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The Shifting Discourse on Third Places: Ideological Implications *

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Abstract

Within the social sciences, literature on third places attempts to assist in the construction of a social concept of “place”. This notion of a place is an idealization of the bridging space with home and family on one side, and work with the rule-based impersonality of life in mass society, on the other. Like the idea of work-life balance—as seen through the vocabulary of placemaking—third places provide people with a place in which there is a balance between the emotive attachments of home and family and the challenge striving for merit and reward in the marketplace. To date, third places have been treated as a unified construct. This paper makes the case that both the discourse and design models used to make sense of third places are significantly different. After reviewing and placing third-place literature in its historical context, we distinguish communitarian, commercial and digital third places. These three types of places—in both their physical and virtual forms—are important parts of the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Subsequently employing a *cui bono* approach or who benefits framework, we highlight the ways in which ideological points of view imbedded in the varying versions of third places have implications for practice and theory.

Key Terms: Third places; Mass society; Servicescapes; Civil society; Virtual communities; *Cui bono* framework; Ideology

“The Shifting Discourse on Third Places: Ideological Implications”

Introduction

Third places are imbedded in the built environment somewhere between home and work. This enables relationship-building in a third location which brings together the best features of each (Francis, et al., 2012). From a social constructionist conception of place, planners, sociologists and land developers have persisted in asking the question of how to imbed the experience of “community” into the built environment of mass society (Sampson, 1988). Third places as used in the place management and design literature (Ferreira et al., 2017; Rosenbaum et al., 2007), function as public spaces for interaction and to provide a context which enhances sociability, encourages sharing and creates a sense of membership. Third places should not be confused or conflated with the “third sector”. These are carefully designed and curated places—albeit with differing motives—to create a sense of membership and community. Whether they are a physical, face-to-face or online variant, third places imbue one with a sense of significance since it feels like when one is within them not only does “everyone knows one’s name” (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006) but given this satisfying sense of personal significance, one frequently returns (Cheang, 2002). This search for a place in which one experiences a sense of membership and community arises in a historical set of institutional transformations (Blyth, 2002). In these dislocating transitions, movement is from the family-based folk society of the small town to the anonymity of the urban setting as well as from the

impersonal mass society to the global context of online communities. Given these transitions, sociologists and others concerned with the built environment ask why, where and how to design, finance, build and maintain third places. The design, management and continual updating of third places—in the midst of a neighborhood’s evolution resulting in a changing experience of community—provides individuals with a sense of personal involvement. It also revives the supportive and emotive bonds made much more apparent in family-based societies (Long and Perkins, 2007).

While Tonnies (1887) located the idea of “third places” as a socially constructed bridge between *Gemeinschaft* (communal experiences of mutuality and togetherness) and *Gesellschaft* (contractual or rule-based experience), more contemporary thinkers (Hawkins and Ryan, 2013; Williams and Pocock, 2010) imbed third places in varying discourse forms each supported by a different ideological position (Francis et al., 2007). In this discussion, we argue that over time, three variations in the discourse about how, where and why to build, design and operate these bridges between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* have arisen. The three variations on the third place theme—“communitarian”, “commercial” and “digital”—all attempt to harness the idea of community and apply it to the built environment. However, most contemporary work on the design and management of third places assumes an over-arching similarity in third place design and, most pertinent to readers of this journal, an ideological homogeneity.

This paper deconstructs the concept of “third place” so that those employing it understand how and why communitarian third places imbedded in for example, the public library, a community center and an opera society differ from commercial third places built into

