The Third Place

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the benefits that accrue from the utilization and personalization of places outside the workplace and the home. It is argued that participation in these third places provides people with a large measure of their sense of wholeness and distinctiveness. Third places are characterized in terms of sociability and nondiscursive symbolism. The benefits of third place involvement are discussed with reference to diversity and novelty, emotional expressiveness, color, and perspective.

Much recent social commentary has focused on a general malaise among the American people. Although commentators disagree as to the the roots of the problem, there is considerable consensus that American life is somehow deficient, that people are increasingly troubled, dismayed, or at least annoyed with the quality of their lives. This uneasiness is accompanied by widespread utilization of personal service experts in efforts to "feel better," "' get it together," and somehow achieve a more satisfying and rewarding life existence. We are in an era characterized by some as the "Age of Narcissism," by others as the "Me Society."[1] Increasingly, people are purchasing the time and expertise of professionals in order to discover more about themselves. There is a strongly held conviction that self-awareness will lead to self-actualization, which in turn, will yield personal satisfaction and happiness.[2]

One element of this general malaise in American society is the rather steady decline in people's sense of personal responsibility and control. We are in an era where personal troubles are increasingly converted into social issues resolvable only through legal apparatus or social support

agencies. Today, the traditional concepts of sin and immorality are dismissed as symptoms of inadequate and immature personal development; what you do is less a measure of you than why you did it. People increasingly utilize strategies of loyalty rather than sincerity in dealing with others. Some critics have described this as a crisis of personal confidence and interpersonal trust. We see it more as a simple acknowledgement by many people that American life makes increasingly difficult the realization of certain personal and social experiences they believe to be integral to a truly human experience. It is not so much that people have fundamental needs that society is not fulfilling; rather, it is simply the case that people are expecting much more from their experiences and relationships than they are getting.

We feel this hiatus between expectation and realization stems, in large part, from the attrition of situations in which people can become personally involved in freewheeling association with others. The range of available arenas for social participation has narrowed to the point that for many people life has come to offer a very restrictive two-stop model of daily existence. The office or shop and the home, joined by the ordeal of commuting, tend to absorb people's time and interest. Contemporary men, and increasingly, women, agitate between these two poles of existence; flit from the "womb" to the "rat race" and back again. Neither place, nor even the two together, seems to provide satisfying experiences and relationships for people as evidenced not only by the measure of general discontent, but also by the well-recognized, recurrent American expression to "get away from it all." People have jobs and they have homes with little else in between save commercially packaged diversions which often seem more enervating than invigorating. The American idealization of intimate marriages and high mobility careers has coincided with what some critics call the decline of the community. In fact, this idealization has served to rationalize the decline. This is particularly true of the broad middle-class, where work and home increasingly dominate the individual's time, interests, and energies. The home has become the highly private "sanctum sanctorum" of the "togetherness marriage" and its progeny. The transformation of work in the industrialized society brings together people of ever more narrow interests and abilities in

settings which are becoming more impersonal. The quality of many people's lives has come to depend almost exclusively on the quality of their families and jobs. As a consequence, people have become increasingly reluctant to invest their time, energy, and emotions in matters which do not immediately, or at least in the short run, enhance either work opportunities on the one hand or home life on the other.

The insufficiency of this two-stop model of life has been recognized previously. Since the thirties, observers of the social scene have decried the growth of specialization and the insularity of American life. Most of this commentary has focused on the decline, eclipse, or disruption of a sense of community. However, we feel it is not the loss of community *per se,* for community brought havoc, as well as happiness, to people's lives; rather, it is the loss of certain conditions of social life which community allowed. Essentially, community provided opportunities for social relationships and experiences with a diversity of human beings; often such involvements were demanded of individuals by virtue of their residence in a community. One set of such opportunities involved the utilization and personalization of places outside the workplace and the home. The benefits that accrue with participation in these "third places" comprise the focus of this article. We feel that these social arenas historically provided people with a larger measure of their sense of wholeness and distinctiveness. Their abandonment has occasioned, in large part, the poverty of experience and relationship that people apparently feel in their everyday lives. We hope to show that much of what people now seek from legal apparatus, from social agencies, and from developmental and adjustment therapies is closer at hand in forms more genuine and less costly in the third place.

