

Café as third place and the creation of a unique space of interaction in UI Campus

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Abstract. The emergence of modern cafés is an interesting phenomenon in the city and it is related to globalization and the creation of urban public space. This paper explores the idea of café as third place and social interaction occurs in the café with Starbucks café as the focus of discussion. We argue that modern café like Starbucks offers a comforting and neutral ground for social interaction but some other characteristic of social interaction come up as the result of modern technology. Oldenburg distinguishes third places as public places on neutral ground where people can gather and interact (Oldenburg, 1991). In contrast to first places (home) and second places (work), third places serve as places for creative and social interaction and often considered anchors of community life. The characteristic of cafés as third space relates to the social interaction occurs at the neighborhood that in terms may enhances quality of life and provide social bounding. With the development of information technology, some characteristics of third places are changed although third places still become an important medium for social interaction as well as in increasing the ability of the city to be more adaptable to changes. Conversation is still the main activity at third place but many people use their electronic devices alongside face-to-face conversations. As a method, this study uses direct observations and qualitative analyses of UI Starbucks in as case studies.

Keywords: third place, café, public space

1. Introduction

In *Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg (1999) emphasizes the importance of neighborhood gathering places in enhancing the lives of people. Oldenburg defines these gathering locations as third places, and further states that third places are not home nor work, but a place between home and work where people spend their time as a community. Oldenburg describes third places 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” (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16). Beside home and work, people needs informal social spaces, or third places, that provide an opportunity to connect with the people in communities and give a balance to the increased privatization of public life.

The concept of "third place" is related to the concept of public, which is defined by Habermas as "the site of collective performance that brings together those who are different from one another precisely because they are different." (Habermas 1956). He argues that it is the architectural nature of the classic seventeenth century coffeehouses (a large room with a large table) and the nature of media found therein (gazettes read aloud and discussed) that shaped our understanding of public.

There are many coffee shops in the city and their existence is closely woven into the social lives of consumers. Coffee shops or cafés can be labeled as “third places,” or public spaces that accommodate the regular, voluntary, and informal gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work. Through the years, the idea of a coffee shop has changed especially in relation to the development of modernization; drinking coffee in a fancy coffee shop becomes a lifestyle. Conversation is added with or replaced by laptop, tablets, and mobile phones. As a result, the idea of third place takes different shapes and plays different roles in allowing social interaction is called into



question, as well as our understanding of public. However, the main function of the coffee shops remains the same: as a space for social engagement and networking.

Oldenburg's third places have the following characteristics:

- neutral ground, in which people can enter and leave the space whenever they want and none are required to play host.
- a social leveler or a level-playing field for participants where people come and interact freely. In the third places individuals can select their associates and third places serve to expand possibilities.
- conversation is the main activity of a third place.
- good accessibility and accommodation; third places must be accessible for people and can accommodate their needs.
- the regulars; third places have some regulars that help to give the space its characteristic so that the places attract people.
- a low profile; third places have a homely feel and accept all types of individuals.
- playful mood; the tone of conversation in third places are never marked with tension but they have a playful nature.
- a home away from home or a place with psychological comfort that occupants might expect at home. Occupants of third places have the same feelings of warmth and feel a piece of themselves is rooted in the space.

There are some critiques and changes to the idea of Oldenburg's third places. As Rosenbaum (2007) asserts, for some people third places can provide a more psychological support than homes do. The concepts of "home" and "comfort" are heavily influenced by personal experience, cultural background, and social class, that means coffee shops are not necessarily homes away from home even for people who regularly go to coffee shops. Some people, such as those who do not have a designated office space or want a change of scenery, use the coffee shop as an office away from office.

Pozos-Brewer (2015) argues that there is no neutral space instead space is related to power dynamics and social hierarchies. The locations of coffee shops is not neutral anymore because the presence of coffee shop indicates a reproduction of social norms of the neighborhood. For instance, the owners of cafés have some rules and have the right to enforce those rules to guests who come to their cafés. There are some etiquettes that guide the behaviors of people who visit cafés. Other critic addresses the low profile character because in reality most people do not come to a café to meet strangers but they may plan a meeting or just want to spend some times alone. Moreover, people who come to a café create invisible boundaries so that they are not disturbed by other people. The claim that third places are for neighbors to meet each other does not necessarily apply to a city, thus, cafés are not places that necessarily lead to an interaction with complete strangers. Most third places in the city are no longer open as long as the sixteen-hours a day of the early English coffee houses. Bars open in the evening while coffee shops usually close around 9 PM. In short, cafés have their own target customers, although there are some exceptions to the norm.

In relation to the regulars or customers who come frequently to a café and help determine its social character, Pozos-Brewer (2015) argues that the baristas still count people who frequently come to get coffee to go as regulars, although those people spend only little time in the coffee shop and do not contribute as much to the social dynamic of the space. On the contrary, the fact that people come in and out as well as stay adds to the coffee shop's flexible nature. Third places no longer have low profiles but to have at least 'middle-class standards' for cleanliness and some cafés are well designed in order to brand themselves and be better able to compete. Playfulness does not dominate the atmosphere anymore but the ambiance of flexible spaces is more important because flexible spaces

allow for different kind of interactions and moods. In addition, cafés today have more formal and sometimes unspoken barriers to enter. Not only that people need to pay for their drink, but usually they need to behave according to a standard such as clothing and manners. Consumerism and consumption affects our societies and creates the contours of our identity by possessing modern products as part of normal standards.

