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# Third Places and the Social Life of Streets

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## Abstract

Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg defines a *third place* as a place of refuge other than the home or workplace where people can regularly visit and commune with friends, neighbors, coworkers, and even strangers. Because little is known about the place-based physical qualities of third places that support sociability and place attachment, this article examines how four urban design characteristics distinguish third-place businesses from other businesses on the Main Street. The article discusses a study conducted at Main Streets in two cities and one town in Massachusetts. As part of the study, visual surveys measured urban design qualities of businesses on the Main Streets, and interviews helped determine user perceptions. The findings suggest that third places are relatively high in both personalization (distinctiveness, recognizability) and permeability to the street, but seating and shelter provisions are perhaps the most crucial urban design characteristics that contribute to sociability on the Main Street.

## Keywords

third place, Main Street, urban design, social interaction, social and physical qualities

Research in urban design has identified many physical characteristics that make public spaces attractive for public life. At the same time, literature in social sciences has emphasized the role of social qualities of public spaces in

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place attachment and place making. Together these efforts attempt to capture qualities in the environment that help create a sense of place with desirable spaces for people. Using the knowledge from the social sciences, urban design researchers are broadening the province of design and have begun to evaluate both physical and social aspects of the environment to understand user needs (see, for example Lang, 1987; Brower, 1996).

## The Great Good Place

Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg defined a *third place* as a place of refuge other than the home or workplace where people can regularly visit and commune with friends, neighbors, coworkers, and even strangers. Oldenburg's (1991) treatise on third places mostly focuses on the social aspects, that a third place is welcoming and comfortable, is visited by regulars, and is a place to meet old friends and make new ones. Often third places are small businesses, cafes, coffee shops, bars, pubs, restaurants, community centers, general stores, and so on. Even though such destinations are called third places, Oldenburg discusses only a few physical aspects of third places, such as their proximity and easy access from home or work for many, and highlights that these places are likely to offer food and drinks. However, there are likely other physical features that differentiate third places from other similar businesses or places. This article proposes that four physical characteristics that support human use and social interaction, which are visible from the street, likely characterize third places more than other places on the Main Street. These characteristics are (a) personalization of the street front by the business, (b) permeability of the business to the street, (c) seating provided by the business, and (d) shelter provided by the business on the street space.

## Characteristics That Support Social Behavior

Researchers and social commentators have been exploring the relationship between the environment and human behavior for decades, in order to understand what attracts people to public spaces and supports social activities. Their findings point to characteristics of the environment that are place based and ones that are people based; that is, some are a result of the characteristics of the physical environment, and others, a consequence of human actions and management. Of the place-based characteristics of Main Streets, some are under the control of public or private authorities, whereas others are controlled and managed by individual property or business owners. The four physical characteristics discussed in this article are largely under the control

of the business owners. There are undoubtedly other physical characteristics that support human interaction that are not under the control of business owners. For example, sidewalk width and the provision of benches for sitting—both characteristics under the control and management of a larger public or private authority, are known to be physical characteristics that support human activities on streets and other public spaces. This article focuses only on the physical characteristics that are under the control of business owners. These four characteristics are discussed below.

### *Personalization*

Personalization is the act of modifying the physical environment and an expression of claiming territory, of caring for and nurturing the claimed territory. By personalizing a space, people change the environment to meet their needs and specific activity patterns. This provides psychological security, a symbolic aesthetic, and the marking of territory (Lang, 1987). By marking territories through personalization, individuals or groups are also able to make the territory “distinctive and identifiable” (Edney, 1976). Perkins (1986) found that personalization of property made the street environment appear safer. Conversely, a lack of territorial control due to lack of personalization made the street environment perceptibly less safe (Taylor, Gottfredson, & Brower, 1984). Various studies have found the perception of safety to be negatively affected by the lack of personalization and care resulting in the presence of litter, graffiti, vandalism, and poorly maintained buildings (Hope & Hough, 1988; Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor, 1992; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). According to Gehl (1987), increased opportunities for personalization add those elements to the environment that are of prime interest to people. Personalization of the street front also allows for change to occur in an otherwise familiar setting. This provides stimulation and interest and creates a reason to stop and look, enabling possibilities that generate conversation and other social interactions.

### *Permeability*

Permeability of the street front is more than just the transparency of the building façade. Permeable street fronts are those that actively reveal the interior to the exterior such that people on the street are able to sense what is going on and understand the activities inside the buildings. Research in marketing and retailing suggests that, besides the primary activity of acquiring goods and services, people go shopping to look around (in addition to

meeting and spending time with their friends, people watching, and walking around). Studies have identified sensory stimulation as an important and basic motive for shopping behavior (Bloch, Ridgway, & Sherrell, 1989; Falk, 1997; Tauber, 1972). Scholars note that pedestrians experience pleasure from characteristics of the edges of buildings that define the street, including shop windows and the displays and goods in them (Ciolek, 1978; Whyte, 1980), and the permeability of the street front is integral to creating a condition for such sensory stimulation.

### *Seating*

Sitting space has been identified as one of the most important characteristics in retaining people in public spaces and possibly supporting social behavior (Lindsay, 1978; Mehta, 2007; Whyte, 1980). Movable chairs are a desired form of seating due to the choice, flexibility, and comfort they offer (Whyte, 1980). Stores selling goods and services that may be consumed outdoors sometimes provide outdoor seating. This allows for goods or services to be consumed outside the store, thus extending the activity that would otherwise be limited within the store. Eating and drinking are activities commonly associated with relaxation, and people frequently combine eating and drinking with socializing. This combination of food and social activity supported by outdoor seating makes people stay longer, making it a very important characteristic to support social life on the street. Outdoor seating makes patrons more visible and several empirical studies show that people are attracted to places with people in them (Ciolek, 1978; Gehl, 1987; Hass-Klau, Crampton, Dowland, & Nold, 1999; Share, 1978; Whyte, 1980).