THE PLACE OF THE THIRD PLACE

Historically, at least from the time of the association of knights onward, people and their communities have benefited from their social participation in public places apart from home and work. During most periods of history, public associations of people have been little appreciated: their full value rarely perceived.

Joseph Addison (1965:42), for example, seemed highly reserved, if not deliberately cautious, in addressing the virtues of the coffee houses of eighteenth-century London:

> When men are thus knit together, by a Love of Society, not a Spirit of Faction, and don't meet to censure or annoy those that are absent, but to enjoy one another: When they are thus combined for their own improvement, or for the Good of others, or at least to relax themselves from the Business of the Day, by an innocent and cheerful Conversation, there may be something very useful in these little institutions and Establishments.

Unfortunately, Addison and other members of the literati did not elaborate the "very useful something" derived from such forms of association. Later, of course, pub life would be depicted as a lamentable institution of working class life, as emphasis was laid on the drinking and not on the associations of men. Even the sympathetic tended to view pubs and taverns of the working class as places where the common man might, with the aid of a few pints of ale, enter into an oblivion which would, for a time, let him forget his unhappy station in life. In the United States, the "drys" came to associate all forms of vice with such third places, vilified them in temperance hymns and failed to see any redeeming virtues therein.

In general, sympathetic commentators on third places for the common man have regarded these settings as peripheral and quaint at best. The "escape theme" is common, in discussions of the third place, permeating descriptions of the tavern and the coffee houses in novels, documentaries, travelogues, and community case studies. Typical of such descriptions is Joseph Wechsberg's (1966:16) discussion of the modern Viennese coffee house:

> [A man's] coffee house is his home away from home, his haven and island of tranquility, his reading room and gambling hall, his sounding board and grumbling hall. There at least he is safe from nagging wife and unruly children, monotonous radios and barking dogs, tough bosses and impatient creditors.

But, there is more than escape, more than a respite from obligations to be derived from third places and the quality of human association which they offer. They provide

opportunities for important experiences and relationships in a sane society, and are uniquely qualified to sustain a sense of well-being among its members. But before their socially obscured virtues are held up to examination, it will help to specify them more concretely.

Third places exist outside the home and beyond the "work lots" of modern economic production. They are places where people gather *primarily* to enjoy each other's company. They are not like businessmen clubs and singles bars which people inhabit in order to informally encourage the achievement of formal goals. Indeed, the majority of public places in our society fail to become actual third places. Upon entering many of these establishments, one finds intense devotion to the business at hand. One opens the door to a bar, coffee shop, or sauna, and finds people at work, either at their job or at their leisure. There is no lively conversation in these places, no suspension of the usual and typical, no joy of association. The "ingredients" of third place are simply not there.

The tavern, or bar, is without doubt the dominant third place in our society and we are not unique in this. Be it saloon, cocktail lounge, pub, or whatever—place it among the golf links and call it a clubhouse, put it at the water's edge and call it a yacht club, or organize a fraternal order around it and call it a lodge—the bar is nonetheless at the core of the institution. But, neither the existence of the bar nor the dispensing of alcoholic beverages is essential to the establishment of third places. For old-timers in many communities, it was the local express office or the general store. For the young, increasingly, it is the "hamburger joint" as the malt shop has disappeared. In many European countries it is still the coffee house as it once was in London. In an earlier day in Germany, it was the *Gasthaus*; in the smaller cities and towns of America, it is frequently a favorite cafe or bakery, drug store, or hotel lunch counter.

In modest business establishments where concern over image has not yet replaced the delights of "shooting the bull," those merely hanging out will be found, most often, to outnumber the customers. Many men who still work in small shops will be found to keep a few chairs around the store in which they spend many happy hours with friends who drop by. In small towns in the midwest, many of the business places used to provide long benches for the "sunshine club"

on either side of their entrances. Here the children and the oldtimers made predominant use while the younger adults were busy at their jobs.

