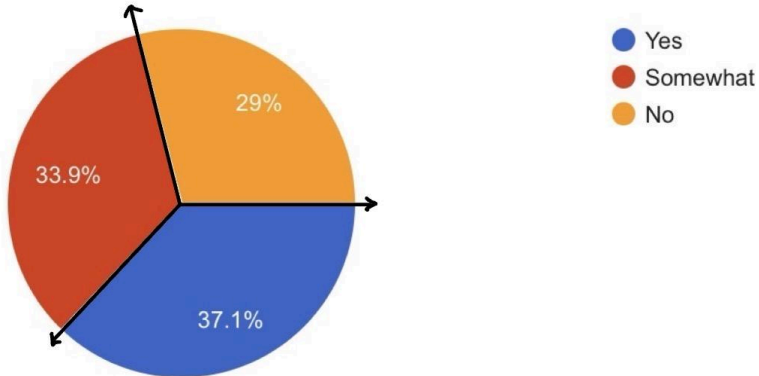
What is your age?

62 responses



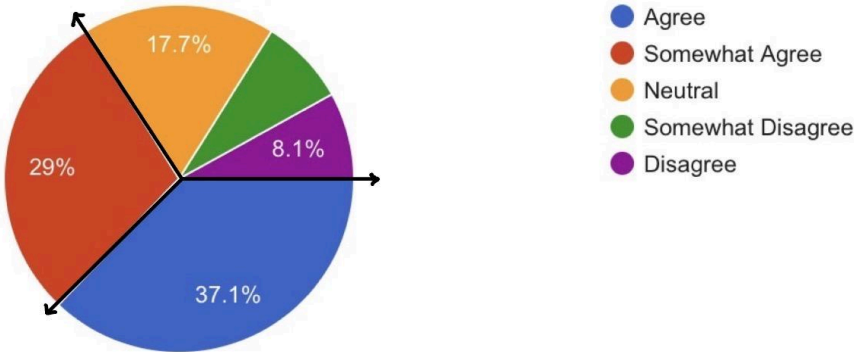
Based on the definition above, do you feel you currently have access (or have previously has access) to a third space in your life?

62 responses



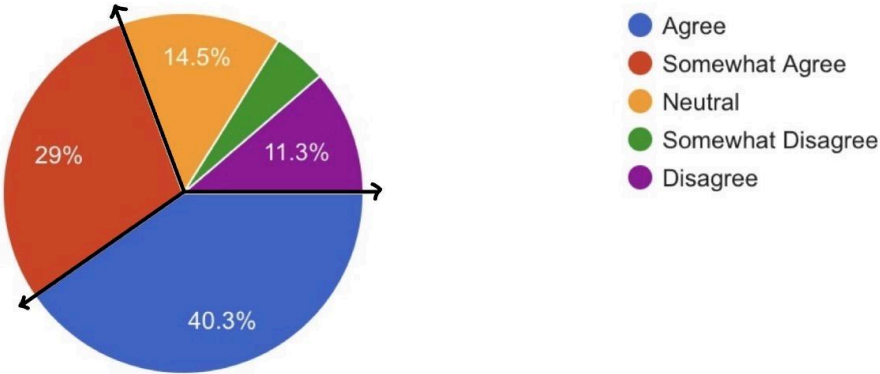
I want community, but I don't know where it is supposed to happen anymore.

62 responses



I believe social skills related to casual, in-person interaction have declined since COVID-19.

62 responses



Upon further analysis, survey results also showed that younger participants were highly drawn to more loosely structured environments such as outdoor spaces or considering their friends a “third space”. Older respondents in turn relied on more traditional spaces such as social cafes, bars, or community centers. This suggests that respondents of an older age were more comfortable with entering spaces that are monetized or structured whereas younger generations are barred from many locations if they cannot pay and highly discouraged from loitering for business purposes. Economic shifts such as this have reshaped the initial function of connection in many spaces. Spaces that once supported free or low-cost socialization have become commercialized. Cafes have become places where purchase is often required, discouraging prolonged use and chastising the person themselves if they do not follow the said social contract. This framework of thinking accompanies a broader trend of social environments beginning to merge with systems of capitalism not prioritizing profit over community but out of a necessity. In today’s society, a business needs money to survive. While a non-profit space seems great in theory, there is only so much an organization can do to accommodate a “free” space as well as keeping up with a buildings’ maintenance. As a result, spaces that once encouraged lingering and conversation become efficient, monetization areas that alter social dynamics and discourage community gathering.