### *Shelter*

Designers and planners often recommend that public spaces should generally be oriented to receive maximum sunlight. However, it is equally important to provide shade and shelter as people's preferences for spaces in the sun or under shade change with changing seasons and weather. Whyte's (1980) study of plazas in New York City showed that though sunlight was an important factor in the spring, people sought shade provided by trees, awnings, canopies, and overhangs during the warmer summer months. Research on the effects of environmental factors on human behavior shows that comfortable microclimatic conditions, including temperature, sunlight, and shade are important in supporting outdoor activities (Arens & Bosselmann, 1989; Khisty, n.d. from Rapoport, 1990; Pushkarev & Zupan, 1975). Similarly,

Zacharias et al. (2001) found that in Montreal's public open spaces at temperatures above 20° Celsius (68° Fahrenheit) people preferred to move to areas under shade.

Hence, there is considerable empirical research that suggests the importance of personalization, permeability, seating, and shelter in making public spaces such as Main Streets more attractive for human use and social interaction.

### *Research Question*

Third places are known for their friendliness and qualities that support sociability and place attachment. However, there is little research that investigates whether compared to other businesses on the Main Street, third places have other place-based qualities that support sociability. The specific research question is: Besides their social attributes, do third places inherently possess physical characteristics that support human use and social interaction on Main Streets?

### **Method**

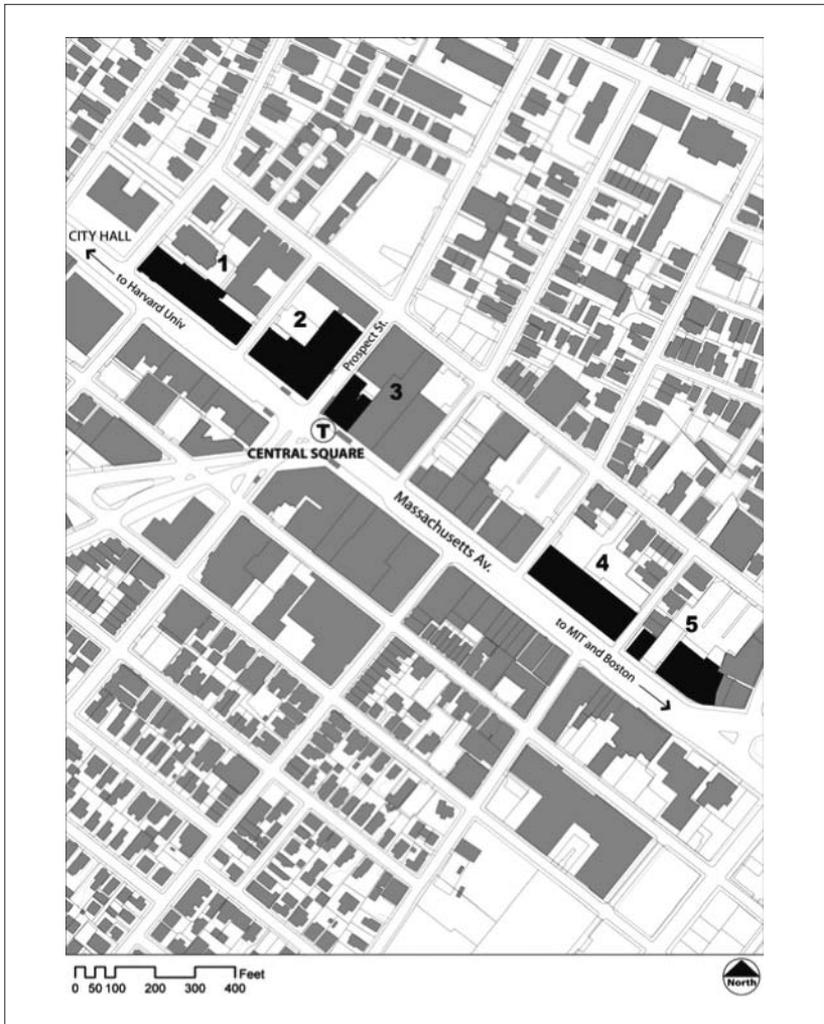
The research for this article was conducted on Massachusetts Avenue in the Central Square neighborhood in the city of Cambridge (population: 101,355; Source: US Census Bureau [2000] data), Harvard Street in the Coolidge Corner neighborhood in the town of Brookline (population: 57,107; *Ibid*), and Elm Street in the Davis Square neighborhood in the city of Somerville (population: 77,478; *Ibid*). All three towns/cities are in the Boston metropolitan area in Massachusetts and are on the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) transit system that includes subway, surface light rail, and/or bus service. Central Square, Coolidge Corner, and Davis Square may be classified as predominantly residential neighborhoods where Main Street shops provide for a variety of daily needs. All three streets studied are the primary commercial streets of the neighborhoods—the Main Streets—which have a combination of small, independently owned, local businesses and national chain stores. All three are historic streets that include mostly older building stock, with only a few new buildings constructed in the past 40 years. Almost all buildings are built to the sidewalk, leaving no setbacks. Aside from a few newer buildings with commercial space, all buildings range from one to four stories in height. All three streets have been upgraded in the past decade to make them more pedestrian friendly. These improvements include the following: widening and resurfacing of sidewalks; creating

curbside parking; planting of trees; and providing benches, bicycle racks, trash cans, pedestrian-oriented street lighting, and so on. Each Main Street has a subway or surface light rail stop connecting it to the MBTA transit system. In addition, there is one bus stop at one of the blocks studied in Davis Square and two at Coolidge Corner. The three Main Streets were selected for this study for their similarities and because each one included a combination of third places and non-third places as well as variability between the four urban design characteristics mentioned earlier. The three streets were also selected to provide an adequate sample size for the study.