Mobile phones and laptops were rare when Oldenburg developed his definitions of third places. Today's common methods of communication includes phone call, texting, email, and some social media. The emergence of electronic devices allows for virtual connection that now dominate our communication. It is common to see people who choose to engage with social media rather than talk to people in a café. The use of communication technology like mobile phones in physical places isolates people (Anacleto & Fels 2013) and some cultures even prefer the use of new technology over physical contact with other persons (Turkle 2011). Gadgets and communication technology give virtual space for people to interact with each other, but in reality people still need physical contacts and a café offers an ability to transform online space into an offline space (Harrison and Dourish 1996; Tuan 2001). Moreover, a café can fulfill the need for and an opportunity of observing what others are doing in public spaces (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone 1992) and virtual spaces (Khalid & Dix 2009)

The paper discusses third places in a campus area and how Starbucks café – as an example of third place – becomes a space for social interaction in campus that enhance the quality of life. The study tries to connect how modern cafés appear to be a remarkably important social space just like Oldenburg's idea of third places but some other characteristic of social interaction come up as the result of modern technology. The argument in this paper is that modern café like Starbucks offers a familiar, comforting and neutral ground for social interaction – just like Oldenburg's third places, yet generic enough to follow new lifestyle that is related to modern lifestyle, especially the use of communication technology. Starbucks café located at the central area of Universitas Indonesia (UI) campus in Depok becomes the case study since the café has some characteristics of third places and their development.

2. Method

The method for this research includes literature studies on café and third place, as well as visual documentation and observation of the case study. The focus on the person-environment connection in this study requires descriptions of the place and dynamics of events happens in that place. Therefore, it is important to observe what people do and feel about space and events relate those observations with the physical conditions of the space. The goal is to find out the meaning of the space to the participants. The study took place in Starbucks café at the central area of Universitas Indonesia in Depok.

3. Discussion

3.1 Physical Conditions of UI Starbucks Café



Figure 1. Starbucks cafe at the Central library of Universitas Indonesia.
Source: www.nikeveryday.files.wordpress.com

Starbucks cafe is a franchise café located on the ground floor of the central library building, Universitas Indonesia (Figure 1). The café faces a big artificial lake that are surrounded by three important buildings: a rectorate building, a function building and a central mosque. Located at the central area of UI campus, it is relatively easy to reach the central library from all directions, especially since there is yellow loop buses that go around the campus that operate every day (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Map of UI campus and the location of central library.
Source: www.ui.ac.id

Starbucks café can be reached through the east entrance as well as through the main lobby and the central plaza (Figure 3). With approximately one-hundred-and-sixty square meters, Starbucks café occupies the biggest area among other retails in the building. Beside Starbucks café, there are some restaurants, a post office, a mini market, a merchandise shop and a bookstore.

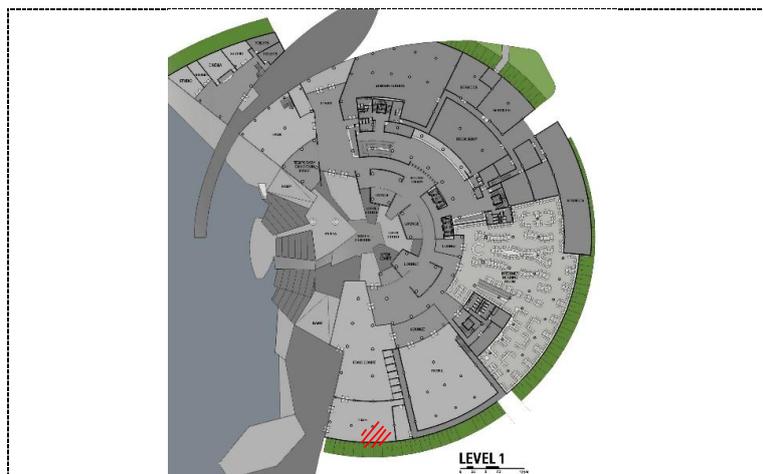


Figure 3. The plan of UI's library. Source: www.lvshedesign.com

UI Starbucks café has both unique exterior and interior. The exterior of the café is the skin of the building made of grey concrete walls and big glass walls so that one may enjoy the lake and the plaza from inside the café. With this kind of transparency, people at the plaza can look inside the café while visitors of Starbucks café can see clearly activities at the plaza (Figure 4 and 5). The clear glass walls allow natural lights to come to Starbucks café all day long and creates a good relation between inside and outside. The central plaza is one of favorite places for students to sit or relax at the central area.



Figure 4. The exterior of Starbucks café facing the lake and the central plaza.



Figure 5. Entrance to the Starbucks Café.