the design of local pubs, coffee houses and the children's playroom in your local Ikea store. Moreover, and equally germane, we explore how these in turn differ from digital third places such as Facebook, Instagram. To this end, the work is divided into four parts. The first locates third places within an interdisciplinary literature seeking to ameliorate, particularly through design, the impact of mass society and anonymity prevalent in poorly-designed neighborhoods or urban enclaves (Schmidt-Thome, et al., 2013). Finding one's "niche" and thereby a sense of belonging, draws people to third places with a sense of personal involvement and to some degree, a place for emotional bonds beyond familial ties and the workplace. Then in keeping with our major concern, we turn to the ideological roots of the three variations in this discourse. In the second part, we concentrate on communitarian third places in civil society theory (Seligman, 1995) as a concerted effort to both enhance grassroots participation and deal with those who, if left to their own devices, would become marginalized. In part three, we turn to neo-liberal ideological assumptions (Harvey, 2007) embedded in commercial third spaces particularly on marketing studies highlighting "servicescapes" (Aubert-Gamel and Cova, 1999) and efforts to employ the shape and feel of community involvement as a strategy to enhance business enterprises. Last, we discuss digital third places proliferating on social media within the ideological assumptions of the sharing society (Schor, 2016). In each discussion, the discourse on third places is examined through a framework of *cui bono* or "for whose benefit"? The work concludes with a recognition that as an umbrella concept unattached to its root ideological premises, third places forfeit the characterization needed to both sharpen theory and practice in this vital area of applied design.

What and where are third places?

“Third places” entered the social sciences literature as a stand-alone concept in the 1970’s. In that period, the renewed concerns regarding the problematic growth and expansion of “mass society” (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974) met with the optimistic belief that with the advent of the post-industrial society (Bell, 1976) it would be possible to design a blend of “immaterial” and “concrete” features of the built environment to establish a viable sense of community (Moles and Jacobus, 1988). The concept of third places as a self-conscious form of place making was given the eye catching “third place” label by Oldenburg and Brisset (1982) and popularized by Oldenburg (1989; 2001). The term, third places, caught on because it both links a classical problem in the social sciences (Silver, 1990) to an apparent solution and concretely points out how to design places which both revitalize a sense of community (Hickman, 2013) and create a more livable environment in human settlements.

Oldenburg and those following his lead (Lewicka, 2011; Robinson and Deshano, 2011) built on an early generation of social scientists whose concerns, particularly given the rise of urbanism, posed the question how an individual was to create healthy social and psychological bonds in a context of fleeting relationships with relative strangers. Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) and Louis Wirth’s “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938) capture not only the themes at hand but each frame the problem in an optimistic outlook foreshadowing the social engineering “can do,” optimism of third place literature. Both Simmel and Wirth viewed the emerging mass society as positive and liberating but only if the anonymity of living in dense pockets of relative strangers were humanized. Seventy years later, third place theorists called for places which help those with health (Glover and Parry, 2009) and mental health issues (Curtis, 2010) and provided spaces where individuals could make friends

(Jeffres, et al., 2009), join in with others with whom they felt a kindred spirit (Yuen and Johnson, 2017). Together they create a sense of a neighborhood (Mehata and Bosson, 2010) or a vibrant experience of being a “local” and attached to a place (Waxman, 2006) in the midst of an increasingly “cosmopolitan” and globalized built environment (Lewicka, 2011).

In the tension between the desire to inhabit places where one can act and feel like a “local” and where one can simultaneously experience the challenge of life among strangers in a cosmopolitan setting (Gouldner, 1958; Ossewaarde, 2007) is precisely where one locates third places. They are hybrids: they are the in-between spaces between work and home (Trenteleman, 2009). In Figure 1 we highlight these three variations: the societal context which supports their growth; the basic nature of these socially-constructed third places; and introduce the *cui bono* or “for whose benefit?” framework. The *cui bono* framework is enlarged in Figure 2. Each of these three variations on a third-place theme, demonstrates very different implications for both theory and third place design and management.

Figure 1: Variations on a Third Place Theme (about here)

Communitarian third places are grounded in civil society assumptions (Van Til, 2000). These highlight the importance of special places, designed to improve social conditions by attending to social problems. They are not just “any” social problems. They are not attractive to profit seeking commercial organizations. These “special” places focus on a mission or cause-based “social enterprise” (Defourney and Nyssens, 2007). In a normative sense, this focus on third places—particularly as seen by communitarian advocates (Etzioni, 1995)—benefits or helps to civilize society (Bannerjee, 2001).

