

Museums as Third Places or What?

Accessing the Social Without Reservations

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Abstract

The applicability of the “Third Place” concept to museums is considered relative to moving visitors from the position of users to that of stakeholders in a cultural institution. In this move, experiences are an integral part of the creation of Third Places. Stories are produced and arranged within the museum context that have varying external effects, a consequence that this paper argues can and should be integrated into the creation of Third Places as not only co-creative moments in time, but also landmarks. In this capacity, the distinctions between volunteer, visitor, participant and stakeholder become less clear. Through a diverse set of case studies, ranging from contemporary art centers to heritage museums, this article assesses the multiple roles of these institutions as social, civic, and participatory venues. Pragmatically, as museum staff sizes either stagnate or shrink, developing venues as expanded Third Places where visitors become more active as fully engaged and participatory stakeholders is an important step in long-term institutional sustainability.

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Introduction

Sustainable engagement with the public creates the potential for museums and other cultural heritage institutions to function as venues of participation for addressing pressing social issues in the 21st century. The engaged museum is poised to become the activist in supporting community-organizing efforts as much as it can also function as “home away from home.” McCarter, Boge and Darlow (2001), when discussing the vital role natural history museums play in conservation efforts, explain that “the challenge of articulating the importance of museums...extends beyond problems of awareness” (p. 2099). In fact, many museums face the challenge of *re-imagining* their image within a community (Connolly & Tate, 2011). Regardless, the location of the museum at the heart of many communities is ideal for fostering dialogue between individuals and public institutions; for providing a neutral ground upon which to build relationships; and, most importantly, for incorporating community members as equal partners in the creation of cultural heritage products. By drawing upon sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s (1989) concept of the “Third Place,” many museums are beginning to consider calls to action through civic engagement in new ways. The civic model implicit in the American Alliance of Museum’s 2002 publication, *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, puts forward an understanding of civic engagement as a means of building relationships that allows museums to foster a diverse set of interactions with the public (Little, 2007; Shackel, 2009). This article asks if the Third Place concept can be used to enhance the position of museums as forces of civic engagement and social cohesion.

Public institutions have grappled with questions of relevancy, participation, and activism for almost two decades (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Moody, 2011; Simon, 2010). More recently, the context, demographics, and prospects for sustainability are changing rapidly for public institutions, especially with regard to their status as creators and stewards of knowledge. Active engagement and open doors to community members is quickly becoming the rule, not the exception. But, even with the doors set wide, held back with a rock from the drive, how do you get the

community through them and into the museum, functioning as active participants away from their homes?

To be clear, this analysis is not simply about what qualifies as a Third Place and what does not. The following case studies explore Oldenburg's concept of the Third Place in public engagement as a heuristic device. The application is useful for moving cultural heritage management and interpretation from the academy to the public and back again. These case studies may be useful for imagining how civic institutions like the museum can become repositories of public memory alongside professional interpretations of the past.

But, how do you implement a plan to create a Third Place in the museum context? Or, what if the true concept of the Third Place, as envisioned by Oldenburg, doesn't fit into the museum context? How do we define the socio-spatial function of the museum in efforts to engage the public more fully?

Third Places Then and Now, or What?

Over the past few years many heritage professionals have engaged in an escalating dialogue with multiple geographic and constituent communities about the role of the museum as a public institution. Specifically, these conversations focus on how heritage institutions will function as a place for community engagement and fulfill their role as a social asset to their respective publics. The engagement is not just a matter of building attendance and revenue streams, but is central to the museum's function as a community stakeholder and partner.

Out of these varied community dialogues one can identify several desirable elements of engagement that have the potential to mold museums and cultural heritage institutions. One of these elements has centered on the museum as a Third Place. Oldenburg (1989) defines a Third Place as "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.... The first place is home—the most important place of all. The second place is the work setting, which reduces the individual to a single, productive role." In

a rather circuitous presentation, he argues for Third Places as “neutral grounds” (p. 22), “the great leveler” (p. 23) of guests “to a condition of social equality” (p. 42). He notes that “the game is conversation and the Third Place is home court” (p. 31). At the same time he notes that Third Places are usually gender specific, and his examples of coffee houses and bars seem more of a harkening back to the “good old days” of an Andy of Mayberry than anything particularly relevant to the contemporary museum environment.