### *Units of Study and Selection of Blocks*

The author conducted several drive-bys and walk-bys at each of the study areas and selected 6 to 10 blocks on each Main Street in which to make preliminary observations. The blocks were selected for businesses with the variability of the four physical urban design characteristics that are the focus of this article. Hence, the selected blocks had businesses that provided sitting space on the street and ones that did not and businesses with a range of personalization of the street front, businesses with a range of permeability of the business to the street, and businesses with variability in the range of shade and shelter they offered through the provision of canopies, awnings, and so on, on the street space. A total 19 blocks were selected for the study; 5 blocks were on Massachusetts Avenue at Central Square in Cambridge, with 30 businesses on the first floor; 6 on Harvard Street at Coolidge Corner in Brookline, with 43 businesses on the first floor; and 8 blocks on Elm Street at Davis Square in Somerville, with 47 businesses on the first floor (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

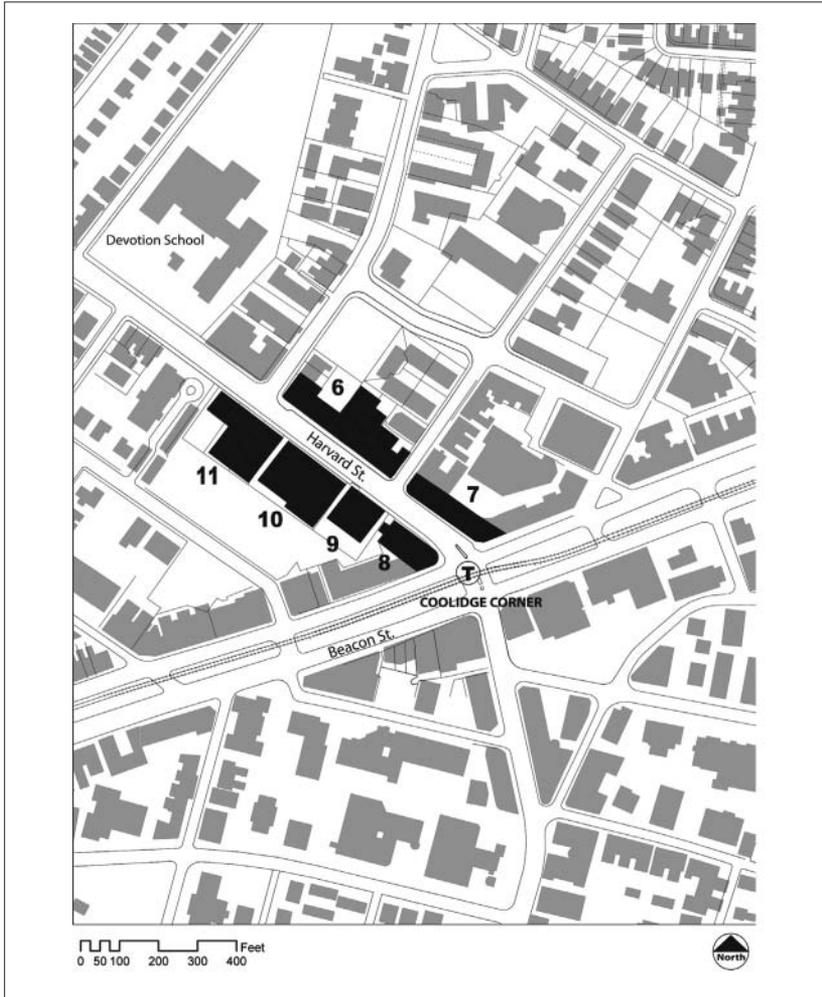
As the selected blocks were all on the Main Street, they were part of the same context and had similar neighborhood-scale characteristics. These neighborhood-scale characteristics included the following: the housing and commercial density of the area; the age, ethnicity, and SES (socioeconomic status) of people living in the area; the proximity to major natural features such as a water's edge; major uses such as a university or a cultural institution; a transit hub; and so on. The distance between the different businesses on the blocks and a major subway station ranged from 0 to 1,080 feet. All the blocks within a study area were within 1,600 feet of each other. This allowed for minimum variation in the neighborhood-scale factors among the selected blocks in a study area. Thus, the selected blocks on all the three Main Streets were part of the same urban context with similar neighborhood-scale characteristics of the environment. As this article explores whether



**Figure 1.** Map showing the five blocks studied on Massachusetts Avenue in the Central Square neighborhood of Cambridge, Massachusetts

Note: All the blocks studied belonged to the same context.

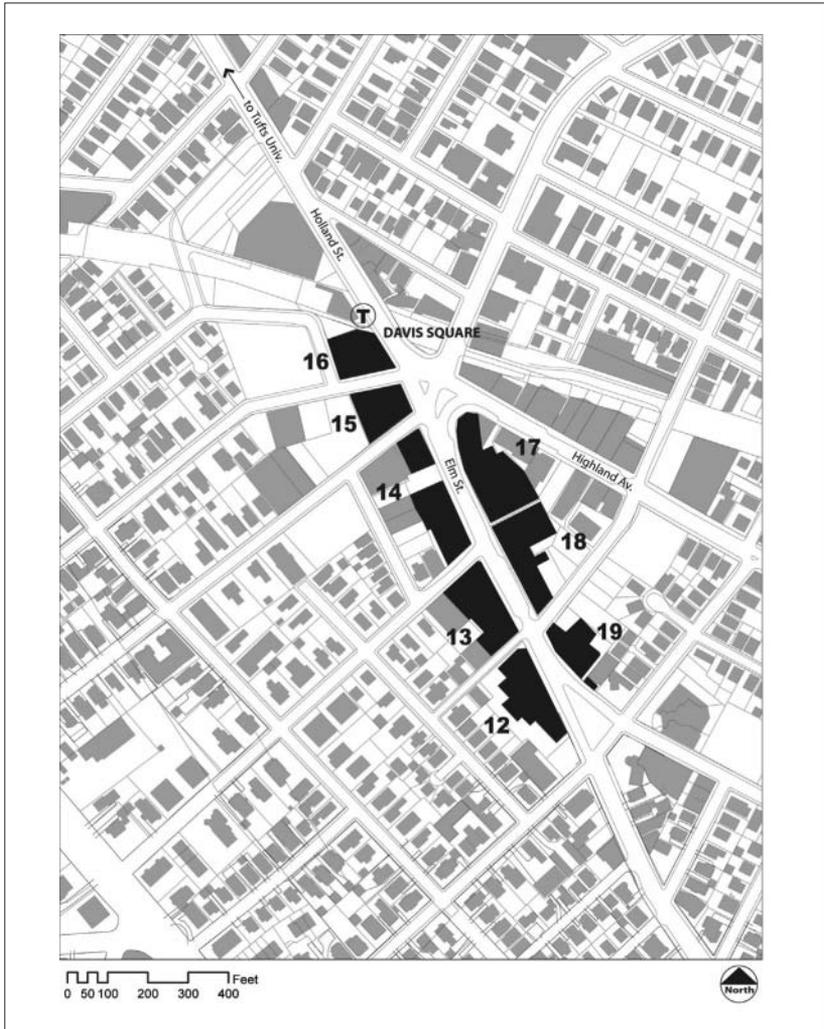
third places provide place-based urban design characteristics on neighborhood commercial streets, the unit of study was each business on these selected blocks.