From the public library, cancer research center and homeless shelter, communitarian third places employ a governance system (Choudhury and Ahmed, 2002) with three options. The first, the public sector option, communitarian third places rely upon government largesse, and within the ambit of civil society, a social problem orientation. The second, the not-for-profit option, relies on the warm glow and propensity by societal members to give and/or volunteer. The third relies on businesses who in the creation of foundations, philanthropic giving and/or in sponsorships willingly forego immediate profits social benefits. Communitarian third places are cause and/or mission-driven places which, as will become more apparent, purport to benefit society by dealing with the very sort of problems which others see as intractable. The psychological return on investment or the warm glow (Mayo and Tinsley, 2009) of knowing you are part of the solution and not the problem, is the central to the ethos of communitarian third places.

On the other hand, commercial third places are profit driven (see Figure 1). These commercial enterprises unlike those providing communitarian versions, provide personalized services and a climate of sociability or conviviality to customers or clients drawn to carefully managed “servicescapes,” (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003) in order to add to the corporate bottom line. “Servicescape” is a term emerging along interdisciplinary borders where marketing runs parallel to sociology (Rosenbaum, 2005). In designing businesses or portions of a business, one can create a community-like appeal and sense of belonging to a community as a means of both advancing the profit and growth of the business. The ideological drivers shift from the civil society assumptions of community as a feature of civil society motivations to a set of “neoliberal” assumptions driven by the primacy of free market logic. The adjective “neoliberal”

is at play here because those who invest in commercial third places or servicescapes see themselves as compassionate capitalists (Benioff and Southwick, 2004) adding a touch of community in order to attract more clients, better employees and where possible claim tax benefits for contributing public amenities.

Lastly, digital third places harness and augment mobile technology via the Internet to build virtual communities in cyberspace (Soukoup, 2006). Digital places of all sorts push the logic of the neoliberal market for commercial third places into what social scientists call the attention economy (Davenport and Beck, 2013). Specifically, digital places known as “digital third spaces,” are increasingly dependent upon social media. They are frequently discussed in ideological terms as part and parcel of the sharing economy (Matzler, et al., 2015). In the attention economy, what is deemed valuable is not information but information relevance, particularly as measured by the attention given to varying bits of information (Terranova, 2012). In general, successful digital sites or digital third places draw large numbers and use these large numbers (Davenport and Beck, 2000) as is the case with movie production and marketing to attract advertisers, content providers and investors interested in stock market evaluations and/or potential influence of these successful attention getting sites (Beller, 2012). Digital third places specialize. They stress construction of virtual communities via social media which enhance “sharing” and connectivity. Not only do they build viable senses of communal space, they have the potential to solve social problems (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). As the number of social media users grows with virtual communities built on platforms in cyberspace, they enlarge and foster varying forms of sharing and benefits in both its social and economic reach (Graham and Wright, 2014). At present, digital third places promise benefits to users,

content providers, advertisers, owner/mangers and aid in the development of a global, networked version of society.

In the following section, we present a more informed view of the way in which: civil society assumptions are central to communitarian third places; neoliberal market assumptions ground the design logic of commercial servicescapes, and social media and platforms highlight the sharing economy ideology of digital third places. Each of these discussions (see Figure 2) outlines a distinct version of third places with a depiction of who benefits and with what ideological justification.

Communitarian Third Places: Civil Society Assumptions

Central life interest theory (Dubin et al., 1975) points to the tension that arises in mass society as individuals seek to find a middle ground between the sociological forces which divide one's central life interest between work and family. Third place communitarian advocates position these places as a form of attachment or interest as a middle ground (Manzo and Perkins, 2006). This ideological space between home and work in its civil society formulation, calls on government agencies, not-for-profit organizations, churches, temples, mosques, synagogues, prayer halls and socially responsible businesses to design, operate, fund, maintain and/or sponsor communitarian third places. This is a "mission" or a "good cause" driven call. These third places highlight the importance of volunteer participation and open dialogue to create a civil society (Salamon and Anheier 1998). In societies which have a theocentric core, the logic of its calling is put into mission-driven theological terms. In more secular societies, such as the ones we are interested in, the mission and cause-driven communitarian third places

are led by third sector professionals, government agencies and fundraisers mobilizing charities, and those interested in advancing social and cultural causes (Lipsky and Smith, 1989).

