

LIBRARIES WITH LATTES: THE NEW THIRD PLACE

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The increased use of the term third place derives from the research of urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg and his 1999 book 'A great good place'. He writes about the importance of public gathering places and why these places are essential to community and public life. Although beverages are not crucial in developing a third place, the enjoyment of conversation over a cup of coffee certainly adds to the experience. Due to their ability to attract a large and diverse range of users and the prominent position they hold in many communities, public libraries are creating a sense of community. Their cafés appear to be an integral part of their development as a new third place.

Public libraries are in a unique position to become the next great good places, places where people can freely gather and interact. As described by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg,¹ a place distinct from home and work – a third place.

Public libraries are the most heavily used Australian public buildings² and are in the distinctive position of attracting a diverse cradle to grave user range through a variety of services. In an era when people have become increasingly dislocated from family, friends and the traditional social structures such as churches, recreational clubs and political parties, libraries have been given the opportunity to become a community focal point. Bryson, Usherwood and Proctor describe the library as being

...at any one time a meeting place, a learning resource and a comfortable and relaxing public space. The buildings that are well designed and managed offer an array of resources that enable people and groups to establish relationship, carry on conversations, exchange ideas, and engage the life of the mind.³

Kate Meyrick of the Australian Horney Institute and presenter at the 2007 Australian public library conference suggests that a key component of a third place is availability of food and drink, especially good coffee. She goes further by listing ten practical ways for a library to be recognised as a third place⁴

- create a brand
- respond to community identity
- allow for planned and chance encounters
- lead with programming
- don't dumb down the vision due to lack of funds
- aggregate and cluster
- make a street cluster a destination and cultural precinct
- encourage discovery

- always open and always on
- fantastic design and fabulous people
- if nothing else is achieved, make sure you have the best coffee in town.

If Meyrick is correct, then coffee shops will play a vital role in helping libraries to build communities and create the new third place. With her comments in mind, it is interesting to see the concept of integrating coffee shops in libraries has increased significantly over the last few years, with a major influence being the emergence of superbookstores like Borders tantalising their customers with lattes and providing what retail marketers describe as an 'experience'. Refreshments are now considered an integral part of the book browsing experience with more libraries building coffee shops or vending machines into their consumer profiles.⁵

Social capital

The concept of social capital has been debated for years, with many high profile social scientists developing theories about it. Political scientist Robert Putnam states that

... social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called civic virtue. The difference is that social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.⁶

According to Putnam, some of the positive attributes of social capital include mutual support, cooperation, trust and institutional effectiveness whilst reducing intolerance, cultural superiority and corruption. In simple terms, social interaction builds communities, enables people to commit to each other and creates a social network, benefiting society as a

whole. In his 2000 book *Bowling alone* Putnam draws on evidence, including 500,000 interviews, to show that individuals now belong to fewer organisations, no longer know their neighbours, meet with friends less often and even socialize with family less.

The World Bank provides a similar view on social capital

...the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions... Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions that underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together.⁷

The library's role in building social capital

Recent research⁸ undertaken by the Local Government Association of Queensland relating to the role of local government and social capital identifies social capital as associated with concepts such as community, trust and networks. In simple terms this research suggests social capital is about institutions and relationships that shape the quality and quantity of society's social interactions. It is community engagement, partnering and collaboration which are all evidence of faith in building social capital.

A comprehensive 2005 project undertaken by the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network and managed by the State Library of Victoria, *Libraries/ building / communities*⁹ highlighted that public libraries are widely considered to be extremely important cultural, economic and social institutions. The roles they perform include the collection and dissemination of information and the provision of comfortable and convenient places for people to read, learn and socialise. Their physical spaces form meeting spaces for the wider community. Free at the point of use they create a sense of an equitable society, are highly valued by members of community they serve and draw a diverse range of people.

The Victorian report was the culmination of a landmark project taking more than two years to complete and is the first comprehensive Australian study looking at the value public libraries bring to their communities. The study included every public library in Victoria and sought the views of nearly 10,000 people.

As confirmed by the *Libraries / building / communities* study, public libraries make major contributions to communities by

- providing free internet access and other related information technology resources
- educating and assisting people to locate information thus creating better informed communities
- providing specially designed programs that encourage lifelong learning and literacy within the community
- building connection within the community, between individuals, groups and government.

All of these attributes contribute to the building of social capital within a community and are indicative of how libraries are instrumental in facilitating a sense of community.

In Christchurch New Zealand the belief of the city council is that libraries are the cornerstone of the community, with the chief executive of the council Dr Lesley McTurk cited as saying that 'Libraries are at the hub of our communities'. This commitment from council members has enabled library administrators to achieve so much over recent years, including the building of five new libraries.