**Figure 2.** Map showing the six blocks studied on Harvard Street in the Coolidge Corner neighborhood of Brookline, Massachusetts  
 Note: All the blocks studied belong to the same context.

### Sampling

A flyer seeking participation in the interview was designed for each study area. These were regularly posted at stores in the study areas that had space



**Figure 3.** Map showing the eight blocks studied on Elm Street in the Davis Square neighborhood of Somerville, Massachusetts  
Note: All the blocks studied belonged to the same context.

for community notices and announcements. Each study area had five to six such community notice boards. Flyers were given to all the businesses on the first floor and were also distributed to people passing by in the study

areas at several occasions. Approximately 220 flyers were distributed at Massachusetts Avenue and approximately 160 each at Harvard Street and Elm Street. A total of 51 people were interviewed: 21 for Massachusetts Avenue at Central Square in Cambridge, 17 for Harvard Street at Coolidge Corner in Brookline, and 13 for Elm Street at Davis Square in Somerville. Participants contacted the researcher by phone or e-mail to schedule interviews. A total 45 people were interviewed on the street at the benches provided by the public authorities. Three were interviewed inside the stores that were considered third places by people, two at their residences, and one at a neighborhood library. The time for interview ranged from 30 min to 2 hours, with an overall average of 50 minutes.

## Measures

*Defining and determining a third place.* For the purpose of this study, a third place is defined as a business on the Main Street that was identified as a community-gathering place by the people who lived or worked in the neighborhood. A face-to-face interview was considered the best method to provide in-depth information to help understand the users' feelings, perceptions, and attitudes toward the businesses and the street environments in the three study areas. The purpose of the interview was to obtain information from people who actively used the Main Street. By posting and distributing flyers about the research at the study areas, we were able to target the neighborhood's residents, workers, and visitors who actually used the Main Street on a regular basis. The instrument was designed to identify the businesses that people considered third places. A structured interview asked participants about their familiarity with the study area of the Main Street, frequency of visitation, identification of frequently used and favorite businesses, and purpose and reasons for using the businesses in the study area. In keeping with Oldenburg's definition, third places were businesses that people identified as places where they were welcome and the people were friendly and where they spent time in active and passive socializing (i.e., sitting in the presence of other people, watching people and their activities, etc.) with their neighbors, friends, and acquaintances. To qualify as a third place, at least three respondents had to mention the above-listed qualities and characteristics of the business. A business qualified as a third place when, for example, at least three people said something similar to ". . . is a community gathering point. I feel at home. It has an ambience of community," or "People can hang out here and socialize and not just be a customer. It is a meeting area—a destination," or ". . . is an institution of the community. It's a good place to hang out," or "It's a great meeting place in the neighborhood."

People sometimes made similar positive comments about businesses they did not consider third places, such as “. . . is very popular. It’s cheap. It draws all kinds of people,” or “. . . is my favorite because it has a diverse collection of books in all price ranges.” While these businesses evoked some positive comments, they earned about half as many positive comments on average as the third-place businesses received (averages = 0.71 vs. 1.29). More important, people did not mention the crucial third-place characteristics when describing non-third place businesses. Specifically, their comments did not mention these businesses to be meeting places or community gathering places—aspects that qualified businesses to be third places in the users’ minds.

There were 120 businesses on the three Main Streets, and each Main Street contained several third places. Of the 120 businesses on the blocks studied, 17 were considered to be third places by the users of the streets (Group 1). A variety of businesses such as coffee shops, bars, restaurants, bookshops, convenience stores, and so on were considered third places. These businesses received between 3 and 14 third-place nominations each, for a total of 80 nominations across the 17 businesses (average number of nominations per business = 4.7). Of the remaining 103 businesses that were not considered third places, 17 were similar in type (e.g., coffee shops, bookshops) to the third-place businesses. These 17 businesses were, therefore, grouped to reflect comparable, non-third places (Group 2). Note that this entire group of businesses received a total of one nomination as a third place, which was clearly not enough to qualify any of the businesses as third places. The remaining 86 businesses (Group 3) were different types from the businesses in Groups 1 and 2 and, like the businesses in Group 2, were not considered third places by the people who used the Main Streets (see Table 1). Only two of the businesses in this last group each received a single third-place nomination.

*Visual surveys: Measuring characteristics of settings.* Visual surveys were used to record the four characteristics at each business: seating on the street provided by the business, personalization of the street front by the business, permeability of the business to the street, and shelter offered by the business through the provision of canopies, awnings, and so on, on the street space. The characteristics and their measures are described in detail in Table 2.