Similarly, because there is a decline of free, non-commercialized spaces that welcome various age groups and backgrounds, there is a technological shift that contributes to the decline of third spaces as well. The rise of digital communication and social media has further transformed the nature of social interaction. There is an increasing reliance on the “digital space” to now host communities as technology has made communication more accessible than ever. Virtual platforms have become substitutes for these physical gathering spaces because there is a

convenience to them, however, research has shown that while these spaces can foster connection they will never fully achieve the equivalent interaction or belonging one may get from a physical space (Livni 2025). Despite the fact that there has been discourse on whether the virtual environment can provide sufficient connection, it has been reportedly said that digital platforms lacked the spontaneity, depth, and true presence that may come from the physical. Prior to his death, Oldenburg argued that virtual spaces cannot replicate the social richness of in-person interaction in the same way corporate models increasingly prioritize convenience and efficiency over community engagement (Oldenburg 1989). Therefore, while individuals can find a meaningful connection through online communities, it does not replicate or compensate for an interaction one can experience in-person.

### **The Pandemic's Lasting Effect**

While the accumulation of these societal, technological, and economic factors have led to the steady decline of these third spaces, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic exponentially decreased their prominence in society. Research found that the most substantial declines in place engagement occurred in indoor, socially oriented environments that previously supported routine interaction and informal encounters (Finlay et al. 2024). This is mainly seen the way the pandemic caused many business closures, occurred during most of the younger generations' formative years, and impacted the general economy overall. It was a widespread panic that the world was not expecting; therefore, it left a lasting influence on our society.

At the beginning of the pandemic, society experienced a wave of temporary and permanent closures of business that were deemed "non-essential", in fact, by April 2020 just a month after the nationwide lockdown, approximately 43% of small business closed due to COVID-19 (Bartik et al, 2020). Along with the shutdown, those that still stood experienced a

reduction in both their availability and accessibility, therefore, they suffered due to this underusage. When restrictions were lifted many spaces did not have the privilege of returning to their previous form; consequently, most reopened with limited capacity requirements, shifted towards more transactional environments, and idolized efficiency above all to stay afloat for just a little while (Girod and Burrowes 2024). This continued into an underlying pattern in communal frameworks where businesses started to become more disinvested in accessible spaces and prioritizing more private spaces. Contributing to this pattern, there has been a preference towards car-centered infrastructure as COVID-19 pushed for a reliance on private vehicles and avoidance of shared environments (Florida et al. 2021). Not only does this tendency reinforce the idea to socially isolate, but it also physically limits individuals and decreases unplanned encounters building upon that fear to interact (Putnam 2000). Additionally, because of these compounding economic and financial factors, there is a sort of class dispersion of said communal spaces. Low-income neighborhoods and other rural communities typically have been seen to lack public gathering spaces that are sufficient whereas wealthier areas have greater access to recreational environments. An article by *Urban Wire* expresses this concern given that high-poverty areas in New York City have considerably less access to parks and walking trails than those in more affluent areas (Girod and Burrowes 2024). This not only leads to targeted investments, but also limits the connection of a social network through these areas and exposure to diverse ideologies.

As a result, the decline of these “third space” coded businesses post-pandemic consequences have been seeping into personalized aspects of life as individuals have been feeling more lonely, gaining fewer social capital opportunities, and decreasing engagement in civic life all together (Girod and Burrowes 2024). There is an outstanding difference between how people, especially those belonging to the younger generation, engage with a public space.

This mostly can be attributed to the social distancing measures that took place during the pandemic for safety, however, the elimination of access to gathering environments and intense discouragement of socialization during a formative time for some has caused some lasting subconscious changes such as: increased loneliness, weakened social ties, a loss of belonging, and more (Rao 2024). How someone chooses to approach community and other social constructs is forever changed by the pandemic, and this is more so presented in the younger generation than it is for the older generations. Younger participants in the survey were asked to recount interaction before COVID and after COVID, and most observed how amongst themselves there was more of a caution in approaching people, reduced comfort in crowded spaces, and other habit changes after the pandemic occurred. Many survey respondents as well expressed that there was an increase in social anxiety and hesitation to initiate interactions that stuck around long after the pandemic. In contrast, older respondents described the pandemic more so as a temporary interruption before continuing to pre-pandemic social habits, generally maintaining a sense of continuity with their social lives. The only difference most noted however was frustration with the increased reliance on technology whereas Generation Z expressed more of a gratefulness towards digital communication. In fact, younger individuals said they had “adapted to the new normal” which they identified as more hesitation, less spontaneity, and appreciation for online communities (Wachs 2023). This exemplifies how the pandemic had a more lasting affect on the social behaviors of the younger generation ergo weakening the physical social culture.