On her blog, *Museum 2.0*, Nina Simon engaged in a five-week book study that considered the application to museums of Oldenburg’s concept of a Third Place. After a brief investigation she found it to be quite limiting,

I [Simon] used to think museums and libraries should be Third Places, but this book opened my eyes to how far they are from being so. Museums are explicitly about something, and Third Places are about nothing in particular. Third Places facilitate engagement among patrons, whereas museums and libraries deliver services to patrons.

She concludes her discussion by pointing to some of the benefits Oldenburg’s description of the Third Place might have for museums, settling on the reality of a trade-off between some aspects of the museum service model and some aspects of the open forum Third Place.

Museologist Elaine Gurian (2010: July 1 M2.0) responded to Simon’s *Museums 2.0* blog critical of Oldenburg agreeably, suggesting instead that the space needs to first be a safe place or congregant space for people to assemble without the need to interact. In a similar vein, Fischer and Johnson (2010: June 29 M2.0) are critical of the lack of restrictions or guidelines of Third Places as applied to a museum context. Even the most favorable applications in the literature of the Third Place to museums (Kiehl, 2010: June 15 M2.0) do not account for the fourteen dollar per adult and ten dollar per child admission fees that are clearly highly restrictive to many. Lawrence (2010: June 8 M2.0) presents the interesting notion of museums not functioning as Third Places but in fact networking with Third Places in the surrounding community.

This discussion suggests that many of Simon's contributors find that the Third Place model, though seemingly attractive at its core, simply cannot engage the diversity of visitors at a typical museum. However, that does not mean that museum practitioners worldwide aren't *adapting* the conceptual model of a Third Place as elemental to fit their strategies for community engagement. Within these adaptations one can find a real potential for the applicability of the Third Place, or some aspects of it, in the museum context. What we choose to call these elemental applications is less central to understanding how to successfully engage the public than is understanding the conditions of application and the resources required to achieve some level of long-term success.

With this elementally adaptive nature of the Third Place in mind, let us turn now to several case studies that demonstrate its applicability. These studies ask and subsequently answer the question: Should museum practitioners attempt to hold the Third Place in its truest Oldenburgian form as that which will solve issues of community engagement within the museum context? Or, is it better to integrate some elemental form of the Third Place model into programming that wishes to create sustainable relationships and stakeholders, and increase relevancy to the public?

Open Field: Conversations on the Commons

The first page of the 2012 volume, *Open Field: Conversations on the Commons*, reads simply in large, bold letters, "Together." This unique manuscript is the product of a creative effort at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis that takes place on their big green yard. Open Field as a program for the museum saw its final iteration in the summer of 2012, leaving those writing the pieces in *Open Field* to reflect on the expenditure of resources that went into the program, and how this approach differed from those of many other institutions because it "debunks the mindset of false scarcity informing the way many institutions dole out, or protect, their cultural capital" (Dietz et al., 2012, p. 138).

The cover illustration provides a lot of information about what the commons is all about. Pictures of binoculars and pencils and hammers are all set in a pleasing green background.

In an editor's note (p. 8) the tools represented on the cover are described as those that are employed to create the commons by participants and that "illustrate the divergent and unconventional apparatus of the endeavor as a whole." The Walker Art Center is mobilizing the concept of the commons, based on gift economies where participants give to spread the wealth with no expectation of an equal exchange, to embody a "philosophical and programmatic framework to imagine a new kind of public gathering space" (p. 19). Editor Sarah Schultz goes on to explain the idea of the commons, "Grounded in the belief that creative agency is a requirement for sustaining a vital public and civic sphere, it nurtures the free exchange of ideas, experimentation, and serendipitous interactions" (p. 19).