Two characteristics, seating and shelter, were largely objective and were measured by the author. Seating provided by the businesses was in the form of movable chairs. The author counted the number of seats at the sidewalk to determine the seating provided by each business. Shelter provided by businesses was in the form of retractable or fixed canopies or awnings of various

**Table 1.** List of Businesses That Were Considered Third Places and the Ones That Were Not by Users of the Three Main Streets

| Business Groupings   | Number of Businesses |
|--|----------------------|
| <b>Group 1: Businesses considered third places</b>                                     |                      |
| Coffee shops   | 6                    |
| Bars/pubs  | 4                    |
| Restaurants  | 2                    |
| Convenience store  | 1                    |
| Deli/local supermarket   | 1                    |
| Ice-cream shop   | 1                    |
| Book shop  | 1                    |
| Thrift store   | 1                    |
| Total  | 17                   |
| <b>Group 2: Businesses in same category as Group 1 but not considered third places</b> |                      |
| Coffee shops   | 1                    |
| Bars/pubs  | 0                    |
| Restaurants  | 9                    |
| Convenience store  | 1                    |
| Deli/local supermarket   | 3                    |
| Ice-cream shop   | 0                    |
| Book shop  | 2                    |
| Thrift store   | 1                    |
| Total  | 17                   |
| <b>Group 3: All other businesses</b>   |                      |
| Movie rental store   | 3                    |
| Hair salon   | 5                    |
| Hardware   | 1                    |
| Education institute  | 1                    |
| Bank   | 11                   |
| Music store  | 2                    |
| Mobile phone store   | 3                    |
| Office lobby   | 7                    |
| Florist  | 4                    |
| Insurance office   | 2                    |
| Electronics store  | 2                    |
| Cosmetics store  | 2                    |
| Fast-food restaurant/carryout  | 9                    |
| Laboratory   | 2                    |
| Drycleaner   | 4                    |
| Tobacco/newspaper store  | 1                    |
| Shoe store   | 3                    |
| Optician   | 2                    |

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

| Business Groupings        | Number of Businesses |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Pharmacy                  | 3                    |
| Crepes store              | 1                    |
| Apparel                   | 4                    |
| Theater                   | 3                    |
| Children's toys store     | 2                    |
| Comics store              | 1                    |
| Art gallery               | 2                    |
| Picture framing           | 1                    |
| Specialty Halloween store | 1                    |
| Sewing supplies store     | 1                    |
| Photography/camera store  | 2                    |
| Liquor store              | 1                    |
| Total                     | 86                   |

sizes and folding umbrellas. The smallest shading device that effectively provided shelter at the street (approximately 30 square feet) was used as a unit to calculate the shelter provided by each business. Therefore, if a business provided a canopy that was 12 feet long and 6 feet wide, it counted as 2 canopies. The author counted the number of shading devices to determine the shade and shelter provided by each business. There were trees providing shade and shelter in some locations on the street. However, the trees were planted close to the edge of the sidewalk near the pavement. Thus, due to changing direction of the sunlight, trees did not provide shade and shelter near the stores at all times. Many business owners realized this and provided canopies, awnings, umbrellas, and so on, even when there were trees present on the street space near their stores.

“Degree of personalization of the street-front” and “degree of permeability of the business to the street” are subjective characteristics. Four urban designers (two women and two men), including one of the authors, independently rated these two subjective characteristics by visiting all the businesses at the study areas and rating each business on scales of 1 (*lowest*) to 10 (*highest*) for personalization and permeability. Interrater reliability was very good, as evidenced by intraclass correlation coefficients of .86 and .87 for ratings of personalization and permeability, respectively. Thus, mean personalization and permeability scores were computed for each of the 120 businesses on the three Main Streets.

Visual surveys were only conducted during days with temperatures between 55°F and 85°F from late May through early October in fair weather between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. on weekdays and between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. on weekends, on each block, and hence, each business.

**Table 2.** Selected Characteristics of the Street Under the Control of Businesses

| Street Characteristic  | Description  | Measured by                     | Unit   |
|--|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Degree of personalization of the street front by the business  | All businesses at the street level were individually rated. The degree of personalization was determined by rating how the interface of the business with the street (building façade, entrances, shop windows) was embellished with personal touches such as displays, decorations, signs, banners, planters, flowerboxes, and other wares. Each architect/urban designer rated the personalization for each business on the three streets. A mean was calculated for all four raters' scores to determine the final personalization score for each business. | Four architects/urban designers | Likert scale rating from 1 to 10, where 1 suggests very little or no personal touches at the street-front and 10 suggests a very high level of personal touches made by the business           |
| Degree of permeability of the business to the street   | All businesses at the street level were individually rated. The degree of permeability was determined by rating how well the activities inside the buildings were visible or could be sensed from the street. Each architect/urban designer rated the permeability for each business on the three streets. A mean was calculated for all four raters' scores to determine the final permeability score for each business.  | Four architects/urban designers | Likert scale rating from 1 to 10, where 1 suggests very little or no permeability of the business to the street and 10 suggest a very high level of permeability of the business to the street |
| Number of seating (chairs) on the street provided by the business  | Outdoor seating opportunities provided by private businesses were usually in the form of chairs. Usually, only patrons of these businesses were permitted to use these seats. It was calculated as number of seats provided on the sidewalk by each business.  | Author                          | Number   |
| Number of canopies, awnings, and so on provided by the business to offer shade and shelter on the street | Shade and shelter at the street provided by canopies, awnings, overhangs, and other shading devices were calculated as number of such devices that were capable of providing shade and shelter.  | Author                          | Number   |

## Findings

Observations and interviews suggested that the third places were destinations to go to, gather, meet friends and neighbors, socialize, and watch people, and so on for people in the neighborhood, as a person one of the authors met suggested,

I feel lucky because I live so close to this block. My friends come to see me and say, "It is so cool." 1369 is my favorite coffeehouse. I love the music they play. It is a convenient place to meet friends, planned and incidentally. There is a place to sit, sit out, and people watch. I read my books here. . . . I like their coffee and other products too. (R 33.1)