The increased reliance on technology was prominent, especially in the fragile years of Generation Z where mental health and social development are of utmost concern. The transition to heavily digital interaction during the pandemic normalized these virtual alternatives further

building social media and other online platforms as primary sites of communication, entertainment, and community. Additionally, research has shown that there is a heavy association in the amount of social media usage and negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, stress, social anxiety, and decreased face-to-face interactions, especially in younger adults (Wachs 2023). While technology was essentially during lockdowns to continue society and not let it completely falter, the downside is that it completely reinforced patterns of isolation in the younger generation. Children and young adults experienced a critical stage of social development under conditions that would not typically occur outside of a global crisis. They were encouraged to remain isolated and rely heavily on their divides to prevent spread of illness. Contrastingly, older generations in their own formative years were more consistently reinforced to socialize and play, therefore, they never settled into that normality of technological communication. The stark difference is why there is a shift in younger people to be more “chronically online” as they are now more familiar with being connected through a phone and digital platforms (Livni 2025). Participants in this study described even having to limit their usage, referring to social media as addictive and consuming (Wachs 2023). The influence of technology on the brain, especially before the age of 25, is still being widely studied as it has rapidly grown more in the past decade than society as seen in any other innovation before. However short the isolation may have seemed, there are prolonging effects on the younger generations' mind society is directly experiencing.

In brief, the COVID-19 pandemic was a leading factor in the decline of third spaces, exponentially diminishing their value. Tense compounding economic, technological, and social factors all were disrupted at a single point in time leading to the loss of a foundational social power. The pandemic not only decreased physical availability but also reshaped social habits in

the younger generation permanently. Society is becoming more transactional, more lonely, and more angry. The social landscape is disappearing as community engagement is no longer upheld and the practice of exchanging ideas, culture, and knowledge are disappearing. However, design presents a meaningful opportunity to begin addressing these challenges. Intentionally, human design can serve as the first step toward rebuilding the space where human connection can occur. Designers can use their expertise and knowledge of creating environments that encourage gathering and promote a sense of belonging to defend against the growing isolation that is occurring in a modern, post-pandemic society. The solution may not be immediate, however, the reintroduction of thoughtfully designed spaces may offer a powerful starting point in restoring the social landscape.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

In order to create a successful third space, it is fundamental to look at design theories that are grounded in how people experience and connect with their environments. Place Attachment Theory, Biophilia Theory, and Environmental Affordance Theory all consider different social design aspects that can encourage long-term engagement with the space and inform guided design decisions into building for the new generation.

Place Attachment Theory was first developed by Irwin Altman and Setha Low. This concept analyzes how humans form emotional bonds with the spaces around them. Originally, environmental behavior was based on what could be observed in a person's actions and spatial uses, however, scholars like Altman and Low began to recognize the importance of the subconscious or subjective experience. This applies to memory, emotion, and shaping of human relationships in place (Altman & Low 1992). Ideas such as place identity, belonging, and groundedness are compounded into one environment in which an individual can respond

accordingly to the value an area may bring to them (Altman & Low 1992). Specifically, they stress the importance of how to enhance and create repeated experiences, social interaction, and meaning into one's physical environment. It is explicitly important in place-making that physical attributes not only engage the community surroundings, but also implement community practices and trusting existing frameworks in place (The Center for Cultural Development 2020). Fostering that engagement and emotional investment then implementing learned factors of social connection evolves the overall final design outcome (The Center for Cultural Development 2020). Whether that be through workshops, surveys, or ongoing participation, creating that sense of ownership towards a space will not only deepen a user's attachment to the space but deepen the community identity and strengthen those weak ties. (Altman & Low 1992).

Altman and Low identify four main factors that maintain a person's bond to a place: biological, environmental, psychological, and sociocultural process (Altman & Low 1992). Biological factors suggest that there are particular settings that may inherently support a human's comfort. Environmental factors expand on this by emphasizing that the physical characteristics, whether it be spatial layout, resources, or conditions, will apply to the patterns of use and influence the individual experience (Altman & Low 1992). Psychological factors then play on the emotions associated with the physical. The ability to encourage a repeated experience in a space or create memorable life events and routine are what ties identity, comfort, and personal meaning for a user (Altman & Low 1992). This is not suggesting that one size fits all but rather that there are subconscious strategies that we can use to influence one's mind into lingering or providing security. Finally, sociocultural factors are becoming the collective hearth of the individual psychological factors (Altman & Low 1992). This is tied to the collective practices that shape attachment through a means of community activities, cultural norms, and reflectance

of a group identity (Altman & Low 1992). The strategic use of those elements can either support or deflect the development of said attachment over time.