In the small towns of the Deep South one still finds card games and checker games going on under the shade trees in the town square. The younger men will be found congregating at the fishing camps and bait shops. In the larger cities some people casually drop in on friends at the lounging rooms of the indoor tennis or racquetball academies. In the north country, the humble one-man ice-fishing shacks often have given way to larger models, complete with carpeting, refrigerators, and poker tables where men spend less time fishing, perhaps, than simply getting away from their jobs and families.

Such places as we have mentioned are merely typical and far from exhaustive. It is not possible to suggest, here, all the types of settings which may indeed be third places. Third places, we would insist, are only partially amenable to rational planning. Their key ingredients seem to remain elusive and emergent and these no doubt change with the shifting patterns of life style. It is possible, therefore, only to describe a few of the necessary, but certainly not all of the sufficient, characteristics of third places.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THIRD PLACES

A third place is a public setting accessible to its inhabitants and appropriated by them *as their own*. The dominant activity is not "special" in the eyes of its inhabitants, it is a taken-for-granted part of their social existence. It is not a place outsiders find necessarily interesting or notable. It is a forum of association which is beneficial only to the degree that it is well-integrated into daily life. Not even to its inhabitants is the third place a particularly intriguing or exciting locale. It is simply there, providing opportunities for experiences and relationships that are otherwise unavailable.

The most obvious of these opportunities is the possibility of pure *sociability*. As Georg Simmel (1949:254-261) commented, both a fondness for association and a sense of its intrinsic worth *beyond* special and immediate purposes bring people together. Sociability is thus the delight, or the "play-form" of association, as Simmel preferred to call it. The basis of the

"play" or the delight in association is not found in what sociologists call the "role requirements" inherent in the job to be done, but in the sense of individuality which emerges from these roles and the interplay between them.

Sociability is found in virtually all types, or forms, of association but, as Simmel insisted, people need *pure* sociability which is not found in any form of association but that which is specifically [illegible] over to it. In this vein, he spoke of the "great proble[illegible] association" characteristic of all forms of sociability. The "great problem" is that all other forms subordinate individuality to matters of objective importance and rational consideration. In family life, work, commercial relations, organized groups, in all of the associations of the "outside world," people find themselves in *purposive* association. Correspondingly, their sense of individuality is subordinated to the requirements of their roles and their personal value is predicated largely upon organizational criteria. In the "outside world" people are assessed by yardsticks of value, merit, and performance as these derive from all associations given to rational purpose.

In situations offering pure sociability, one enters happy association that is not premised on the social qualifications of the people involved. One thereby enters, as Simmel insisted, the most purely democratic experience life can offer. Here people who are expressing their unique sense of individuality are equals as nowhere else. They are truly different but truly equal. In pure sociability, the surrender of outward status is rewarded by unqualified acceptance into human fellowship. "Joy, vivacity and relief" (to use Simmel's terms) are of the essence in this form of association which, unlike all others, accepts individuals as ends in themselves.

Just as individuals must divest themselves of outward status claims before entering the portals of truly democratic participation, so also must they set aside personal problems and moodiness. As others there claim immunity from the too-personal worries and fears of the individual, so, in turn, may he relegate his problems (for the time being, at least) to a blessed state of irrelevance. Pure sociability is the antithesis of a "group therapy session" and if souls are saved therein, as well they may be, it is only incidentally.

It becomes clear then, as Simmel insisted, that pure sociability is as subject to good or proper form as any other type of association. The intrusion of the worldly assessment of the in-

dividual or of his inner moods are anathema to good form. The conversational style of third places embodies the spirit of pure sociability. A person must not remain silent, nor must he dominate conversation. In the free and uninhibited atmosphere of third place fellowship, conversation is remarkably democratic. Everyone seems to talk "just the right amount." How unlike corporate meetings where status dictates not only who will dominate serious conversation but also who will engage in levity. Even exceptionally witty persons, and even when they are in "rare form," will not dominate conversations for long, for people are there to participate, not to enjoy monologues. Accordingly, the subjects of conversation are dictated by common experience or turned quickly to that level, and correspondingly, good and proper form discriminates against excessive use of the first person singular in speech which is the hallmark of the "Me Society."