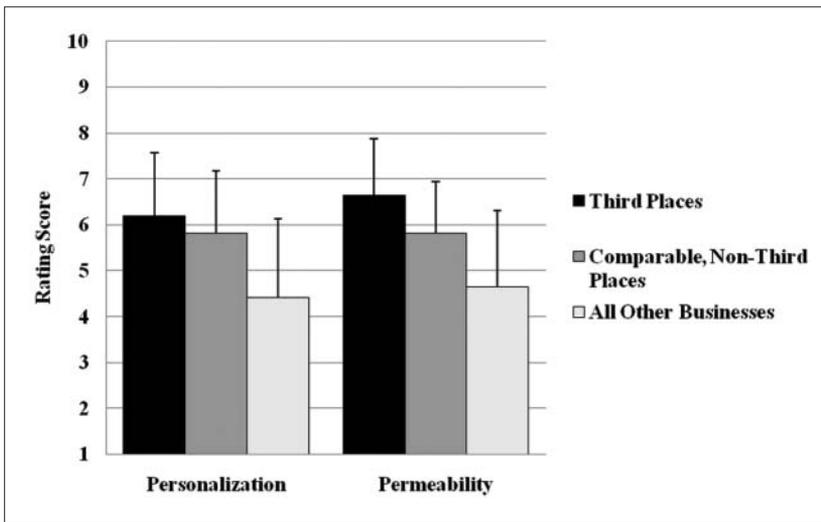
At the same time, however, observations and interviews suggested that in some cases the choice of the third places was based on the residents' duration of stay in the neighborhood, age, class, and attitudes that resulted in different third places for different groups in the neighborhood. New residents seldom mentioned an old bar that was a favorite community place for the long-time residents of this neighborhood, and, as suggested by one person one of the authors met,

Sligo is an institution of the community. It's a good place to hang out. It's a community place. It's a place you go to. People hang out there. It feels very comfortable for an average middle-class person, but there is a variety of people there. That's the old Davis Square. (R 48.1)

The differences between third places (Group 1), similar businesses that were not considered third places (Group 2), and other businesses (Group 3) with respect to the four urban design characteristics are discussed in detail below.

### *Personalization*

Many businesses had personalized their street frontage with signs, displays, and decorations and by bringing out their wares, goods, and services to the street, but third places were more personalized than other businesses on the three Main Streets. As shown in Figure 4, third places ( $n = 17$ ) received a higher mean personalization score than similar businesses not considered third places ( $n = 17$ ), as well as all other businesses ( $n = 86$ ). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that the differences between these personalization scores were statistically significant,  $F(2, 117) = 11.64, p < .001$  (see Table 3). To determine more precisely which groups of businesses



**Figure 4.** Mean ratings of personalization of street front and permeability of business to the street for third places, comparable non-third places, and all other businesses on the three Main Streets

Note: Y-error bars represent the standard deviations of each group.

differed statistically from each other, post hoc Tukey HSD tests were conducted. The output of these tests showed that both third places (Group 1) and similar businesses (Group 2) were significantly higher in personalization than the other businesses (Group 3),  $ps < .01$ , but they did not differ from each other,  $p = .78$  (see Table 4).

Observations showed that businesses that were considered third places spent considerable time and effort in changing and updating their interface with the street by frequently changing their show window décor, displays, planters, signs, often displaying their goods and wares on the sidewalk and thus adding a personal touch to their appearance. This personalization was very important to the users of the street as suggested by previous research and corroborated by many people who regularly used the businesses and the Main Street who said,

Booksmith [bookshop] is my favorite because it's locally owned. I like the atmosphere there. It is very personal. . . . I like that they change the [window] displays, and put out so many things to add color to the street. Like the flowers and book displays and the signs about the readings

**Table 3.** Summary of ANOVA Results

|  | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F     | Sig. |
|--|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|------|
| Personalization of street front by business      |                |     |             |       |      |
| Between groups                                   | 62.57          | 2   | 31.29       | 11.64 | .000 |
| Within groups                                    | 314.67         | 117 | 2.69        |       |      |
| Total  | 377.29         | 119 |             |       |      |
| Permeability of business on street front         |                |     |             |       |      |
| Between groups                                   | 67.17          | 2   | 33.58       | 13.99 | .000 |
| Within groups                                    | 280.91         | 117 | 2.40        |       |      |
| Total  | 348.08         | 119 |             |       |      |
| Seating on street provided by business           |                |     |             |       |      |
| Between groups                                   | 203.90         | 2   | 101.95      | 20.69 | .000 |
| Within groups                                    | 576.42         | 117 | 4.92        |       |      |
| Total  | 780.32         | 119 |             |       |      |
| Shade and shelter on street provided by business |                |     |             |       |      |
| Between groups                                   | 2.17           | 2   | 1.08        | 3.30  | .04  |
| Within groups                                    | 38.49          | 117 | 0.33        |       |      |
| Total  | 40.67          | 119 |             |       |      |

that they arrange. . . . It is the center of cultural life [in Coolidge Corner]. It’s one of the reasons we chose to move here. (R 14.1)

Signs out on the street [in front of the coffeehouse] change every few days. They tell you the special brews or flavors 1369 [coffeehouse] is serving that day. And the flowers and planters—they change every few weeks. It’s very personal and neighborly. Not like a corporation. (R 28.1).

Another respondent, a regular user of the Main Street, suggested how businesses may make their interface with the street more personalized. She suggested,

We need planters, awnings—things that give off that people are around. Something that makes the stores communicate with you. Window boxes for flowers would do a lot for me. (R 42.9)