Complementing this concept is Biophilia Theory. This was an idea introduced by Edward O. Wilson discusses a human's innate sense or drive towards naturalistic environments (Wilson 1984). This concept is derived from humanity's evolutionary biology and deep rooted sense of survival that has been interlocked with an environment. The need to thrive. Early human habitation was shaped by our physical needs which included access to water, vegetation, and natural barriers for protection (Parmar 2020). In modern day, this translates into the term "biophilic design" where designers implement these familiar elements to support a user's comfort and overall psychological health (Xing et al. 2025). There has been heavy research on this idea that supports the fact that natural interventions have been directly correlated to reducing stress, improving cognitive performance, and even mitigating issues such as sick building syndrome (Xing et al. 2025). This shows that interacting with the natural world is not only a preference, but a biological need (Wilson 1984). In the context following the COVID-19 pandemic, such design provides a way to establish this restorative comfort that people need from a space and encourage the exploration and engagement of others.

Evolutionary preferences are highly evident in this theory as certain spatial structures are configured around how humanity used to survive in the early days. The concept of Prospect and Refuge Theory falls under the umbrella that is biophilia. The desire to have observation of surroundings while simultaneously having access to protection or some sort of enclosure is linked to our ancestral environments in savannah landscapes. Early humans benefitted from elevated views across open terrain while remaining near sheltering elements like trees or rock formations (Appleton 1984). Design-wise, this translates to integration of spatial strategies such

as having layered environments, semi-enclosed seating areas, overlooks, and natural views. Additionally, the idea of risk-peril comes from humans' tendency to want to have control over their surroundings, especially in moments of stress and tension (Wilson 1984). This translates to spatial strategies that include heights, edges, or possible moving elements that can create excitement without risking the comfort. The environment feels more alive and freeing.

James J. Gibson's Environmental Affordance Theory is also a great addition to the framework that creates a third place as it provides a means of how individuals perceive and interact with their environments. Affordances in this case is defined as what the environment provides in opportunities for action and potential constraints (Gibson 1979). Simply, it is the relationship between a user and their surroundings as they exist within it. For example, a flat surface affords walking or standing but only in relation to the body operating within it (Gibson 1979). This shows that perception is not only about what an individual subconsciously picks up through stimuli but what an individual can gain from possibilities integrated within an environment. This model is particularly important because it separates perception from meaning and instead directly acts through available information. A designer can try their best to influence the cognitive, however, visually cues can just as well construct meaning (Gibson 1979). Individuals entering a space are not observing it but rather calculating what actions are immediately possible, therefore, there is a dual tool a designer can possess when making informed spatial structuring. Environments can encourage certain actions that highlight safety, comfort, and interaction but also discourage others such as exclusion and dangers (Gibson 1979).

Affordances also explain why certain environments perceived to be third spaces fail to function as meaningful. Community centers, parks, and cafes are not inherently social through physical structure, however, they can become one through what affordances they may provide

such as seating arrangements, lighting, noise levels, and more. This perception can extend beyond objects and include social interactions, where other people afford complex behaviors such as communication, cooperation, or conflict (Gibson 1979).

### **Case Studies**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, society has been thrown into disarray. People seem angrier, distrust is forming, and everything has become more expensive. We are experiencing a social divide encouraging a culture of animosity and tenseness, and yet, there are still some third spaces that thrive. It becomes increasingly important as a designer to examine how these gathering environments counteract such egregious trends rather than focusing solely on the loss of such spaces. Looking into spaces such as the Hope Royal Botanic Gardens, second place, and third place, one could analyze how these environments create a place that intrigues people, garners connection, and uses their own structural framework ergo making a humanistic atmosphere.