In ideological terms, communitarian third places arise in the context of the moral/normative grounds occupied by what social scientists and design-oriented planners refer to as wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are complex, intractable (Hartmann, 2012) and, more often than not, imbedded in controversies (Ritchey, 2011) which call for public input to deal with them. Whether the problem is homelessness, child poverty and climate change or at a more parochial level, the imminent bankruptcy of the symphony, those motivated to take on wicked problems recognize a moral commitment (Wexler, 2009). Without concerted effort to reduce the impact of these persistent problems, advocates of communitarian third places insist that society would become increasingly imperiled (Head, 2008).

In the *cui bono* framework elucidated in Figure 2, wicked problems call for forces of civility (DeGrace and Stahl, 1990) and/or good citizenship (Theiss-Morse, 1993) to rise to the challenge of the persistent social corrosiveness of wicked problems. Civil society theorizes and treats incivility as far more than the manifestation of rudeness or impoliteness (Boyd, 2006). It viewed as a failure to build and support “needed” public places which enhance dialogue, stabilize, fund and maintain bridges between self-interested publics and establish a sense of “the” commons. It is in the idea of the commons, or more realistically the search for it, that one locates communitarian third places. Moreover, in the absence of these civilizing third places, strong and costly forms of societal conflict, desecration, dislocation and escalating social fragmentation set in (Berman, 1997).

In the quest for a civil society, communitarian third places handle two sorts of wicked problems. The first, led by government agencies, not-for-profit organizations, charities and volunteers, focuses on those in dire straits—the homeless, mentally and/or physically ill and/or addicted—and those without the means or connections to set things right. Civil society combats incivility by creating a set of safety nets for those who, if left untended, are likely to crash and burn. The private sector not only moves away from clientele who cannot pay for their services. They reluctantly enter the fray when governments, churches and or NGO's (non-governmental organizations) will with the help of insurance firms, pay for those looking for a communitarian third place. In this regard, it was Dag Hammarskjold (1982) who, when commenting on the mission-based nature of the United Nations, noted that the purpose of this “place” is not getting those with resources to heaven, but rather keeping those without a penny in their pocket and on the edge of hell from falling even more deeply and irretrievably into a permanent problem state.

Civil society theory, in its take on communitarian third places, is not exhausted by focusing upon the super-needy or marginal publics. Incivility arises not only when the social order fails to provide for problematic publics: it also does so, albeit at a lesser level of intensity, when it fails to embrace persistent problems or causes which would, at least in “a” specific public's view, enhance society. These cause-oriented groups vary in the communitarian third spaces they establish. Some seek to establish a communitarian third place by raising money, organizing volunteers (Milligan and Donaldson, 2006) and creating events to save and/or support, for example, the symphony, opera or a heritage building. Others, attempt to secure resources, organize voluntary labor and create a sense of place which brings together like-

minded people in the name of a cause or a social movement to fight for “good causes” (Williams, 1995). These might include: climate change; loss of agrarian land; or a shift to positions on the left-right continuum; contest the availability of abortions or curtail the ease with which same-sex marriages are licensed.

Figure 2: Third Places: *Cui Bono* (about here)

As noted in Figure 2, communitarian third places are special places because they provide benefits. In the eyes of communitarian third place advocates, these benefits humanize a society. Within civil society assumptions, it is understood that a society if left on its own, would drift into a set of disenchanted, alienated and anomic conditions. Free markets in themselves cannot carry the load. It is argued that communitarian third places provide a public space—either mission or cause-focused—which keeps the experiences people have of their communities as one of compassion towards those grappling with wicked problems and provides encouragement for those actively seeking to improve society.