**Table 4.** Summary of Post Hoc Tukey HSD Tests Showing Multiple Comparisons

| (A)  | (B)              | Mean<br>Difference<br>(A-B) | SE    | Sig. | 95% Confidence<br>Interval |                |
|--|------------------|-----------------------------|-------|------|----------------------------|----------------|
|  |                  |                             |       |      | Lower<br>Bound             | Upper<br>Bound |
| Personalization of street front by business      |                  |                             |       |      |                            |                |
| Other business                                   | Third place      | -1.777*                     | 0.435 | .000 | -2.81                      | -0.74          |
|  | Similar business | -1.397*                     | 0.435 | .005 | -2.43                      | -0.36          |
| Third place                                      | Other business   | 1.777*                      | 0.435 | .000 | 0.74                       | 2.81           |
|  | Similar business | 0.380                       | 0.563 | .778 | -0.96                      | 1.72           |
| Similar business                                 | Other business   | 1.397*                      | 0.435 | .005 | 0.36                       | 2.43           |
|  | Third place      | -0.380                      | 0.563 | .778 | -1.72                      | 0.96           |
| Permeability of business on street front         |                  |                             |       |      |                            |                |
| Other business                                   | Third place      | -1.998*                     | 0.411 | .000 | -2.97                      | -1.02          |
|  | Similar business | -1.178*                     | 0.411 | .014 | -2.15                      | -0.20          |
| Third place                                      | Other business   | 1.998*                      | 0.411 | .000 | 1.02                       | 2.97           |
|  | Similar business | 0.820                       | 0.531 | .275 | -0.44                      | 2.08           |
| Similar business                                 | Other business   | 1.178*                      | 0.411 | .014 | 0.20                       | 2.15           |
|  | Third place      | -0.820                      | 0.531 | .275 | -2.08                      | 0.44           |
| Seating on street provided by business           |                  |                             |       |      |                            |                |
| Other business                                   | Third place      | -3.789*                     | 0.589 | .000 | -5.19                      | -2.39          |
|  | Similar business | -0.730                      | 0.589 | .433 | -2.13                      | 0.67           |
| Third place                                      | Other business   | 3.789*                      | 0.589 | .000 | 2.39                       | 5.19           |
|  | Similar business | 3.059*                      | 0.761 | .000 | 1.25                       | 4.87           |
| Similar Business                                 | Other business   | 0.730                       | 0.589 | .433 | -0.67                      | 2.13           |
|  | Third place      | -3.059*                     | 0.761 | .000 | -4.87                      | -1.25          |
| Shade and shelter on street provided by business |                  |                             |       |      |                            |                |
| Other business                                   | Third place      | -0.345                      | 0.152 | .065 | -0.71                      | 0.02           |
|  | Similar business | 0.126                       | 0.152 | .687 | -0.24                      | 0.49           |
| Third place                                      | Other business   | 0.345                       | 0.152 | .065 | -0.02                      | 0.71           |
|  | Similar business | 0.471*                      | 0.197 | .048 | 0.00                       | 0.94           |
| Similar business                                 | Other business   | -0.126                      | 0.152 | .687 | -0.49                      | 0.24           |
|  | Third place      | -0.471*                     | 0.197 | .048 | -0.94                      | 0.00           |

\*Statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 5.** Personalization of street front encourages window shopping and conversation, provides current information and amenities, and adds interest to provide sensory pleasure, and sometimes even humor, on the Main Street

Personalization through the change of signs and displays also provided current information about schedules and events, and goods and services in the stores, right at the street (see Figure 5).

### *Permeability*

Many businesses had modified their street fronts to make them permeable to the street, but third places were more permeable than other businesses on the



**Figure 6.** Permeability of the street front provides information of services and activities inside, enlivens the outdoor street environment, and arouses the curiosity of many on the Main Street

three Main Streets. The mean permeability score for all third places was higher than that of similar businesses not considered third places and all other businesses on the street (see Figure 4). A one-way ANOVA on permeability scores revealed that the three groups differed statistically from each other,  $F(2, 117) = 13.99, p < .001$  (see Table 3). Post hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that both third places (Group 1) and similar businesses (Group 2) were significantly higher in permeability than the other businesses (Group 3),  $ps < .05$ , but they did not differ from each other,  $p = .28$  (see Table 4).

Many third places left their doors or windows wide open, letting the people outside see and hear the activities inside and in some cases, smell the goods for sale (see Figure 6). Users of the Main Street expressed a strong desire for this quality of permeability as suggested by comments regarding some businesses that were not considered third places:

Some stores have no communion with the sidewalk environment. I walk by but feel shut out. There's not enough interaction. (R 42.3)

Another respondent suggested how window displays could make the street front more permeable:

I wish the façade was more interactive with the street. It's very alienating. It is like a black hole. They should soften the barrier between in and out, put more signs on the sidewalk welcoming you, inviting you in. Hang plants, pictures in windows, add color in windows. (R 42.12)

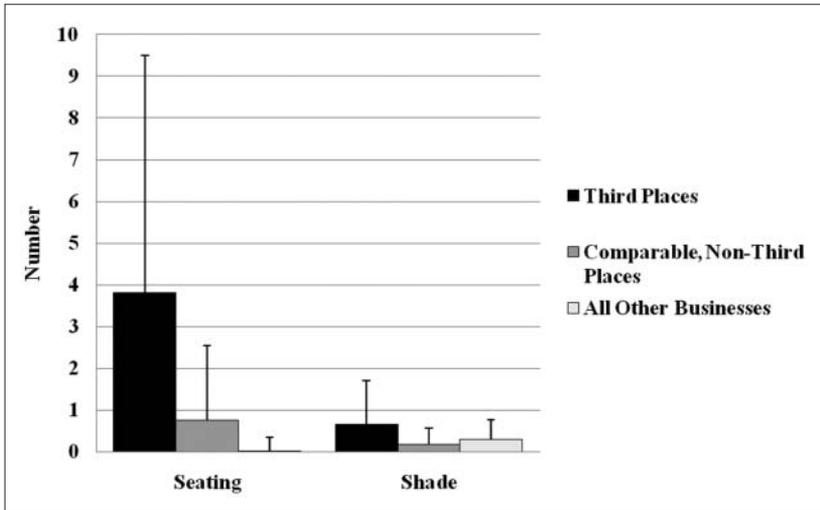
In contrast, this participant recognized and appreciated the quality of permeability in one of the third places on the Main Street:

I love the colorful atmosphere at Diesel. Acoustics aren't terrible either. The garage doors open to the street and it has a good in and out flow. You can see people hanging out in there. It has a great connection to the street. (R 41.3)

## Seating

Seating provided by stores is usually near businesses where goods may be consumed outdoors. Many stores, especially those offering goods and services that could be consumed outdoors, provided seating on the street. As illustrated in Figure 7, third places provided more seats on average than similar businesses not considered third places and all other businesses on the street. An ANOVA on the mean number of seats provided revealed that the differences among groups was statistically significant,  $F(2, 117) = 20.69, p < .001$  (see Table 3). Moreover, post hoc Tukey HSD tests showed that third places offered more seats than both similar businesses not considered third places and all other businesses on the street,  $ps < .001$ . The latter two groups did not differ significantly in the number of seats they offered,  $p = .43$  (see Table 4).