The Hope Royal Botanical in Kingston, Jamaica demonstrates how with accessibility, outstanding environmental design, and community-centered infrastructure a vibrant third space such as this can thrive alongside the modern social landscape. It was first established in 1873 as a colonial area and over time it has evolved into a large, elaborate garden. Spanning about 200 acres, the garden supports a wide range of activities which include recreation, education, and social interaction. Attractions in the area include a plant nursery, multiple historical and modern gazebos, ponds, sculptures, and themed garden areas such as the Sunken Garden and Peace Garden (HRBG 2023). There are various spatial experiences allowing for an array of activities a user could choose from. The area is welcoming as their multifaceted functions allow for one space to support walking, relaxing, observing, and socializing; in fact, connecting these activities

is a continuous walking path throughout the site (HRBG 2023). Not only can the users explore an array of functions an area may have to offer, but engagement in spontaneous interaction is possible as the path gives visibility to the whole site and how others are functioning within the space. Furthermore, the gardens highly promote their sustainability and education initiatives becoming a site of learning and cultural exchange. There are recycling programs, energy-efficient initiatives, and plant conservation efforts which aim to not only conserve the local biodiversity but educate the community as well (Green Globe 2024). Guided tours allow the visitors to meaningfully learn about the environment around them and support their social initiatives for helping mental health in individuals. Connection is strengthened by promoting the responsibility of supporting the Earth (Green Globe 2024). The combination of programmed activities along with their more informal uses solidify the gardens as a social anchor in the community that encourages lingering and exchange.

The Hope Botanical Gardens achieves many aspects of a third place. For one, the area is quite accessible as the gardens are free and open to the public removing that financial barrier that limits participation. Regardless of economic status, users are encouraged to visit the area and spend their leisure time there. Additionally, transportation is accessible with many bus routes available or for many the park is in walking distance (Jamaica Observer 2024). This makes the area inclusive as it is and a widely used community space. Beyond that, the environmental qualities of the area support a user's mental well-being. Being that it is inherently in nature, the green space supports the Biophilia Theory which appeals to humanity's affinity for natural spaces, therefore, reducing stress and improving our cognitive well-being. This is valuable in a post-pandemic society where declining mental health and social fatigue are more prominent than ever. The gardens also integrate an array of local vegetation, water features, and shaded seating

areas creating a serene atmosphere (nTravo 2021). These areas align with Prospect and Refugee Theory as the layout combines expansive sunny areas for observation with security spots such as tree canopies and overhangs. The gardens support both solitude and socialization, allowing individuals to choose how they engage with the space depending on their needs at a given time (HRBG 2023). By remaining free, accessible, environmentally rich, and socially engaging, the gardens serve as a model for how third spaces can be designed for community health and reconnection.

As large scale social and spatial trends contribute to the decline of third spaces, examining how modern environments successfully establish a sense of community is equally important. This can be found in one of the main breweries in Fort Collins, CO named New Belgium Brewing Company, a social hub that demonstrates how interior design programming can create a thriving third place atmosphere. Originally founded in 1991 by Kim Jordan, she was a social worker who saw the inequities in the community and sought to address them in this company (New Belgium Brewing Company 2025). They believe in a Human Powered Business model in which engaging a diverse, equitable, and truly environment that prioritizes the well being of their communities is what creates a “positive ripple effect that benefits everyone” (New Belgium Brewing Company 2025). Since 2021, they have annually achieved a perfect score on the Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equality Index and the Equality 100 Award (New Belgium Brewing Company 2025). Today, it is now one of the most recognized craft breweries in the United States and produces a sense of collectiveness amongst local Fort Collins residents giving them not only a gathering space but also a shared community.

One of the most interesting characteristics of this space is how effectively it integrates Ray Oldenburg’s concept of the “regular”. This is largely achieved not only through an array of

spatial and interpersonal design strategies. One example of this is through their employees and their ability to engage with patrons in a way that reinforces a sense of belonging. They seem to blur the lines of staff and guests and instead verify that users do not feel out of place or awkward in the environment. They perform in this “regular” role and are allowed to be amicable and more informal than typical staff would be (Oldenburg 1989). Similarly, the bar itself is a central anchor in the social value of the space. While most of the areas surrounding the bar are flexible and can accommodate various activities, the bar encourages interaction between patrons and makes the space feel familiar. This can be attributed to design strategies that psychologically calms a person in unfamiliar territory such as personalized decor and hand-drawn graphics, warm lighting, and an circulating layout that invites lingering and conversation. Additionally, the variety of spatial zones that surround the bar area function to offer different levels of engagement. Although the interiors are open-plan, participation feels optional through design details such as flexible seating. Ranging from communal tables to more intimate corners, users can choose their levels of interactions and can still achieve spontaneous engagement. Therefore, this space also achieves a feature of being a “leveler” being another key Oldenburg characteristic (Oldenburg 1989). Spatial hierarchies are minimized and individuals can occupy the space comfortably regardless of background.