If you flip through the pages of *Open Field*, you find several reflections, interviews, and, most importantly, a plethora of photographs of the public participating in the commons together. Each contributor to the volume highlights the necessity of the commons to the Walker's strategy for generating engagement with, and ultimately relevancy to, the public they seek to serve. The open field itself is a large open area located adjacent to the Walker Art complex and the multi-acre outdoor sculpture garden and conservatory. The complex is located adjacent to Loring Park, a favored location for urban residents of Minneapolis to congregate because it offers plenty of space to create in the heart of the city. But, how does a Third Place compare to or integrate within the concept of the commons in *Open Field*? The commons, as described by many of those contributing to the volume, is a space where creativity is inhibited only by the capacity of an individual to treat the space they are offered with respect. In Oldenburg's framework, he encourages a space that is accessible, playful, and most importantly, meant to build community. It certainly seems plausible that the Open Field program has all of these characteristics working for it. The call to be a commons implies there is some form of community expectation that will inevitably involve the exchange of some medium through interaction. Nevertheless, it doesn't foreclose the possibility of also functioning as, or adapting some elements of, a Third Place, especially for those members

of the public seeking an environment outside of the home that provides them stability and an outlet.

The Walker Art Center focuses primarily on the experience and circulation of works of art (including music, dance, and other performances). Such a focus allows for the creation of a program where the public can come and use the Center's resources to make their own art, which can remain, if one so chooses, on display throughout the three-month period when the field is open. What is critical to consider here is that the art remains in the space the community inhabits and creates, sustaining it through the resultant social network. As an example of a Third Place, the Open Field program at the Walker Art Center is certainly relevant for thinking of place creating as an elemental step in engagement. The fact that the artwork produced on the field remains there to be displayed is all the more telling of how the commons operate in the field to produce an environment connected to, but sovereign from, the Center, living into Oldenburg's desired effect of a neutral environment. However, the Open Field program at the Walker Art Center moves beyond 'the game of conversation,' asking its participants to produce and circulate works of art. The Open Field then, necessarily moves beyond Gurian's and Oldenburg's assertions about conversational exchange to embrace a material component. While it is undeniable that much of what makes the Open Field a success relates to elements of the Third Place Oldenburg envisioned, not all criteria are met. Consequently, I will also consider an alternative museum program that engages in place making as an essential step in community engagement to show that the Third Place is alive elsewhere in a different form.

Third Places and Volunteer Programming

One can see elements of a Third Place concept in the social settings of long-term volunteer programs at museums. For example, the archaeology volunteer program at the Cincinnati Museum Center has been in existence for over 30 years. In a recent interview, Curator of Archaeology Bob Genheimer explicated an operation that seemed to approximate much of the Third Place concept. He noted,

The archaeology lab is a gathering place where dissimilar people gather to have fun, tell stories, and play practical jokes. It is a place where politics are avoided, bad jokes are told, and lots of hard work is accomplished. I would like to say it is the archaeology that holds them together, but I know it is this unique social environment that allows them to be a community....That connection or social bond, is perhaps the most important aspect of a successful volunteer program. (2011: March 14 AMO)

Genheimer continues,

Throughout the years I have come to recognize two factors that strongly affect volunteer retention. The first is a sense of family. We all know each other, we know our spouses and kids names, and we even know our [pets'] names. There is a strong social bond to volunteering, it is not just an opportunity to wash flint flakes, but to catch up on friends and stories. Without this bond, the volunteers have no connection, and are hence reluctant to remain for a protracted time. But we do note the distinction of the purpose is being there. (2011: March 14 AMO)

Genheimer highlights a few critical components of Oldenburg's Third Place schema in his evaluation above. The museum volunteers in this case are on neutral ground: "It is a place where politics are avoided, bad jokes are told," the volunteers are part of "a strong social bond," they have "a sense of family," they act as a "community," implying a leveling, regulars, playful mood, and most importantly for Oldenburg, "a home away from home" (1989, p. 22). These attributes of the museum environment lead to sustained engagement in the museum space. But, for Bob, it is the idea of drawing in "The Regulars" that captures his attention (1989, pp. 33–36). The focus on the "work" of archaeology is enough to push against the idea of "conversation as the main activity," reflecting Simon's critique of the Third Place when applied to museums as being about something in particular.