In regard to this aspect of third place language, Orrin Klapp (1969) distinguishes between "discursive" and "nondiscursive" symbolism. The former refers to the quality of talk people use when they are pursuing rational ends. Discursive symbolism is used when individuals are giving directions, establishing contracts, solving problems, buying merchandise, discussing personal problems, planning parties, meeting clients, etc. It is instrumental and pragmatic. Man's technology, his ability to work in concert with others, indeed, the whole progress of his evolution as a primate, has depended on discursive symbolism but, as Klapp argues, it is not enough.

Another kind of communication (*non*discursive symbolism) establishes not contractual bonds between people but spiritual ones; providing not simply *knowledge of* people but *knowledge about* people. This kind of speech is idiomatic and steeped in local heroes and local tragedies, in gossip and romance. It ties people to places and yet removes them from the little schemes and strategies of self-interest. It gives individuals a sense of continuity. Always, it evolves from the people themselves and is not manufactured by hucksters or campaigners. There is nothing rational, instrumental, exploitative, or promotive about such talk. To the extent that men engage in it, they maintain unity and a sense of belonging.

Klapp observed that nondiscursive symbolism has become an "endangered species" of conversational style and content

and that its loss involves a symbolic poverty, a malnutrition of the soul which psychiatrists might recognize as an impaired sense of identity. He did not associate his types of discourse with *places*. Types, or styles, of conversation, however, are tied to places to an important degree, and what Klapp calls "nondiscursive symbolism" refers precisely to the chatter and banter of third places. Indeed, as pure sociability is the characteristic *form* of third place interaction, so also is nondiscursive symbolism the characteristic *content* of such places.

BENEFITS OF THIRD PLACE INVOLVEMENT

Like most social phenomena, participation in the third place does not guarantee anything. The consequences of participation are emergent, not linear and sequential. However, it appears that continuous involvement does provide individuals with a realm of social experiences and relationships that are increasingly unavailable in the society at large.

Diversity and Novelty

"Society," as W.I. Thomas and F. Znanieck (1918-1920) pointed out, "wishes its members to be laborious, dependable, regular, orderly, self-sacrificing; while the individual wishes less of this and more of new experience." Since Thomas's time, we have witnessed an astounding relaxation in social controls over the individual, but it appears that *boredom* more than *delight* has attended these new freedoms. As the personal freedom to "do one's own thing" has increased, the sense of doing something unique and novel, in fact, the feeling of "being one's own self" has apparently declined. It is, in a way, ironic that a nation should suffer culture shock and boredom at the same time; that the feeling too much is new and different should be attended by the feeling that little which is new is genuinely interesting or exciting. Boredom, as John Crosby (1964) noted in one of his columns several years ago, was traditionally reserved for the aristocrat. Boredom came with leisure, that "baby not planned for," that unanticipated consequence of the industrial revolution. Freed from the need of working from sunrise to sunset and also

having money left over after taking care of basic necessities, the people of the Industrial Age faced the challenge of how to deal with both "spare time" and "spare money." Their earnings represented an open-ended reward which remained to be committed to something intrinsically gratifying, and the newly gained personal time could either fulfill one's existence or mark its emptiness.