There is an outdoor space that strengthens the brewery’s image as a modern day third place by its ability to expand those opportunities for spontaneous interaction. This space supports many activities including but not limited to: casual lounging, yoga classes, line-dancing class, and general community gatherings. Many of these events as well are free and open to the public making the space accessible and reducing the pressure of purchasing. A food truck is available outside as well for an optional food choice in the space for customers. This balances the line

between its commercial and non-commercial criteria of being able to support the inclusivity of the environment and still sustain business management as well.

From a theoretical perspective, New Belgium Brewery aligns with key environmental psychology principles that can elevate a third place and increase its chances of succeeding. Firstly, the concept of place attachment being evident in the way regular patrons can develop emotional connections to the space through positive experiences and social interactions (Low & Altman 1992). Biophilic elements as well are incorporated throughout the area through natural daylight, greenery, and an outdoor area option within the space. Prospect and Refuge Theory is integrated within the adaptable spatial layout with both socially engaging zones and more reflective zones (Appleton 1984). Additionally this aligns with principles in Environmental Affordance Theory, providing multiple opportunities for engagement without imposing them. Overall, New Belgium Brewing Company demonstrates how a place rooted in human centered design can counteract the social fragmentation we are experiencing today by having a business rooted in human connection and belonging.

As urban environments develop, it is important to understand how modern third spaces are implemented into cities as well. One great example can be found in the Amazon Spheres in Seattle, Washington. This space is a multi-story, glass-enclosed structure that encompasses thousands of plant species, however, its main function is a work environment for Amazon employees. The project was developed in response to the highly metropolitan environment surrounding it causing stress for the workers in the high-paced environment, in return, the architects implemented informed design decisions through E.O. Wilson's Biophilia theory (NBBJ 2018). By integrating biophilic elements into the design, the architects succeeded at reducing workers' stress, enhancing their cognitive performance, and promoting their creativity

in projects and design (ArchDaily 2019). The Amazon Spheres not only support social interaction and well-being amongst the employees, but it also opens up to the public on the weekends giving the area a community centered aspect providing a range of informal gathering spaces for collaboration, relaxation, and social engagement (ArchDaily 2019).

An intriguing characteristic of the Amazon Spheres is the environment's ability to shape behavior and interaction through spatial experience. The architectural form consists of three glass domes held together by a steel structure which allows for daylight to naturally come through the area and provide overall transparency. This creates a memorable experience as it forms a sort of ethereal experience between the light and the plant life. The circulation as well is very organized and non-linear allowing for users to navigate the space freely and encourage exploration. This is brought about by design feature elements that include stairs, bridges, suspended walkways, and more areas for lingering. The configuration is comprised of multiple layers that diminish work hierarchy and allow the user to use the space as they wish. There are multiple opportunities for different types of work forms which include collaborative work areas, quiet retreat spaces, and informal lounges. Social activities in the space can range from spontaneous conversation to individual reflection.

The architects themselves took pride in how heavily the design was based in Biophilia Theory and other evidence based design strategies (NBBJ 2018). Within the Spheres, there is the incorporation of over 400 plant species, controlled humidity levels, and natural light, all of which contribute to a restorative and stimulating environment (Amazon, 2018). Additionally, the organic form of the design, the multiple textures brought into the space, and the living systems all created a rich sensory environment that contrasts with what a traditional office space may look like (ArchDaily 2019). Prospect and Refuge Theory is heavily emphasized in the elevated

walkways and multiple overlook points (Appleton 1984). There are many secluded seating areas and dense plant zones that open up to a larger space that provide retreat for users (ArchDaily 2019). The zones within the building reflect a higher standard of design that appeals to a fluid and interconnected spatial experience that brings a new meaning to what movement could look like. Overall, the Amazon Spheres address critical issues that correlate with urban environments and individual fatigue. By using natural elements to contrast the urban environment and creating adaptive spaces that engage wonder and exploration, this space becomes a monumental place in Seattle that the community can interact with.

### **Conclusions and Findings**

According to the research above, there is a clear consistency revealing modern society's evolving role in perception and necessity of third spaces. The literature provided establishes that third spaces are essential for establishing environments that support community, social cohesion, and wellbeing, however, we as a contemporary society are not utilizing nor producing them enough resulting in a loss of connection, belonging, and other basic survival needs (Oldenburg 1989). This significant misalignment between the theoretical ideal of these spaces and their current accessibility, usability, and relevance has particularly affected the younger generation and the way they approach social matters (Putnam 2000). These shifting patterns in social engagement are important to evaluate and analyze as standard spaces currently are failing to provide this basic priority to modern day social shifts.