At the Sunwatch Village, a circa 1200–1500 AD Native American site and museum near Dayton, Ohio, Site Manager Andy Sawyer developed regular gatherings of the Native American community via the Miami Valley Flute Circle for

concerts and socializing. These public concerts have a strong community-building component. Visitors are encouraged to bring their picnic dinners, visit, and turn the gathering into a true social event. The Flute Circle is different from the typical festival or powwow event in their regularity (monthly) and the community component of both Native and non-Native participants. Conceptually, the Flute Circle is similar to a series of Sunday evening concerts in the park or coffee house acoustic performances, only in a museum setting. Of added significance at Sunwatch is the relevancy of a Native American musical form being played in a traditional Native American setting.

Do we see in Sunwatch's Flute Circles a real adherence to all the principles of the Third Place concept? People come together on level ground to commune with one another. Importantly, the space is not created for the purpose of work. Picnics are shared and conversations are had in a playful, relaxed, neutral museum setting. A past participant described the space as a unique one where Native and non-Native visitors come together and interact in ways not normally fostered in the museum environment. But, the critical analyst must ask, why do the participants come? And the answer, again, is not just to converse and be away from their first (home) and second (work) places, they come to share the musical art form of the Miami Valley Flute Circle. The setting at Sunwatch Village is closely aligned with an ideal Third Place, with the addition of a musical element.

So far, I have analyzed volunteer programming as discrete events offered up for Third Place consideration. But, what about the museum as a whole, a continuous, potential Third Place? The volunteer program at the C.H. Nash Museum (CHNM) in Memphis, Tennessee, is based in the best elements of the Cincinnati Museum example. A thank you note is written to all volunteers after their monthly participation. In the fall of each year, the museum hosts a volunteer appreciation dinner where there is a review of the past year's activities and a presentation of the next year's annual action plan for the museum. A social component is added to all volunteer events, ranging from spear throwing to drumming circles, to coffee and snacks at sorting tables.

CHNM attempts to integrate the volunteer into the group as a whole. The flute circle at Sunwatch has also been quite instructive in terms of the social component at the CHNM. Traditionally, the museum hosted a single festival event each year. In evaluating these programs, the museum staff found that they were less mission driven and more attendance or revenue driven. That is, if the weather held, they could generate attendance and revenue figures in a single weekend to balance out for doing nothing the rest of the year. Although not opposed to large type events, staff at the CHNM has found that the most sustainable social relations come from the smaller but more regularly offered events, such as nature walks, family day programs and so forth. Importantly, these are all ongoing, giving visitors a reason to come back, and not typically done at other local museums.

The director of the museum, Robert Connolly, anticipates asking volunteers to take on additional coordinating and presentation roles. He has found that by creating an environment like that described by Bob Genheimer, and exemplified by Sunwatch Village, volunteers now feel more comfortable asking for new projects, new learning experiences, and engaging in more co-creative ways with the museum heritage products. Volunteers are now able to exert some agency over their role within the museum space. For example, members of the avocational Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society (MAGS) who participated in regular Volunteer Day activities over the past two years proposed to collectively increase their role as an organization. Beginning in the spring of 2013, MAGS will meet at the CHNM monthly to identify curated collections that are suitable for analysis and subsequent exhibit in county libraries or other public venues throughout West Tennessee. They will then work with students from the Museum Studies Graduate Certificate Program at the University of Memphis to develop these exhibits.

At the C.H. Nash Museum elements of a Third Place exist. There is a non-committal leveling space for many, especially those entering the environment anew, but importantly, the space also serves as a catalyst for volunteers to become stakeholders, always allowing them the ability to return back to the social capacity in

which they originally became involved. Most importantly, the museum allows them to feel comfortable enough to challenge the authority of the museum's interpretation of heritage.

What seems to distinguish the Cincinnati Museum Center and Sunwatch Village is the restricted or purpose driven nature of the engagements, and for the C.H. Nash Museum the accumulation of ongoing small projects on museum grounds open to all. Upon evaluation of each program, museum staff find that "a sense of family," or the regularity of a setting that blends heritage with recreation, or the creation of a space that functions to empower the volunteer, are all critical components to increased civic engagement and the opening of the museum's authority to public input. We see this opening most clearly in the example of the CHNM, where volunteers now take part in the everyday functioning of the museum and a recent influx of stakeholders has led to co-created community projects ranging from Black History Month celebrations to relationships with the federal Americorps program. Each instance of adapting some elements of the Third Place has led to an increased public relevancy for the museum and, subsequently, a more sustainable environment for both staff and visitor.