Rather than enlarging their sphere of social participation, too many people turned almost exclusively to the family in exercising this newly gained freedom. They built familial life styles which ironically provided experiences very similar to their places of work. The suburbanizing of America produced a dependable, secure social existence in which the American family could exercise its options in a predictable, and monotonous, fashion. Sennett (1973:81) speaks of the problems which the suburban family faces in this regard:

> In the past ten years, many middle-class children have tried to break out of the communities, the schools and the homes that their parents had spent so much of their own lives creating. If any one feeling can be said to run through the diverse groups and life-styles of the youth movement, it is a feeling that these middle-class communities of the parents were like pens, like cages keeping the youth from being free and alive. The source of the feeling lies in the perception that while these middle-class environments are secure and orderly regimes, *people suffocate there for lack of the new, the unexpected, the diverse in their lives.* (italics ours)

As a consequence, the home, like the workplace, offers a small and highly predictable world; and, although both places may meet many important needs, they rarely allow for novelty and diversity. For one thing, both the home and the place of work are marked by a constancy of their population. On the other hand, the third place is populated by a shifting diversity of inhabitants who are granted involvement by virtue of their presence at a particular place at a particular time. As a result, an aura of the unexpected surrounds each visit to a third place. This is not to say that the unexpected or unpredictable invariably occurs. However, the feeling that it *might* occur is a vital part of experiences in the third place. One can never be certain exactly who will be there; can never predict what the chemistry of a particular "mix" of people will create. One can, however, count on it being lively for

third places are arenas for active participation with others. Here, individuals truly entertain one another without the trappings of their social status and personal problems. It is, in fact, this very lure of active, uninitiated human participation which Clinard (1962) observed as causing many solid midwestern citizens to prefer the tavern over the church.

In the sharing of experiences with others in third places, a *spectrum* of interpersonal involvement is also a relevant feature. When economic production was accomplished on a much smaller scale, individuals found themselves in frequent contact with people in a variety of occupations and they shared their leisure hours with them. In the back rooms of saloons and other commercial establishments, plumbers, retailers, lawyers, doctors, cabinet makers, and creamery operators sat down to play cards with one another. Similarly, when the family was more extended and aunts and uncles frequently sat at the dinner table together, a variety of "walks of life" were represented in intimate association. In those days, a person was not cloistered among his "kind" as are, for example, the "Exurbanites" who literally took over the residential areas of some of the outlying counties around New York City and found a kind of refuge in their homogeneous life styles (cf. Spectorsky, 1958). Such people have no experiential knowledge of how others live or make a living and probably don't care. Lower in the occupational strata one often encounters "good union men" who have effectively substituted not only patriotism but civic responsibility as well, with the strategy of "getting into a good union and to hell with everyone else."

These associations based on narrow work loyalties together with the insular home, which sets barriers against relatives not in the "immediate family," hardly serve to bring people into cooperative and good-natured association with people different from themselves.

Third places, especially those which are not insulated by formal membership requirements, often *uniquely* provide a common meeting ground for people with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Depending upon when a person stops in at a third place (and he is, at the same time, unbidden but most welcome), he may chance to meet the friend of a friend; someone's visiting relative; someone new to the area, and perhaps just some of the regulars. Fundamentally and

most importantly, in such places one meets and enjoys a human being who, incidentally and secondarily, repairs appliances or teaches school. In this respect, third places represent one of the important vestiges of community: an experience of mutual concern and appreciation for people who are ostensibly different from oneself.

Perhaps the most telling indication of the appeal of third places is found in the effect such places have upon the individual's sense of time. Most individuals, except in unusual situations, seem able to estimate the time of day within 15 or 20 minutes when they are at home or at work. Very typically, however, time "slips by" unnoticed amid the interesting company afforded by third place association. In an interesting study of what he came to call "flow" association, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) observed that people who enjoy what they are doing "... concentrate their attention on a limited stimulus field, forget their personal problems, lose their sense of time and of themselves, feel competent and in control, and have a sense of harmony and union with their surroundings." It may well be imagined that men of antiquity, those who lived by hunting or tilling small plots of land and for whom time was marked by the cycle of the seasons and the angle of the sun's rays, rather than by degrees of incremental gain toward success goals or the execution of busy daily schedules, found that life itself had a "flow" to it. At least they did not go about with chronometers strapped to their wrists or beeping "pagers" hooked to their belts, the effective leashes of modern organization which jerk individuals into dutiful responsiveness.