Commercial Third Places: Neo-liberal Assumptions

Rather than treat third places as a means of establishing a civil society to buffer the problems of mass society, commercial third places attempt to humanize experiences such as shopping or working. Unlike the wicked or intractable problem-focus of communitarian third places, these commercial third places or “servicescapes” are strategic efforts by those private sector investors to attract a pay-for-service clientele in the deliberate use and design of third place exemplars or models (Johnstone, 2012). Thus, the bookstore (chain or independent) which provides comfortable public seating and a scheduled set of book readings not only

creates a user-based meeting place where groups sharing similar values can meet, it also attracts consumers, authors and publicity (Laing and Royle, 2013). Ikea, the Swedish international furniture store, provides the consuming public with a family-friendly children's play space as a means of signaling and drawing families to its premises. Other venues like shopping malls, coffee houses, and pubs, create and seek to capitalize upon the those drawn to these commercial third places (Rosenbaum et al., 2007). From an ideological perspective, commercial third places extend and extoll neoliberal assumptions.

Within the ambit of neoliberal depictions of society, and a particular focus on urban contexts, a good deal of problem solving is turned over to free market operations of the commercial firm (Theodore, et al., 2011). This adheres not only to support a market-based society, but as well, to the commercialization of the neoliberal conception of spaces as private property (Weber 2012). Commercial third places focus upon a work and leisure experience referred to, for lack of a better term, as "servicescapes" (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999). This is a socially-constructed place (or portion of it) which is intended to attract and provide a paying clientele with a set of experiences which bridge the rift between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. These servicescapes differ from the civil society take on third places in three ways.

First, these places are created and operated by a business as a means advancing and marketing their business model (Nilsson, et al., 2014). The creation of "servicescapes" in commercial enterprises suits the nature of the consumer seeking not only an economic transaction but also a personalized set of services or amenities imbedded in and related to the primary goal of enhancing economic exchanges (Mari and Poggesi, 2013). Those advocates of commercial third places like to think they are humanizing specific businesses by making their

relationship with stakeholders more than an economic transaction (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). They succeed, they insist, when paying clients/customers or others pertinent to success (employees, supply chain providers and investors) of the commercial enterprise, see themselves immersed in a relationship or dialogue-based exchange rather than in a mere economic transaction. Servicescapes, in this sense, are good business (Nilsson and Ballantyne, 2014). When successful, they create a following, enhance consumer/client and the firm's stakeholders' loyalty and in so doing, expand the reach of both those investing in commercial third places and interested in bolstering the sense of community through contributions of efficient managers whose private sector acumen and market strategies have benefits for the paying public (Rosenbaum, 2008).

As noted, the owners and/or managers of many pubs, coffee houses and shopping malls understand and operate commercial third places as servicescapes. As well, government-private sector ventures or partnerships like airports and private/public health facilities recognize the need to build servicescapes into the architecture of these multi-purpose public spaces. These venues create spaces which provide users with the feeling that they are in charge of these public spaces and not the actual owner/managers. In these public private partnerships, (Wettenhall, 2003) the aggregation of different publics is encouraged and the space is configured to greet newcomers, encourage curiosity and enable customer and clients to mix with others in these jointly operated servicescapes. Compatible with neoliberalism, community is created in the market place just as it is in the hurly burly environment of open-air farmers' markets. (Tiemann, 2008). The sense of a commercial venue which serves commercial purposes

yet confers a healthy sense of community, sociability and openness to newcomers, pervades this position (Johnson, 2013).

Second, commercial third places encourage paying users to invite their friends, workmates and family members to join them in creating a community. Business Districts Associations (BDAs) which seek to enhance shared commercial servicescapes by providing shoppers with a managed commercial space which is inviting, fun and safe, engages the type of third place users sought by merchants who have come together to create this non-work/non-family leisure/shopping experience (Mitchell, 2001). Word of mouth marketing is an important feature in the creation of commercial third places (Glynn Mangold, et al., 1999). Recurrent visitors invite others with similar values to join. As the community of users drawn to a commercial third place grows, its viability as an investment for those owning, operating and maintaining the third place is strengthened. It is important in this shift to the neoliberal ideology to recognize that shopping is increasingly framed as a pleasurable activity (Backstrom, 2011) which creates a sense of community; an activity which not only brings together various people in the collectivity of an “agora” but provides them with carefully curated commercial places to meet and pursue friendships. Thus, these commercial third places as designed communities entail not only the consumption of goods but the very experience of the commercial third place itself (Mikunda, 2004).