Discussion

The concept of the Third Place, introduced by Oldenburg and transformed by museum professionals, may not be a definitive model for thinking about the core elements of building community engagement programs within public institutions. However, the above case studies show that there are definite benefits to adapting certain elements of the Third Place concept that depend on the resources and setting of a museum program.

One can observe in the example of the Open Field program at the Walker Art Center a clear necessity in neutral space creating, in order for the creative work of the public to materialize. Without an inviting environment constituted by the shared experience of the museum visitor, Open Field would face extreme challenges in living its mission of interaction and co-creation. The Walker Art Center has captured the essence of the "home away from home" element of

a Third Place, while also encouraging a commons atmosphere that adds appeal through a complexity of possible relationships within the program. The authority of the museum is opened to visitors by asking them to create and share their art in museum space. Yet what happens to this art after Open Field closes for the summer, and now for good? Without a permanent representation how do we evaluate the sustainability of the relationships created during the program? Regardless, Open Field fosters very diverse sets of interactions with museum visitors, taking steps to operationalize the American Alliance of Museums's 2002 call to civic engagement within museum practices.

Volunteer and community recreation programs are also a rich source for thinking about how the mere creation of an environment that functions as a safe, relaxed space outside the home can actually lead to a deeper investment of volunteers, subsequently producing museum stakeholders. When volunteers at the Cincinnati Museum Center and the C.H. Nash Museum were invited to become co-creators of the knowledge being shared, a new environment was produced, one that flourished through a combination of casual conversation and playful interaction. As volunteers became more invested in the museum, they became more interested in giving their input regarding museum programming and exhibition. Because an environment of trust and community existed, the museum staff was able to co-create content with volunteers, thereby successfully opening up the authoritative practices of the museum, and they carry on with these efforts today. In both cases discussed here the primacy of the bond established within the museum space cannot and should not be underestimated.

At Sunwatch Village, the Third Place concept resonates most strongly, but it also comes with a musical caveat. The space is less about neutrality and more about sharing the products of the Flute Circle's heritage. While it is easy to assume that conversation and playfulness abound at the regular meetings of the circle, it is just as easy to imagine the necessity for the creation of a safe space, per Elaine Gurian's comments on Oldenburg, before conversations between a Native and the average non-Native visitor can take place.

Our jobs as museum professionals, then, are to take these experiences generated from the public's inclination towards the creation of neutral, level, and playful spaces and allow them to actualize through the way we plan our programs and structure our expectations about the outcomes of such programs. As we become successful at integrating aspects of a Third Place element into museum programming, the channels for moving visitors from passive receptors of museum content to actively engaged stakeholders are opened. Increased investment of the public also generates trust that can be translated into the co-creation of museum content, and the breakdown of authorities that have traditionally held the visitor behind the glass. The Third Place concept when applied to museums in a rigid manner according to the case studies presented here would, in fact, detract from the successful outcomes of civic engagement and social cohesion in each context.

This analysis, while showing that the Third Place as Oldenburg envisioned it is not necessarily an appropriate programming tool for museums, does not contend that it should be ignored. Understanding the elemental nature of the Third Place offers museum practitioners a toolkit to pull from and adapt to their various sets of resources, needs, and environments. When studied as a concept full of potential that only needs articulation at the local level, the Third Place actually reminds practitioners that we need to not only be able to explain the relevancy of what we are doing to anyone who inquires, we also need to be able to search for and find those with questions that have never even been asked. The first step in this process should necessarily consider the environment a visitor enters from the start of his or her experience. We can call this method of dissecting and reassembling the Third Place concept whatever we like. There are eight principles in Oldenburg's original concept, and we could call the museum model an eight eighths place. The important point is to keep working on strategies and developing tools for expanding our approaches to civic engagement.

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