The conditions of modern work necessarily bind men to the clock and to the schedule. The extent to which the home also has lost its easy-going character to scheduling, however, was not nearly so predictable. Particularly in the automobile suburbs, daily family life often runs by a tight schedule. Since little is in walking distance, family members must transport themselves or be transported to a wide variety of other locations. But what starts as a necessity easily becomes a device for controlling family members. In this regard, Gail Fullerton (1977:362-365) talks of "rubber fence marriages" wherein the control over scheduling affords security to the essentially insecure spouse or parent. Husbands or wives may characteristically invoke the "scheduling problem" whenever they or

their spouses or children have the opportunity to participate in situations other than those which have been established as safe and predictable.

But even the self-confident tend to find much of daily life and the experiences which it affords highly scheduled and structured. People seem so given to rationality that they tend to think all worthy experiences can be prefabricated. We seem to forget that the most enjoyable and memorable moments of our lives were not really planned. As Samuel Johnson (1759) put it, "Nothing is more hopeless than a scheme of merriment" and yet a lifetime of dull and deadly cocktail parties, those rational extensions of the host's ego, seems not to have brought that truth home to us. Parents are often exasperated by their teenaged children who respond to "Where are you going?" with "No place," and to "What are you going to do?" with "Nothing." The youngsters, to their credit, resist the demand that they subject their lives to rationally purposive scheduling. Perhaps they know that there is little vitality in most prestructured activities.

One of the major theses in *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman, Denney and Glazer, 1950) is that the "other directed man" is a consumer of experience. If this be the case, people's approach to consumption is curious indeed, for increasingly, experience is preplanned, scheduled, organized, goal oriented, rationally defended, overly controlled and commercially packaged. People allow for few uncertainties, avoid risks, preclude surprises, and as Maurice Stein observed, tend to categorize experience prematurely: people "predigest" experience, he insists, even before tasting it. It becomes cliche. As Stein (1960:259) remarks:

> while Midas suffered tortures of starvation, the people under whose eyes every experience turns into a barren cliche do not know that they starve. Their starvation manifests itself merely in boredom or in restless activity and incapacity for any real enjoyment.

The third place, while rarely the forum for dramatic or high-intensity excitement, does involve its participants in spontaneous and free-wheeling social experiences. Boredom, when present, is felt only by those individuals who choose not to participate.

Another aspect of the novelty and diversity of third places concerns the degree of emotional expression that is permitted

and sometimes even expected. Both the home and the work organization tend to inhibit the expressive styles of their members. This phenomenon is most obvious and was first observed in the work setting. Students of large-scale organizations observed many years ago the necessity for "compulsive sociability" at work; that one outburst of righteous indignation might permanently jeopardize a career. The "sweetening" process involves the careful muting of the emotions and the maintenance, always, of an affected sociable and negotiable demeanor. But homes, as well, particularly those which represent the basic training grounds for middle-class career opportunists, also effectively seek to modulate not only feelings of anger and rage but also those of grief or great elation. Sennett (1973:81) has found that conflict, or more properly, perhaps, the *expression* of conflict, is taboo in the intense family. Annabelle Motz (1973:346) applying Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective to the American family, finds that the home is becoming less and less a place where the players might let their hair down, vent their spleens, or take off the "Brady Bunch" or "Waltonesque" masks which signify a deep and abiding love and concern for all other members of the family. The rational society basically distrusts the wisdom of the emotions and, in extreme cases, children grow up unwilling by conditioning, to get genuinely excited about anything.

On the other hand, third places encourage and, indeed, thrive on emotional expressiveness. Both the subject matter and style of conversation in the third place is extraordinarily emotional, as is the very vocabulary used to communicate. Often third place participation is loud and boisterous. It is reassuring to observe that the average person, given the opportunity to let off steam, rarely will be vulgar, obnoxious, or spiteful in the presence of his companions. It is our feeling that a person ought to have a place where he can bellow like a fundamentalist preacher now and then, and not have to confine his protests to cryptic sarcasms at the water cooler or to taking "little digs" at his spouse across the dinner table.

