

AAT VOS

Can cultural institutions be third places?

Giving away control

Once upon a time, our societies were inclusive by nature. We, the people, took care of most of our social, educational, safety and medical functions. In some rural communities that is still the case. Yet as societies and economies grew, especially in the Western world, most of these functions were outsourced and transferred to institutions. As a consequence, normal everyday care became institutionalized. We handed over basic social functions to institutions to have them take care of us, our education, our healthcare, our cultural needs, etc. This led on the one hand to an increase in the power of institutions, and on the other to decreasing control over the way we rule our communities, the rise of social bubbles and a focus on rights rather than obligations. Thus, a society that excludes is born, while the influence of people on society decreases. This phenomenon is beautifully illustrated by Cormac Russell and John McKnight in their »Hydraulics of Community Power« (2019): a »people's piston« is pushed down, whereas an »institutional piston« is pushed upwards, gaining in importance and shifting functions from one side to the other. Russell and McKnight seek a turnaround; they encourage the people's piston to push upwards as a way of reempowering societies, enabling us to return to our social origins. People used to take care of each other and should strive to do so once again.

Need for public space

So in the old days our public spaces had become exclusive. They belonged only to those who had the power, time and money to even think about enjoying them. In »The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere« (Habermas 1962), the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas describes the transformation of the public sphere from what has been an elite privilege into something all social layers will have to experience at the end of the day. He talks about the public sphere as a ba-

sic need for democracy – »We need free room for rational discussion on public issues« – and in a sense paved the way for the American Sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) to introduce his concept of the »third place«. Habermas also includes an individual benefit from entering into a public sphere, asserting that »only by externalization, by entering into social relationships, can we develop the interiority of our own person«. More recently, the American sociologist and urban scientist Eric Klinenberg stressed the importance of social places for the creation of inclusive and healthy local communities in his book »Palaces for the People« (2018: 4).

Definition of third place, as coined by Ray Oldenburg (1989, Wikipedia 2019a): A third place is a social place in the public domain. It is a freely accessible place where people can meet, hang out, discuss, gather, work, help, enjoy each other's company. It is open to all, caters for a stay (clean restrooms, provides food & drinks), is around the corner, of great importance to its users and enables users to take ownership of the place itself and the way it is programmed. It is, with the words of Nina Simon (2019), »Of + By = For All«.

The origin of third places

Now, if third places are an exemplification of what Habermas, Oldenburg and Klinenberg all describe as a basic need, how do they come about in a time when people tend to outsource »social functions«, as Russell and McKnight have shown? How can they help to push up the people's piston again? There are probably three ways third places can arise. The first and most natural way is when they are founded spontaneously by people themselves, because the need for such a place just arose. It happened because it occurred. An example of this can be found in Garaget, a small workshop/library near Malmö, Sweden, that started off as a repair cafe by and for locals in a small garage, and later gained momentum by teaming up with local public library services. Garaget is a perfect example of people taking back control as Russell and McKnight's »hydraulics« push former institutionalized functionality back towards the people.

The second way third places can arise is when they are built intentionally by for-profit private parties. Although one can question their social motives, companies like Starbucks, Espresso House, Joe & the Juice and others are creating places designed to make you feel at home away from home, as they cater for you to spend your time. These commercial third places meet almost all the requirements of the Oldenburg definition except for ownership and free accessibility, as users are expected to purchase while spending time. In other words, hanging out means spending money, not exactly the unconditional intention Oldenburg had in mind. More of these privately owned »social« concepts show up every day, as the recent roll-out of »3DEN«¹ in the US shows. However, one can ask if they really promote inclusivity as they tend to focus on very specific user groups.

1 See <https://www.businessinsider.com/3den-hudson-yards-coworking-nap-shower-meditate-photos-2019-3#after-my-tour-i-found-myself-impressed-by-what-3den-offers-for-only-6-for-30-minutes-28> (latest visit: 25.11.2019)

The third way these places can emerge is by transforming cultural public places into third places. In a sense, this happens when formerly exclusive functions that pushed up Russell and McKnight's institutional piston push back themselves towards the people's piston. Examples include theatres, sports facilities, houses of culture/cultural centers, youth clubs, libraries and the like. This is a remarkable development, since to become a true third place these cultural places with mostly pre-designated programs have to become less institutional, and therefore by definition need to give up parts of their authority. When it comes to places for the people, one would naturally expect people to take control (as the example in Malmö shows). Here, however, cultural institutions deliberately push parts of their *raison d'être* back towards society. An example of this movement is currently being developed in the city of Enschede (NL), where a theatre, an art school, a music school, an opera house, a pop music venue and a library have physically merged to become a »public living room«, open to all (Vos 2019a). Another example can be found in Chester (UK), where the StoryHouse² successfully operates a theatre, cinema, restaurant and library combined. In both cases, cultural institutions open up their stages for »things that happen«, as the Danish architect Ivar Moltke would say. So are cultural institutions stepping back in order to move forward in their development?