The ability to consume goods or services outside the store allowed for an extension of the activity and hence the extension of the territory of the store space that would otherwise be limited within the store. This extension allowed people to engage in social activities on the street. The users of the Main Streets valued the outdoor sitting space provided by businesses for relaxation, people watching, and so on as suggested by these people who regularly used the street:



**Figure 7.** Mean numbers of outdoor seats and shade/shelter devices provided for third places, comparable non-third places, and all other businesses on the three Main Streets

Note: Y-error bars represent the standard deviations of each group.

1369 [Coffeehouse] is very personal. There is great outdoor seating. The music outdoors attracts people. It is a great place to sit and enjoy your day and people-watch. It is interesting to see all kinds of people. I frequently run into people without planning. (R 37.1)

Greater socialness is created when you are outdoors. People feel less private and have an ease of interaction. Sociability increases in outdoor seating. It just seems more comfortable and results in higher social interaction with all types of people. (R 50.2).

Eating and drinking is an activity commonly associated with relaxation, with a break in the regular schedule, a pause. People frequently combine eating and drinking with socializing. This combination of food and social activity supported by outdoor seating made people stay longer on the street (see Figure 8).

### *Shade and Shelter*

Canopies, awnings, shading umbrellas, and overhangs were permitted on all three Main Streets, but not all businesses provided and maintained such



**Figure 8.** Outdoor sitting space and shade and shelter provided by third places serve as basic amenities to support social interaction on the three Main Streets

amenities. Some buildings had recessed entrances that provided adequate shade and shelter, but most buildings required additional semifixed elements to protect their entrances and the interface with the street. Third places provided more shading devices than similar businesses not considered third places, as well as all other businesses on the street (see Figure 7). An ANOVA confirmed that the differences among these groups was statistically significant,  $F(2, 117) = 3.30, p < .05$  (see Table 3). Post hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that third places provided significantly more shade and shelter on the street than similar businesses not considered third places,  $ps < .05$ , and they provided marginally significantly more shade than all other businesses,  $p < .07$  (see Table 4 and Figure 8).

## Discussion

Meaningful differences among third places, comparable non-third places, and all other business were observed on the four characteristics of settings

studied here. With regard to personalization and permeability, third places and comparable non-third places did not differ statistically from each other, but they both received higher ratings than all other businesses on the street. This suggests that, although personalization and permeability are clearly important features of third places, these characteristics in themselves cannot fully explain the unique appeal of third places. Instead, the characteristics that distinguished third places from comparable businesses included seating and shelter provisions. Specifically, third places provided more seating, and more shade and shelter, compared to similar businesses that were not considered third places and all other businesses on the street (although the difference between third places and all other businesses only approached significance for shade and shelter provision). This indicates that features of businesses that increase people's physical comfort—by providing a place to sit and shelter from the sun—are especially important criteria for distinguishing third places from other businesses.

In addition, it was observed that the four physical design features examined here often served the human functions of territoriality, window shopping, and socialization. In an attempt to attract customers, many businesses on the first floor of Main Streets extend their territory from the interior space to the outdoors. Usually this extension of territorial claim is on the street or public space right outside or adjacent to the business. This extension of territory has great ability to influence the immediate space on the street. For example, when the physical environment supports it, it is common to see people sitting or standing and eating or drinking and socializing on the street near a business that offers food and drink items that may be consumed outside the business. This type of impact creates valuable human activity and active and passive social interaction on the street space adjacent to the businesses. Semi-structured observations showed that window shopping was a frequent activity on the three streets that was further supported by personalized street fronts of businesses. Social activity frequently occurred as a result of window shopping. Personalized street fronts also acted as zones for education of children, and sometimes even adults, through a variety of ideas conveyed by the signs, materials, and displays. The personalized street fronts often added a sense of delight, and occasionally, a sense of humor that could be shared by all. The permeability and information of the inside of stores aroused the curiosity of many, especially children, who were able to satisfy their curiosity by observing the objects and activities that were visible from the street and thus also learning about these objects and activities. Permeable street fronts of businesses provided opportunities for people to stop and engage in the businesses. As a result, people spent more time lingering there, and this opened

up opportunities for conversation and passive and active social interaction on the street. In addition, seating, in the form of chairs that could be moved, provided a level of flexibility and control desirable to users. Systematic investigation of these functions would be a worthwhile topic for future studies of the appeal of third places.

## Limitations

As most empirical research, this study has its limitations. The research was limited to center-city neighborhoods with a high density and intensity of use relative to other neighborhoods in North America. The study of Main Streets of these neighborhoods also limited the types of third places encountered, most of which were places for eating and drinking or bookshops or some other retail. Oldenburg's work (1991, 2002) demonstrates a wider range in the types of businesses that qualify as third places. His research also shows that third places exist in most cultures, in various types of neighborhoods and in locations beyond the Main Streets and prominent public spaces of towns and cities. Hence, it would be important to test the hypotheses put forth by this research in other locations and cultures. This study was also limited by its sample size, and we suggest extending this inquiry using larger populations. Although in this study the criteria used to qualify a business as a third place were clear, a larger sample would further differentiate businesses considered third places from similar businesses that are not. With a larger sample, researchers could increase the threshold of nominations for a business to qualify as a third place in the minds of people. Lastly, we understand that this is a difficult topic to study experimentally and our research is only a first step. We encourage researchers to apply other methodological approaches to address this important subject.

## Policy Implications

Community development programs recommend supporting small businesses and third places for their people-based social benefits. The findings of this article suggest that businesses that are considered third places by the users of the three Main Streets influence their immediate public space by paying more attention to and providing place-based urban design characteristics that help make good people places. These findings have implications for urban design, community planning, and economic development policies. Policy makers need to retain and support the third places that exist in neighborhoods. In addition, many businesses realize the economic and social value of being

recognized as a third place and follow business models that help them become third places (Oldenburg, 2002). Such businesses should be supported and encouraged through economic development programs. Policy makers need to be sensitive to both the existing and the new third places in neighborhoods and value them not only for their social attributes but also for their contribution to the design quality of the public spaces in which they exist.

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