In general, to speak of the lack of diversity and novelty in the home and workplace is to point to the prominence of color in the third place. If a subject, character, setting, or locale has color, it has, by definition, vitality and interest. We

can best appreciate this quality, in the social and cultural sense, by briefly considering those movies or television programs based on "futuristic" or science-fiction plots. The settings are invariably sterile as are the silly uniforms everyone wears, for no writer can possibly invent an entire "culture" with all its trappings. Dazzling gadgetry and technical jargon must be offered excessively to detract from the void in genuine cultural content; apocalyptic plots and cataclysmic events must take the place of deep character development. The "color" in such productions is, for all the dazzle and exotic noises, entirely superficial.

Life here on earth can also be devoid of color. We sense it only vaguely, for the most part, because color is subtracted from life gradually. We begin to see it when we note that young children never get as excited about going to the supermarket as they used to about going to the "Mom and Pop" grocery store on the corner. We sense it when, out of sheer boredom, we sacrifice a little time and leave the interstate highway for the lesser routes along which people may be seen going about their daily lives. We sense it, sometimes on the heels of misfortune, when local calamity brings people together in a rare cooperative effort in the face of common hardship.

Color, by its very nature, is conservative and local; it is, thereby, the complement to new experience as we discussed it earlier. It is the familiar and the personal backdrop against which new experience is made meaningful. Color is manifested in the ritual observances of a people, in their particular brand of civility toward one another, and in their fondness for their own ways. Most of all, though, it is manifested in the substance and content of their daily conversation. Conversation, above all, directly represents the distinctions people make in their daily observations; reflects either the excesses of self-concern or interest in things outside themselves; reveals capacity or incapacity to enjoy the simple things in life. As long as people continue to habituate third places, color will not disappear. Color will decrease in daily life to the extent that people confine their lives to the realms of work and family life. In fact, when third places do lose their color, it is often because they are invaded by people of singular purpose as when "swappers" or "swingers" or businessmen "take over" a location for their worldly pursuits.

Perspective

The other primary benefit of involvement in third places is their contribution to the perspective or mental balance of the individual. We believe one of people's most common conceits is that mental health, or as we refer to it here, perspective, maintains itself. The benefits of diet and exercise seem overemphasized in our society. However, the necessity to subject the products of one's mental processes to the judgment of others is rarely appreciated. When an individual sits down to eat, he knows that he is nourishing his body. When he casually chats with his friends, however, he is rarely, if ever, aware that he is, thereby, keeping in touch with a reality that is always socially constructed and maintained in social interaction.

This process reveals itself most clearly in the case of individuals living without intimate personal ties. Such people characteristically find it difficult to maintain emotional balance or a sound perspective on life. Left alone, they may become irrationally fearful or may delude themselves into thinking that someone has done them a terrible wrong. When these feelings go uncommunicated; when they are not allayed by the reasonable objections and reassurances of others, the individual may come dangerously close to paranoia or depression. We see this in aged people who have been left alone for too long a period of time; we see how, after a brief period of time back with family or old friends, they "come back to normal." But this affliction is not limited to the elderly, it is merely more pronounced among them. All those who live within the web of social life are prone to develop anxieties and insecurities, fears, and aggressive impulses, but most are kept in bounds when communication with others is resumed.

One of the basic handicaps of the insular family arises from the tacit assumption that one's spouse is sufficient audience in this regard. While the importance of "just one other person" can scarcely be overestimated, its sufficiency can be. Many spouses can do little to defuse the other's rage; indeed, some inadvertently feed its fires. In many marriages, furthermore, communication is simply not that good. The deepest fears and resentments may never be verbalized. In still other marriages, husband and wife think "as one" and pathological outlooks may be endorsed rather than checked.