Moen¹⁰ further adds that it is not all about architecture – it is about what happens within the building that is important. When designing buildings it is crucial to understand how the community will use the building, either as individuals or as groups, to build social capital within Christchurch.

McTurk states

In Christchurch city we believe libraries are about more than books and buildings. Libraries are at the hub of our communities. No longer places where everyone has to be quiet, today's libraries are busy information centres focusing on customers and offering a place to meet friends for coffee, use the net and of course find the latest thriller. The benefits to our communities are well worth the ongoing significant investment. In the future we anticipate even more innovation in the way libraries help create inclusive communities, and are centres for lifelong learning, fun and creativity.¹¹

As Christchurch has shown, libraries can become the hub of a community – much more than a place to borrow reading material. Libraries have moved beyond the role of repositories of information to assume that of facilitators of a wide range of resources and programs. It is a combination of books, magazines, DVDs, databases, computer access and community programs which help to build social capital and community engagement.¹²

Third places: anchors of community life

The term third place is being used increasingly to describe the building of social capital in an environment distinct from home and work. Ray Oldenburg's *The great, good place* is the most influential work to date explaining why third places are crucial for civil society.¹³ Although other writers comment on the concept of a third place, all evidence is based on Oldenburg's theory.

Third places and the importance of informal life have been an integral part of great civilisations for centuries. It has also been an important part of American culture. The inns and saloons transformed colonial society. Later it became the soda fountains, drugstores, diners and churches that became the social anchors of community life. Over the years the local library has become another important foundation of local communities, serving as a third place.¹⁴

Oldenburg suggests the attractor of a third place is not necessarily the number of seats, the variety of food and drink served, parking availability, prices or anything else supplied by management. It is what other users or customers supply that lures people to a third place. A great building is just a building and a place is just a space unless the people are right to make it a living space. These people are the regulars who give the place its character and set the tone, mood and manner.

Oldenburg describes the third place as being typically plain. Third places are commonly older establishments which have been commandeered by a group of people who want to linger over good company. Although the build form of a third place may be subdued, the mood of a third place is always playful. This spirit of play adds to the playground character and encourages people to stay longer and also urges them to return.

Oldenburg adds

The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in other spheres. Through a radically different kind of setting from a home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends... They are the heart of a community's social vitality, the grass roots of democracy.¹⁵

In its quest for good urban design, Australia's Gold Coast City Council describes 15 qualities of urban design it uses to create good places. These qualities include

- variety
- public and private sides
- adaptability and versatility
- human scale and richness
- qualities of edges
- connectivity
- sustainability
- urban greenscape
- safety
- space and space making.¹⁶

These qualities are about legibility, accessibility and the quality of the edges of spaces which are easily accessed when on foot, explains Gold Coast City architect Phillip Follent.¹⁷ The concepts are considered part of the council's development plan.

Libraries as place

Public libraries belong to everyone and are increasingly becoming places for social interaction, with areas set aside as meeting spaces, training rooms and art galleries. All of these activities add to the attraction of the library as a destination suggests William Sannwald in the book *Planning the modern public library building*¹⁸ considered by the American Library Association to be a worthy resource for any local authority planning a new public library.

Library Garden blogger and US librarian, Peter Bromberg¹⁹ suggests that by the very nature of what they do, libraries offer people a third place, a place different from home or work, a place where people can come to learn, think, explore, play, reflect and socialise.

To remain relevant and sustainable it is important for libraries to focus on strategies to ensure libraries are destinations of choice, and not just a place.

In order to create the right library spaces and places West Australian library manager Rebecca Moore, at a 2006 national library conference, suggested libraries should be colocated with other agencies.²⁰ This can be achieved by locating the library with a bookstore, café, playgroup, art gallery, museum or child care facility etc. Libraries should be seen as the hub of the community and with an ageing population and an increasing number of people living alone this concept will become more important.

US research indicates libraries have become anchors in major urban and retail redevelopment projects with branch libraries appearing more frequently in malls and housing subdivisions. Libraries have become destinations and attract a large number of visitors. The destination concept has provided libraries with the opportunity to act as catalysts in cultural tourism and economic development – so much so that planning authorities are now including libraries in revitalisation projects in low socioeconomic areas and in other urban development plans.²¹

Research undertaken in a South Australian public library indicates many users consider the library to be a great good place. They appreciate the library as a peaceful and relaxing place to spend time. The fact that it simply is there appears important to many, whilst some value the pleasant atmosphere, the spaciousness and the warmth. Others describe it as being a meeting place and a safe haven, welcoming and open to all who wish to visit.²²

US architect Jeffrey Scherer²³ highlights some very valid points for libraries to embrace if they are serious about creating a third place

- the library is a central place and is the only single political agent that can effect change at all levels. The neutrality a library has is an important tool to use in creating a third place
- the library is an agent for the four elements of an individual's life: live, work, play and learn.