Third, as the size of the community drawn to the third place grows, many third places recognize the value of boilerplate designs of these carefully curated servicescapes and either franchise or license them. This phenomenon is exemplified by Starbucks (Lin, 2014), McDonald’s (Osman, et al., 2014) and chain bookstores (Trager, 2005). A good deal of the

literature arising from Oldenburg and his colleagues' nostalgia for the "good old places", is a result of the shift over time from third places as local spaces and hangouts to the replication of servicescapes found in Starbucks and other successful "global" brands (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). The successful commercial third place, in line with the neoliberal worldview, extolls the emergence of global markets. Moreover, pointing towards the ideology of commercial third places this highlights a paradox which explains why attempts to keep these communal third places as a local community treasure become a persistent problem.

The first portion of the paradox goes like this. Successful commercial third places do not merely satisfy a community of users as is the case with communitarian third places. Indeed, once one begins to replace communitarian with commercial versions of third places—owners, managers and investors (as is clear in the business model)—must grow this community both in its brick and mortar form, and as will become apparent in the next section, online as well (Kohler, et al., 2011). Without this growth, they fail to reap the return on investment which motivates their escalating commitment. The opening phase of the paradox emerges in full bloom when commercial third place users are encouraged to invite others to join them, and in so doing, find themselves, over time, crowded out of what was once "their" good old place (Erickson, 2010).

To keep the paradox intact, note that if client/consumers of commercial third places decide to keep their third place a secret it will in time die out. Particularly so, as the place begins to generate insufficient capital to maintain and refurbish itself. Moreover, the failure to grow, in market logic, means that others are unlikely to replicate the template or modular nature embodied in the success of that specific commercial third place. In the neoliberal

worldview, benefits accrue at a macro-level as rational market players benchmark or copy the success of others (Chan, et al., 2002). In this way, the neighborhood, with its notion of local attachment of a place, gives way to transnational brands and with it place attachment begins to establish a global reach.

From the *cui bono* perspective, commercial third places shift communitarian third places from their cause and mission-based focus upon intractable wicked problems into a market driven logic. Thinking which moves too quickly to lump together communitarian and commercial third places, raises concerns about the commercialization of friendship (Silver, 1990) or the reduced attention given to the social safety net (Debus, et al., 2012). Rather than focus upon wicked problems which yield little if any profit, servicescapes are designed, operated and managed to act as a means of selling involvement, service personalization and the selective targeting of possible consumers. These businesses claim to act as a buffer against mass society. They attempt to humanize that portion of the private sector which invites people to meet others, share ideas and personalize services.

While servicescapes enhance and humanize economic transactions by establishing a venue where pay-for-service transactions become social relationships, digital third places (Slater and Koo, 2010) focus on turning online or simulated communities into a sharing economy (Hamari, et al., 2015) in which place attachment and forms of sharing take hold in cyberspace. In digital third places, aspects of the multiple publics found in communitarian third places, mix with the commercial servicescape. This mix provides individuals at a geographical distance from one another, a means to join in or connect to a place where everyone knows their online name. As well, those drawn to these digital third places not only become part of a

virtual community, but in it they can shop, befriend others and share ideas, car services, apartments and tools (Richardson, 2015). Those seeking to raise money for good causes, see these virtual communities as a means not solely of crowdfunding (Belleflamme and Lambert, 2014) but of responding to the urgent needs of those caught in despair—famines, floods and the dislocating violence of wars. (Jaeger, et al., 2007).

Sharing Economy: Virtual Third Places

Digital third places have their roots in virtual communities (Duchenaault et al, 2007) and technologically augmented relationships (Soukoup, 2006) arising from the use of online platforms (Evans, 2013) to simulate the experience of face-to-face community membership. Within the literature on digital third places, these virtual communities act as a hedge not only against the anonymity of mass society, but as a means of extending the geographical constraints of the local neighborhood. Life, in this computer or Internet-mediated sense, is lived not only on the material or physical plane but in the virtual or simulated places. These are an online “habitus” (Papacharisi and Easton, 2013) in which individuals can shop (Wolfenbarger and Gilly, 2001), befriend others (Henderson and Gilding, 2004), share ideas (Chiu, et al., 2006), and form instrumental and/or affective bonds (Ren, et al., 2012). Digital third places seek to design simulated, technology-mediated communities which help realize what McLuhan years ago termed, the “global village” (McLuhan and Powers, 1989). These imagined places in cyberspace are real in that they create communities (Wellman and Gulia, 2002) or virtual groups which become viable social networks (Wellman, 2014). These virtual communities not only have consequences, but are increasingly framed as bridging the postmodern variant of the rift between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Mossberger, et al., 2007).