Across the selected case studies, there has been strong emphasis on how an atmosphere prioritizes certain needs of some users and how that engagement is therefore utilized and afforded as a means for social interaction and prolonged occupation. The Hope Botanical Gardens offers highly expansive and natural landscapes that offer accessible spaces and open

environments giving way for leisure, reflection, and community engagement (HRBG 2023). Similarly, New Belgium Brewing Company is highly programmed towards creating a comfortable social environment; in fact, it begins at the very root implementing human-centered business design that aims to promote employee bonding (New Belgium Brewing Company 2025). This in turn applies to Ray Oldenburg's principle, "the regulars", that establishes the tone of the space and how it can comfortably invite newcomers making everyone feel welcomed, highly produced through a friendly and human environment (Oldenburg 1989). The Amazon Spheres study represented how certain design theories, such as Prospect and Refuge Theory, Biophilia Theory, and Place Attachment Theory, when considered and thoughtfully implemented, it can create an experience and moment for the user that encourages them to linger and continue to come back to a place (NBBJ 2018). Each space finds a way to cater design to the human experience and make the users feel comfortable and welcomed in a society or atmosphere.

A key design element found in all of these precedent studies is the integration of biophilic elements as a central component of success. As society evolves, we are currently seeing a big trend towards implementing greenery and natural daylight in indoor environments (Wilson 1984). Vegetation, water, daylight, and organic materials are repeatedly seen to create psychologically restorative environments which retrospectively invites social aspects and creates a healing space. In all three case studies, incorporation of nature does not solely operate as an aesthetic function, but it encourages lingering, interaction, and engagement with the user's surroundings (Wilson 1984). This was also thoroughly seen through the survey conducted as most users considered recreation, parks, outdoor spaces, and hiking trails as their "third space". Indoor areas are no longer meeting typical user standards anymore. It is critical to consider how

natural elements can be brought into a space in a way that supports the user and building operations.

Despite the success of these case studies, there have been limitations in their everyday relevance and accessibility. Users of these spaces often expressed that while the environments were socially engaging and embracing, the spaces often were hard to integrate into a daily routine or were not available. Respondents of the survey similarly expressed how while they enjoyed their spaces they considered a “home away from home”, they would only visit these areas once in a while and often had a goal when visiting. This reveals that there is fundamental tension between aspirational third spaces and accessible third spaces. For example, the Amazon Spheres do provide a beautiful and immersive environment, but access is largely restricted, limiting its function as a true public third space. Similarly, the botanical gardens offer open and restorative environments, but they do not always support frequent use due to location, scale, or programming. New Belgium Brewery is very welcoming and encourages interaction, however, the location makes it hard to access without a car and it is not within a walkable distance of most places.

The survey issued further shows how vast the generational differences in how third spaces are perceived and utilized. Younger respondents reported a higher reliance on digital platforms for social interaction and often prefer it for its convenience and accessibility. However, they also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of meaningful connection in these environments, reinforcing the idea that digital spaces cannot fully replicate the benefits of physical third spaces (Wachs 2023). Older respondents contrastingly demonstrated a stronger preference for physical environments. They more so associated third spaces with routine, familiarity, and community presence. This divergence highlights the need for third spaces that not only can bridge physical

and social gaps, but accommodate the behaviors of the younger generation as they report not feeling connected to community or place in modern society.

The impact of COVID-19 has highly compounded these challenges that third spaces are facing. The pandemic extremely disrupted these physical gathering spaces shifting society momentarily towards digital interaction. This proceeded to establish altered patterns of social engagement in the younger generation; additionally, many businesses were not able to withstand the economic and cultural barriers contributing to the decline and inaccessibility of these third spaces. Many young survey respondents noted that spaces they used to frequently visit such as cafes, breweries, and entertainment venues often require financial participation, limiting their inclusivity and promoting consumption (Rao 2024). Research similarly indicates that the loss of accessible third spaces during this period contributed to increased social isolation and declining mental health (Bartik et al 2020). Survey responses reflect this shift, with many participants reporting decreased comfort in social environments and a reduced frequency of engagement in public spaces.

The redefinition of these third spaces are highly important as these spaces are essential to society's infrastructure. They promote accessibility, inclusivity, and deliver that basic human need for connection and socialization. There remains a critical need to translate these qualities into environments that are integrated into everyday life and accessible to a broader population.

### **Capstone Project Analysis and Further Research**

The capstone project I have developed is all a direct response to the gaps identified through case study analysis, survey findings, and through literature review. While precedents demonstrated the potential for immersive, human-driven environments, they reveal limitations in trying to define a third space that achieves Ray Oldenburg's standards. My response is to

propose an activity center or community center that reimagines the third space as a community-centered environment that is non-institutional in character and instead emphasizes warmth, comfort, and everyday usability. This project seeks to create a space that attracts people, creates core memories, and is grounded in the human experience.