What can be learnt from bookstores

Superbookstores are relatively new to Australia and very little has been written on the

Australian perspective of what libraries can learn from these marketing machines. However the US has embraced the concept for some time. Businesses such as Borders are creating environments that are comfortable and offer a sense of community.

The willingness to adopt a community centre approach has dramatically increased trade in bookstores. Cafés are now very important elements of many retail centres and are extremely successful in the superbookstores, with Chapter 21 and Borders leading the way.

The major US bookstores have been forced to change in order to survive. A decade ago food and drink was taboo – there were limited places to sit and loitering was definitely discouraged. Surviving bookstores have now replaced their no food signs with cafés and increased floor space to allow for comfortable chairs, study tables and information desks.²⁴

Libraries can learn and take inspiration from these bookstores. They can become much more inviting by serving coffee and other beverages, providing entertainment through programs and encouraging users to stay.²⁵

Commercial enterprises rely on a financial bottom line to survive. A library's bottom line, however, is encouraging more people to use the facility. A library, for the many benefits it provides to society and individuals, can never be overused. It is here that cafés play a vital role. It is common practice for US libraries to adopt a nonprofit attitude to cafés. The profit for the library is the return visits of users and their comfort and convenience.²⁶ Another noncash related bonus is that the library can benefit from the lucrative partnerships which can be forged through involvement with large coffee retailers, with instore promotions and cash sponsorships.²⁷

Cafés in libraries

For decades consuming food or drink in libraries has generally been discouraged. There has been very little research on the subject of using food as an enticement to use them. Food associated with children's activities and special events has been considered acceptable, but usually library managers have had an aversion towards eating in the library. This seems to have stemmed from concerns about spillage, cleaning, food fights and insect infestation.²⁸ However the reality is that eating and drinking

in libraries has always happened surreptitiously, possibly leading to user discomfort about doing so.

Most of the negative response comes from library staff who suggest libraries should be about providing library resources, not supplying food and drink. There also appears to be a hesitation about libraries becoming competitors to commercial organisations, not to mention the threat of used coffee cups crowding library shelves.²⁹ These comments come from internet blogs, and provide a library staff perspective not normally found in published articles. Increasingly, however, library cafés are becoming an integral part of library design.

Christchurch city libraries, considered by many to be a leader in innovation, established its first integrated café at the new South Library. A decision was made during the early stages of planning to add to the overall vision and to enhance the total experience for users when visiting the library. Library manager Nicki Moen³⁰ is adamant that cafés have helped to promote Christchurch libraries as a community meeting space and a true destination. This is to the extent that users are staying longer in libraries, requiring a reconsideration of parking adequacy.

The manager of Christchurch's Parklands Library, Sally Thompson, explains

Providing a café was an integral part of the vision... with customers being able to consume their purchases anywhere in the building but so far most have opted to remain in the Easy Zone either sitting at the café tables, both inside and out, or on the lovely orange sofas.³¹

Although overall the café concept at Parklands has been a great success, as with all new ventures there are things to learn. Thompson lists the key learning points as

- establishing a clear and detailed lease agreement for the café is vital
- communicating expectations and sharing the overall vision is crucial
- testing assumptions on both sides of the partnership is an advantage. Whilst fluctuations are generally part of library life, for a commercial venture major fluctuations could mean serious financial problems.

San José public libraries in California's Silicon Valley is another group of libraries embracing

the incorporation of cafés. The café proprietor comments on the success of the venture and describes libraries as being 'cool' and an interesting place to be. This comment is reflected by other members of the San José community.³² The City of San José recognises that cafés in libraries can expect low profit margins but encourages new entrepreneurs by offering nominal rent and subsidises some of the operating costs, such as power and water. The library manager considers a café to be part of providing library users with comfortable and welcoming spaces. In San José, libraries are increasingly becoming community gathering places. Coffee is considered a natural way to encourage dialogue between individuals.

In Western Australia, the Geraldton Public Library has effectively incorporated a quality coffee shop for over 25 years – possibly the first in Australia and New Zealand to do so.

In South Australia libraries have also begun to embrace the notion that incorporating a café in the design of a library is good for business. Tea Tree Gully Library is home to Scribes Café and reports an excellent response from users. Library staff suggest this shift has resulted in libraries entering a more retail path, rejecting the stuffy image they once had.³³ This change of image is again reflected by the description of modern libraries as becoming places with funky lounges filled with latte drinking university students and 20 year olds flocking to hear the latest guest speaker at a library literary event.³⁴

Another South Australian library to experience the effect of incorporating a café is Marion. Staff suggest that an increase in loans and usage has occurred primarily due to users being able to enjoy coffee whilst using the library.³⁵ The recently refurbished Findon library has also included a café and an adjoining community lounge area in its new look library, with council representatives hoping the new facility will help to bring a very multicultural community together.³⁶