The concept of the built environment in cyberspace (Zatz, 1998) extends to locations with recurrent exchanges in which publics—with varying motives and levels of commitment—meet and find relevance, significance. Groups turn into a network (Vitak and Ellison, 2012). This network or exchange platform can occur in an online game (Hinton, 2006) in which individuals' personae are represented by avatars (Taylor, 2012) or in a text/texting relationship between or among individuals in, for instance, an online chat room (Peris, et al., 2002). One's experience of virtual communities or online networks refers to those within one's technologically-mediated reach, with whom one has recurrent exchanges. From the perspective of this sharing economy, one's network serves as a bridging construct. On the one hand, we look to those in our network for aid in instrumental matters like locating a new job or locating an individual with whom one can exchange homes for a short vacation. On the other hand, one's network also permits one to extend one's friendship circles (Vallor, 2012), find those interested in what one values and would like to share—perhaps at times overshare—one's personal information (Agger, 2015). Increasingly, couples in search of either a mate or a romantic fling, find joining certain online communities to be an excellent bridging device. What is bridged is the anonymity and impersonality of the mass society with the search for a community in which personal meaning, friendship and sharing become possible. It is important to highlight how in digital third places these relationships may become fleeting. Typically, digital third places are constructed as platforms where different virtual community members can come together, albeit with different motives (Couldry, 2012).

From a placemaking perspective, digital third places are exemplified by exchange platforms (Van Dijck, 2013). These social media platforms extend the market logic of

neoliberalism (Phelan, 2014). At its core, market logic brings together buyers and sellers. Neoliberal assumptions insist that (most) markets work better when government or regulators are kept to a minimum. In digital third places, exchange platforms draw the attention of many participants to the platform in order to share and exchange instrumental and affective content. On these platforms, content is exchanged, shared, sold and/or offered for free (Gawer, 2009). Content includes not simply information and images but goods and services. This is not simply a market of buyers and sellers; rather it is a community in which brokering occurs between and among the platform participants with varying roles. For instance, consumers in digital third places, due to their active participation in the production of content, become producers or as they are now referred to as, “prosumers” (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Membership on the platform and within the virtual third place, pushes the neoliberal market concept since some platforms—particularly open-source versions of the virtual community—are owned and governed by the participants (O’Mahoney, 2007).

The platform authority over digital third places is much more contentious than the notion of control and or authority in either civil society-based communitarian or in commercial servicescapes. While digital third places can be employed by governments, not-for-profit organizations and commercial enterprises, they are difficult for one group to govern. The reason for this is that these digital third places have a reach and an economic-political clout that has the potential to threaten or disrupt governments (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012), both local and national and to “disintermediate” established business models (Gilbert, 2003). These digital third place communities—whether used for commerce, political messages or entertainment—threaten those whose power and authority are seen as legitimate within a geographical

territory. Thus, regional governments, for example, worry that communities built upon online gambling, child pornography or a shared conviction toward “terrorism,” can not only thrive on these virtual community-building platforms but leave local governments with a set of blunt and inadequate tools. These incursions push various levels of governments as they enter digital third placemaking via the design of varying forms of e-government (Fang, 2002).

A related type of contention surfaces within these digital third place platforms that are owned and operated on a for profit basis. The quandary underlying this phenomenon is the question of whether, for instance, Uber (Cramer and Krueger, 2016) or Airbnb (Guttentag, 2015) in their calls to the sharing economy (Schor, 2016) disrupt longstanding arrangements between taxi cab drivers and their government regulators or hoteliers and their guests. The question takes on barbs when one pushes it even further and asks if the disruption is legitimate or whether the ensuing dislocation breaks up old communities in the name of technologically enhanced and more easily accessed new digital third places (Martin, 2016). While these platforms succeed by drawing attention to the “new and promising” they also change the definition of what it means to design communities intended to alleviate the problems engendered by mass society.