The café has a high ceiling with dominant grey color for the floor and the walls. The high ceiling makes the café looks spacious. The interior of UI Starbuck café is mainly dominated with dark wood, which gives the interior a warm atmosphere, and combined with big glass walls. The floor uses marble like dark wood color to emphasize the warm atmosphere and simple interior. The artificial lightings are set quite high and this condition causes the brightness from the lighting comfortable, in addition to natural lights that come from the glass walls. The workstation for the baristas has three types of lightings – downlight, wall lighting for working station, and some decorative lighting near the food and merchandise counter. Tables in the café are made of wood, couches are made of red leather, and the chairs look modern and simple.

3.2 Experiencing Third Spaces at UI Starbucks Café

Every time a visitor come to Starbucks café, a barista always greets him/her from a counter at the left corner of the entrance. Most of visitors who come to UI Starbucks café are students. The café opens at 8 AM and closes at 7 PM from Monday to Friday; and on Saturday the café closes at 4 PM. Starbucks café closes on Sunday because the central library is also closed. From the observation, Starbucks's visitors are still few in the morning and the afternoon is the peak time.



Figure 6. The interior of Starbucks café: Barista counter & centered tables (left) and seating area looking to the central plaza and the lake (right).

Visitors who came to Starbucks café were mostly students and they came as an individual or as a small group. Mainly, people who come there have activities such as talking, working with their laptops, or just use their mobile phones. The most favorite place to sit in the café was near the glass walls and at the corners that faced the plaza outside. People in a group sat mostly on chairs around big tables and couches around small tables for four or five people. For big tables with some chairs (see figure 6), people may share the table with other visitors up to ten people.



Figure 7. Ambience of Tables Lining Near Windows and in the Center.



Figure 8. Ambience of Tables Lining Near Entrance.

Starbucks café also offers privacy to visitors, especially through sitting arrangement. There are some tables surrounded with moveable chairs. In this way, visitors may move those chair and create boundaries necessary to create comfort zone. Between tables, there are enough space to create private space. Columns inside the café function as separators between chairs.

One of noticeable characteristics of Starbucks café is that the seating arrangement mostly facing the public space outside. With glass walls, there is no sharp boundary between the café and the public space outside (Figure 7 and 8). In this way, visitors of Starbucks café can easily observe activity in the plaza while visitors are also engaged in another activity, like talking and eating. The seating arrangement and the whole interior of Starbucks café seem to support the roles of visitors as spectators of people in the plaza while at the same time they could have their own privacy. Even though people in the plaza can look back to café's visitors, they usually do not reply to or even acknowledge their audience.

Visitors of Starbucks café have to buy a drink or a food when they want to sit inside the café, and this was a challenge to neutral characteristics of third place. From the observation, tables placed at the center of the café offer less privacy than tables at the corners and near the entrance or the windows. People can look easily at people who sat at the center of the café. The chairs arrangement around the big table allows people to sit across each other and suggests both close and open group conversation. There are also some seating arrangements that accommodate relatively more private talk such as small tables placed near glass windows and at the corners (Figure 7). The privacy was usually needed by people who come alone and those individuals mainly sit at the corners or near the glass walls. From the observation, individuals who come alone spent more time with their laptops or gadgets and they do not like other people to pay attention to what they do. When some people come as a group, they are free to choose their seats because they can create boundaries by moving some chairs and configure their sittings to allow interaction with the group members or working together with their laptops.

In contemporary third places like UI Starbucks café, there are some alteration in the characteristics of Oldenburg's third places. The presence of information and computer technology is obvious. Most visitors use one type of technology in this third place of Starbucks - mobile phones – and people are often occupied with mobile phones, instead of interacting to a person near-by. Starbucks café has a digital presence such as Wifi, and surveillance camera that allows the owner of third places to record every activity. In general, modern cafés usually offer a digital connection that at least operates locally. People very often are online connected while in third places and as an effort to attract customers third places also offer a presence of digital connection. In this way, people may have multiple focuses while talking, which is not mentioned by Oldenburg. Although people are in a physical third place that affords the ability to talk to each other, they may choose to temporarily access a virtual place or occupied with their phones and laptops or have online conversation.

4. Discussion

In the age globalization and Internet, third places remain places of contemplation and meeting for people wanting to expand their work and home activities. The connection of people to physical spaces has changed specially to accommodate modern culture such as online conversation, social media rather than cultural specificity originally outlined by Oldenburg. The characteristic of third places outlined by Oldenburg has been developed and changed especially in relation to modern culture and communication technology. Starbucks café remains as neutral where people can easily come in and out, but there are things like etiquettes and rules that guide visitors' behaviors inside the café. The physical conditions of the café such as the seating arrangement show neutrality as well as offering flexible spaces for different kind of interactions. Third places no longer have low profiles but to have at least 'middle-class standards' and the interior of the café usually enhance those standards. Modern cafés like Starbucks do not primarily encourages interactions between strangers but accommodate the need both relaxing and working and doing multiple conversation through social media. Conversation is still the main activity at third place but many people use their gadget and electronic devices alongside face-to-face conversations. Contemporary third places also give a possibility to observe others and to allow others to observe you, both physically and virtually.

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