The State Library of South Australia has also embraced a café culture. Its café blends cafeteria and restaurant functions and although the situation is different because food or drink is not allowed in the library, the atmosphere created is still similar. People can still gather and enjoy a sociable time whilst sharing a coffee, and are still within the greater confines of the library.³⁷

Having food and drink freely available creates a welcoming environment. The sense of smell in creating a positive or negative first impression should not be underestimated, with the smell of coffee often relating to comfort.³⁸ International retail marketing consultant John Stanley believes it is only a matter of time until a major coffee franchise, such as Starbucks, will consider a 1,000 square metre library a market opportunity.³⁹

Conclusion

In his book Oldenburg states that the common feature of any great civilisation or great city is highly distinctive informal public gathering spaces. These include the pavement cafes of Paris, the forum of classical Rome, the many pubs that adorn the streets of London, the piazzas of Florence and the tearooms of Japan. These areas provide a link between the individual and the larger community. He notes that

Life without community has produced, for many, a life style consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle. Social wellbeing and psychological health depend upon community.⁴⁰

The traditional third place described by Oldenburg is the church. This was a safe meeting place for many communities, and was later replaced by the village green. Over time society has found other third places such as the local pub, the corner drugstore and coffee shops. Simply because of what they are and how highly they are used, public libraries are now in the perfect position to become the next great good third place.

An article published by a US organisation dedicated to creating and sustaining public places that build communities, suggests that the core purpose of a public library is the fostering of democratic participation through access to information and ideas. All of the evidence suggests libraries are much more than books, reading rooms and information. Through community partnerships and public programs libraries are converting physical spaces into community places whilst enhancing the civic sphere. The evolving aspects of the library indicate a radical restructuring of their place in society, with the potential to redefine the village green.⁴¹

Creating community is a worthy goal, but is often beyond the capability of any government department. Community happens from

conversations between individuals. Venues for these conversations are often difficult to create. Interesting public spaces provide merely a framework. The daily details are supplied by aware entrepreneurs who understand the importance of community and the concept of providing third places as gathering places for it.⁴²

An article published recently in *Australasian public libraries and information services* suggests that public libraries have not just survived – they have thrived and cemented their position within the community. They have been smart enough to learn from commercial institutions and have not simply relied on supplying a product. They have surveyed their communities, formally and informally, and found a need to go beyond the traditional approach to library services, to target community concerns and needs. They have forged partnerships with other organisations and government agencies to develop services and programs which until now have not been considered core library business.⁴³

The biggest challenge to libraries is consumer stores such as Borders, Starbucks and McDonalds. These stores are aiming to become consumer third places – somewhere to go after work and before home. Libraries are, however, placed perfectly to become the next third place, but the challenge is to create a consumer mindset. To do this library administrators must brand and market themselves well in the local community. Third places are not just about coffee, and they are not simply about branding. They offer much more. In Oldenburg's words

What suburbia cries for are the means for people to gather easily, inexpensively, regularly, and pleasurably – a place on the corner, real life alternatives to television, easy escapes for the cabin fever of marriage and family life that do not necessitate getting into an automobile.⁴⁴

So why should libraries bother with cafés? With some library staff suggesting they create more trouble than they are worth, it may take a brave manager to accept the challenge to provide coffee in the library. Simply by their business, libraries are places where members of the community gather to obtain information in a sociable atmosphere. The goal of any good library manager should be to use this existing social environment to expand on their library's influence in the community. The idea of providing great service, giving people a reason

to spend time in the library and simply for enjoyment is too great an opportunity to disregard. As indicated by two different US writers, cafés inside libraries are helping to create a sense of place and are creating friendly and inviting spaces.^{45,46}

As Australians strive to fill the values gap and restore balance there will be a need to identify ways to satisfy the human herd instinct. This could be through book clubs, eating out, mature education classes and community groups and activities. A paper presented to a Friends of Libraries Australia conference by Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay suggests there is an opportunity for the library to become the new village green, a place where people meet not just to borrow books, but to discuss ideas and topical issues, to participate in community events, to hear authors speak and generally to connect with the world of ideas.⁴⁷ This is good news for public libraries.

Although much of the literature provides a US perspective on libraries as the next third place and the role cafés play in connecting communities, there has been a recent increase in the Australian literature. Australian libraries are changing, with many local authorities recognising the importance of building social capital and accepting that public libraries are in a very good position to build community and social connectivity. Libraries have always been much more than books and reading rooms. Through community partnerships and public programs libraries are now converting their spaces into community places.

Cafés are helping to create these spaces by providing relaxed friendly environments whilst contributing another element to the building of partnerships. If Oldenburg and his fellow researchers are correct, and society thrives on conversation and contact, then libraries are perfectly positioned to become the next great good places.

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