Third places provide a responsive arena for the individual reality constructions of its participants. For all the happy confusion and unresolved arguments which permeate them, an outlook on life *is* asserted in third places. Emerson (1940), we suspect, had this view in mind when he insisted that life is neither intellectual nor critical but sturdy. We persevere. The collective wisdom of regular inhabitants of third places is that people persevere best when they do not make egoistic and unrealistic demands upon the world nor upon those immediately about them. The characteristic view of the third place is that people's institutions are merely foible-ridden ground rules and only the fool would become hyperinvolved in them.

In the third places of the Lower Appalachian mountain men, around the stills and the cracker barrels of that region, the term "scissorbill" is current. Kenneth Rexroth (1975:374-6) informs us that these people have no greater term of contempt and it means a "hick," a workingman so naive that he actually believes that the boss has his best interests at heart. The men who use this term certainly have no interest in organizing local labor. Nor are they cynical, complacent, or apathetic. They are saying, in effect, "Hang on to your dignity and don't make unrealistic demands on life."

In the neighborhood taverns of our society, to take another example, men often refer to their wives as "the old lady," or "the wife," and such sympathy as is extended regarding the less desirable aspects of the marital relationship is reserved for the male. Yet, there is no intent to harm or disparage the marital bond. Again, the language and the attitude are debunking ones, admonishing the individual not to overly glorify marriage; not to expect too much from it. And, just as the debunking themes in the social sciences are said to keep its students and practitioners from becoming Utopians or True Believers, so the conversational experiences of the third place do the same for the average person.

The maintenance of perspective has become more difficult in the postindustrial period. The rapidity of social change, the fragmentation of society, the increasing uncertainty about the future, and the escalating disclosures of social problems and strains within the system are one set of challenges to the individual's perspective. The pervasive mass media bring ominous tidings daily to every home in the land. The world takes on the cast of a chaotic, but deterministic and unchangeable

social structure. Under such conditions, a healthy measure of role distance becomes important in the retention of mental perspective. For it is role distance that transforms structure into process; that changes one's awareness of society in such a way that "giveness becomes possibility" (Berger, 1963:136). Role distance enables people to make deliberate use of their society in accordance with their own purposes. In this context, the individual can experience both a sense of freedom and a sense of personal control. At the same time, this ability to step aside from one's world, if ever so occasionally, restores one's faith in humankind. Here the average person may debunk the establishment and all those who would reform it with impunity, and before his profound exclamations cease to echo throughout the room, they will no doubt be negated or amended by others. In such places, people intuitively recognize that what they have *in that situation* is worth far more than their moral speculation, petty prejudices, or political ideologies.

CONCLUSIONS

We have argued that much of the discontent of contemporary Americans can be understood as a consequence of the increasing narrowness of people's spheres of involvement with others. We feel that too many people have organized their life styles almost exclusively around efforts to achieve satisfaction at home and at work. They have ignored what we believe is a crucial sphere of human experience, that being an active involvement in a third place. This is not to imply that the home and workplace are necessarily repressive or even negative features of social life. It is only that people are expecting too much of these obviously vital aspects of their social existence. At the same time, participation in third places does not, in our eyes, detract from an individual's involvement at home and work. In fact, we feel it complements and supports such involvement. Third places provide *enabling,* not escapist, experiences for their inhabitants. They are a forum for "play" in a society interfused with a stubborn commitment to work and purposiveness. Association in third places envelops individuals in a temporary world within their ordinary worlds. "Into the confusion of life it brings a temporary,

a limited perfection" (Huizinga, 1955). We feel that such experiences can only help, not hinder, the development of meaningful interaction at home and work. It seems to us that a satisfactory execution of life style cannot help but be abetted by a playful involvement in a larger round of life.

NOTES

[1]A number of social analysts have commented on these issues. See, for instance, Christopher Lasch, *Haven In A Heartless World: The Family Beseiged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Richard Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); and Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves: Madmen, Clutter and Vine* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1976).

[2]A rather pessimistic analysis of this conviction is found in Edwin Schur, *The Awareness Trap: Self Absorption Instead of Social Change* (New York: Quadrangle-New York Times, 1976).

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