Cultural places as third places

If cultural places are to become third places in the Oldenburg manner, it is of course not just a matter of changing the interior design into a gentrification-proof, hipster-style, vintage look & feel. In fact, it is not like that at all. First and foremost, it is the way people – users – are taken into account. Probably one of the best examples of how to involve users is shown by Nina Simon and her »Of + By = For All« team (Simon 2019), a method which originated from drawing in users of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, a place which seemed to have lost its relevance. Simon developed a way of involving neighbors and local communities in programming the museum that resulted in long-lasting adaptation; she is now helping other cultural institutions to do the same. Their secret? Listening to what really mattered in the Santa Cruz community. Similarly, in our own work, we always investigate the communities we work in, train our clients to talk with and listen to their users, look for latent needs and take obvious findings seriously because only »people give meaning to places«³. We do this through something we call »user-investigations«. There is no excuse for not taking users into account.

Time well spent

There are at least two ways these insights should be used. First, an essential quality of what should happen at any third place is people spending time. This raises an

2 See <https://www.storyhouse.com> (latest visit: 25.11.2019)

3 A quote by Ivan Reis at Amsterdam City Event, June 8th, 2017

interesting challenge for cultural institutions, as most of these locations are not designed for »just« spending time; they often consist of single-purpose rooms that are either dressed to impress or limited in size, like classic theatres and lobbies, or designed as practical, service-oriented environments, like conventional libraries. How do you turn them into places where people like to spend their time? According to Joe Pine II and James Gilmore in their updated edition of the influential »Experience Economy« (2019), one needs an »experience« to do the job. Merely creating room for »services« only leads to »time well saved«. Experiences, according to Pine and Gilmore, are individual and customized valuations of the way we conceive an environment, and as a result help to create places we like to spend our time in. This showcases the need for user-investigations again. So at the end of the day, if all of this input really does mean an atmosphere should have a gentrification-proof, hipster-style, vintage look & feel, well then ... make it happen!

From context to content

Second, apart from the way a place looks, user insights should also be used to determine programming. Oldenburg, again, is quite clear on this: by definition, users should be able to take ownership of and participate in activities in a third place. This opening up of stages might seem quite a challenge for traditional cultural institutions whose role in the institutional piston has long been to take care of matters themselves. Now, as the people's piston is pushed up, things inevitably change. How this challenge can be handled is perhaps to be found in the definitions of cultural institutions themselves.

Let us look at two examples of cultural institutions, both confronted with the question: can they be a third place by nature? Taking theatres first, Stanislavski's definition of theatre put spectators in consumer mode and »treated the theatre as an that is from and one in which the 's contribution should be respected as that of only one of an ensemble of creative artists« (Wikipedia 2019b). However, both older and newer definitions see spectators as having a more contributive mode (Bennett 1988: 2ff.) and describe theatre as a place that includes spectators – similar to the social aspect Habermas speaks of. Second, libraries: the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (IFLA 1994) makes it quite clear that »fostering intercultural dialogue and favoring cultural diversity« is one of the main objectives of any library. In this respect, theatres and libraries are (or at least were and could again be) inherently well-suited to being (partially) a third place. They ought to welcome user participation in and contribution to content and programming.

Essentials

Now that we know they can, it is good to learn about some of the essential conditions these cultural third places need to meet. Environmental psychologist Aga Skorpuska uses the »Hierarchy of needs in public space« (2017), based on among

others Alfonso M.A. (2005), who describes essential conditions for any public place, including third places. The first and foremost condition, according to Skorupka, is visibility. What's the use of making anything at all when it can't be seen? The same also goes, of course, for accessibility, universal access and so on. The second is usability; a place should be self-explanatory, usable, hospitable and clear. The third is safety, both social and physical, as it goes without saying that an unsafe space will never gain momentum. Finally, the fourth essential condition is comfort, in any sense, whether aesthetic, acoustic, visual or bodily. Any uncomfortable place will only be used for as short a time as possible, whereas a third place, as we now know, is meant for spending time, as comfortably as possible. Only when these four essential criteria are met is a public place able to create engagement and become more social, as a brief review of our own work has recently shown (Vos 2019b).

So can cultural places be third places?

Yes, they can. They can, as long as they welcome all, stimulate the emancipation of minorities, embrace differences and create equal opportunities for all. Because if they are open to all, for all, if they are able to step aside and allow others to take ownership of the place, atmosphere and program, cultural third places can contribute to a more inclusive society, which is one of their main objectives. Cultural institutions can, then, help society to get back to its natural roots of inclusivity.

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