One of the drivers of this design will be the translation of outdoor qualities into the interior environment. This is grounded in the fact that survey findings highly conveyed a strong user preference for outdoor spaces due to their familiar qualities; in fact, this further supports E.O Wilson's biophilia theory that humans evolutionarily prefer things that perceive to their natural environments due to their ability to improve mental health and wellbeing (Wilson 1984). Therefore, to address this the project will integrate biophilic design strategies embedded into the interior setting. Water feature elements, local vegetation, utilizing the site's natural daylighting, and incorporating natural airflow are all design elements aimed to be included in the project.

Spatially, the project will draw on the observed precedent studies and how they used centralized atriums, hidden nooks, and continuous circulation systems to navigate the space and bring the community to a core node in the area. The design central system will act as a visual and social anchor within the space that engages connectivity and conceivable orientation. Circulation is connected by a continuous "hiking trail" that will wrap around the building. This idea is rooted in survey respondents highly preferring hiking trails for social interaction and most view them as a third space they could highly access. This intervention is intended to encourage movement throughout the space, enable exploration into other programs, and provide spontaneous interaction among the users. This design will highly play on the Environmental Affordance Theory providing moments of prospect, refuge, mystery, risk, and more (Gibson 1984). This

will create a memorable experience for users and enhance the spatial engagement. Users will be subtly encouraged to interact with the space and encounter one another along shared paths.

Programmatically, the project will incorporate modern familiarities and aspects that can show how third spaces can evolve for the users that so desperately need them today. The diverse range of activities will appeal to multiple generations and play on a users' interest whether they are extroverted or introverted. Survey findings showed that there was an importance for users that the design consisted of flexible and inclusive forms of active and passive engagement. Some survey respondents discussed how they preferred areas that had quieter activities such as art and games, therefore, I wanted to design spaces for them as well in this activity center that would incorporate their needs as well. This further reinforces the idea that third spaces should support a wide spectrum of activities, more importantly, these spaces should not be isolated but rather interconnected to allow for an exchange of ideas and provide unique opportunities. From the precedent studies and the survey, I have cultivated programming that consists of traditional and contemporary forms of engagement within the space that include: pickle ball courts, arts and creative studios, esports gaming areas, and more. This aligns with the concept of affordances, where the environment itself suggests and encourages certain behaviors that then supports organic interaction and community formation (Gibson 1979).

Materiality and atmosphere play a role in reinforcing the sense of place attachment a user may feel to the design or project (Altman & Low 1992). Sleek and highly polished finishes would make the space feel impersonal or institutional which would not appeal to Ray Oldenburg's characteristics of a third place. Instead, the design would prioritize warm, tactile materials that promote familiarity and also give the space its own sense of branding. By creating a space that feels somewhat lived-in and adaptable, this can support an emotional connection the

user may feel to the space and allow them to form a personal meaning or memory to the space (Altman & Low 1992). The design encourages users to develop a sense of ownership and belonging which strengthens their connection to the community.

Accessibility is highly important to consider in the project, both in terms of physical location and in programmatic inclusivity. The selected site chosen should incorporate traditional transportation networks that can allow users to incorporate this building into their daily routine. This decision is a response to literature reviews and survey findings that discuss that users find the most trouble with time constraints and transportation as a barrier to engagement. Building the project in a highly accessible, and preferably walkable location would increase visitation and allow for a foundational use in people's lives.

Additionally, the programmatic strategies incorporated into the project will appeal to the primary users by providing opportunities for economic and social participation. The importance of weak-tie relationships in an individual's community network is vital, therefore, student employment, small-scale entrepreneurship, and community led programming will be intuitive that will take place in the design (Granovetter 1973). This will not only allow the space to move past passive participation but also make it a space of natural social connection, exchange, and learning.

Third spaces are the dying power of our society. This research demonstrates how critical these spaces are to the vitality of our communities. As society navigates the challenges that come with increased reliance on digitalization, economic pressures, and shifting social behaviors, there becomes a moment where humanity can gather under the one fact that we all crave connection. It is a basic human need. Designers, planners, and policymakers should prioritize inclusivity, affordability, and adaptability in our environments to cater to the broader population. Everyone

deserves to be heard and cherished. The shift away from community-centered design to more commercialized models is fragmenting society today. Through intentional design and continued research, there is potential to redefine the third space and revitalize the community as a whole.

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