Two contending ideological images of community in digital third places emerge and each fixates upon who on or in these community-based platforms should possess legitimate authority. The first position, often called “open source”, includes examples of digital third places like Linux (Moody, 2002) or Wikipedia (Forte, et al., 2009). These open source digital communities extoll the idea that in digital third places “information wants to be free” (Wagner, 2003). The digital third place flourishes when a community is run by the users/members, the

open code or operating mechanism (algorithm) powering the platform is public and generates a “creative commons” (Lessig, 2003). Advocates of open-source platforms insist that these digital third place communities, not only create places of meaningful exchange and a heightened sense of involvement, but that society as a whole, benefits as open-source platforms accelerate the introduction of innovation.

While platform authority in open-source digital third places extolls the benefits of “freeing information”, many are entirely comfortable with open-source and laud community input, participation and transparency when it results in benefits. The problem emerges when digital third places—either those which are open-source or those owned or governed by specific participants—cause harm. These digital third places fail to curtail cyberbullying, erase hate speech, give out information considered “top secret” and or “trade secrets” or result in non-competitive oligopolies. From the “who benefits” perspective, what is interesting to those studying ideology, is how the version of success in digital third places brings back into the discussion whether virtual communities are primarily a means to provide individuals searching for a sense of belonging in a roiling world of change with stability, or whether communities are essentially a way for grassroots participants to challenge authority.

Conclusion

The changing discourse on third places suggests that the notion of place embodying community and mediating the relationship between home and work is dynamic. Design elements of communitarian third places in a civil society employ a notion of publicly supported cause, mission and voluntarism. The design elements in commercial third places provide

benefits to owners and third place investors who manage, maintain, enlarge, and to some degree, humanize a portion of the private sector. Digital third places push this neoliberal faith in market logic into a new gear, insisting that free markets augmented by technology will usher in a sharing economy.

This paper begins a conversation with researchers and practitioners interested in designing, building and funding spaces which provide a sense of significance, meaning and community to individuals and groups wrestling with the impersonality and anonymity of mass society. Our concern is not to suggest that the present treatment of “third places” as a unified ideal concept does an injustice to the different drivers imbedded in the underling distinctions between communitarian, commercial and digital third places. Third places are vital. Within a built environment approach, third places represent our understanding of how the abstract and theoretical ideas of community relate to its construction in cities, shopping malls, public libraries and online virtual communities.

The triangulation of third places into communitarian, commercial and digital forms becomes part of this conversation when we stress the fact that both in future research and practice, what seems most germane in the authors’ opinions, is how, when and where these varying third places are hybridized or put together in useful combinations. This occurs when, for example, a not-for-profit organization steeped in a mission-based communitarian third place, develops a digital third place to bring together, in a micro-finance manner, lenders with developing world borrowers. The future of third places involves not only the dynamic emergence of new concepts of “community” but equally important, different ways of reassembling the communitarian, commercial and digital variations.

Figure 1 – Third Places: Three Variations

Third Place Variations	Societal Context	Focus of the Place	<i>Cui Bono</i>
Communitarian	Civil Society	Mission/Cause Wicked Problems	Users/Volunteers Society-at-large
Commercial	Neoliberal Society	Business/Commercial Enhancing Profitability	Owners/Managers Users
Digital	Sharing Society	Technology/Cyberspace Online Sharing	Owners/Participants Advertisers

Figure 2 – Third Places: *Cui Bono*

Third Place Types	Dominant Beneficiaries	Key Problem	Ideological Implications
Communitarian	Users	Resource Acquisition	Stresses the role of the good citizen
Commercial	Owners/Investors	Balancing Commercial and Social Responsibilities	Stresses the compassionate potential of the private sector
Digital	Advertisers/ Platform-Entrepreneurs	Governance and Community Control	Stresses the humanizing potential of connectivity via augmented technologies

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