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# Museums as Third Places: Designing for Complex Webs of Interaction

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**Abstract**

Revisiting Oldenburg's conceptual foundations of third places offers an opportunity to explore the ways in which human-centered computing and human-computer interaction may create room for the primary activity which constitutes third places: conversation. After drawing parallels between Oldenburg's third places and Winograd's interspaces, this paper explores how the design of the Idea Zone, an innovative space within the Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI) in Tampa, Florida, affords a complex web of third place interaction where interface designers, community members, and museum visitors together can explore and learn about designing for third places through an inquiry rooted in conversation and action research.

**Author Keywords**

Third places; interface design; interspaces; exhibition design; museums; space and place; action research; World Café.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.2. User Interfaces.

**General Terms**

Design; Human factors; Theory.

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### Revisiting Third Places

In his book *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg conceived of third places as a “third realm of satisfaction and social cohesion beyond the portals of home and work that...is an essential element of the good life” [10, p. 9]. These third realms, he suggested, were strongly tied to inclusive and local places that performed important community-building functions, from uniting the neighborhood to serving as political and intellectual fora. As such, third places are, for Oldenburg, critical scenes of informal public life. In noting the “eternal sameness” [10, p. 20] of the physical characteristics of third places, however, Oldenburg called attention to the main feature of a space that activates and transforms it into a third place: human communion through conversation. Conversation is the main activity [10, p. 26] of a third place, says Oldenburg, but not just any sort of conversation will do.

With this, Oldenburg points to a fundamental set of productive tensions that could be said to constitute third places: they are in between locations, yet also have a location; they are eternally and globally the same, yet they are inclusive and local; conversation must take place, yet the conversations are primarily emergent out of that space and time; they are immediately recognizable, yet they are not built as third places per se. In moving back and forth between these descriptions, we posit that Oldenburg was not so much denoting third places as he was connoting a *third-place pattern* he observed among the various patterns of place and conversation. Or, in other words, his description suggests that there is an emergent dimension of third places related to the possibility of space at that historical place and the conversational possibilities arising there.

This emergent nature of third places, however, points to various sorts of challenges that may also arise when attempting to design for such spaces. If, for example, third spaces are not normally constructed (designed) as such [10, p. 36], yet they are immediately recognizable based on an observable pattern of activities and conversations across spaces, to what extent can the feature patterns of third places or the usual design patterns of interfaces and information communication technologies (ICTs) be applied with any sort of regularity by architects, designers, or human-computer interaction (HCI) practitioners? Could it be said that third places are to an extent made possible through a community's (re)appropriation or recovery of a public space from designers and city planners? (Might this also extend to those private spaces, such as the coffee houses Oldenburg uses as exemplars?)

Before exploring these questions further, it is useful to draw a parallel between Oldenburg's observation that spaces are activated as third places by emerging conversation and Bannon's observation that the focus of HCI has moved away from its namesake and more toward human activities mediated by computing [1, p. 50].

### Integrating HCC and HCI

In their accounts of the evolving history of HCI, Bannon [1] and Winograd [15] noted the field's recognition that a focus on (human-computer) interaction presupposes a finite and normally very small set of participants (usually two) conducting a reasonably straight-forward (or at least approximable) exchange over a mostly arbitrary space between them. As the field and practice of HCI evolved, this simplified model of interaction became the pattern after which future

interactions between millions of other humans and their computers (or is it millions of other computers and their humans?) were modeled and subsequently designed. Might it be possible that the new worlds created by the design of systems and applications [15] were primarily the worlds of the designers, and this recognition in part prompted HCI's move away from focusing on the traditional conception of interaction (only) between human and computer?

Though a direct answer to this question may not be possible, with time it has become clear that the HCI community has recognized that other communities also have a stake in ICT and interface design processes as well as their outcomes. In problematizing the idea of "community" in HCI, Carroll [4] calls for a deeper understanding of the ways in which thinking of people (of any sort) as a "community" is consequential for HCI practitioners and those who use their designs. If the unit of analysis is moving away from a traditional binary model but the characterization of a "user community" as a community is problematic, upon what should the analysis focus?

### **Interspaces and Third Places**

Bannon and Winograd suggest a way forward that offers a nice opportunity for integration with Oldenburg's idea of third places. Bannon's conceptualization of human-centered computing (HCC) positions it as an emerging field of inquiry that seeks to understand "people, their concerns, and their activities" [1, p. 53] and to situate this understanding as a primary tenant of designing new technology. The evolution of HCI to HCC, he suggests, "points to a more bottom-up process of rediscovering human potential and reconstructing the very foundations on which we

attempt to build any form of human-centered informatics" [1, p. 54]. Similarly, Winograd's suggestion for moving away from the binary interaction model was to bring together the interface and the larger space, both physical and virtual, for a broader perspective on the worlds "inhabited by multiple people, workstations, servers, and other devices in a complex web of interactions" [15, p. 153]. He termed this integrated model the "interspace" and suggested that this reconceptualization could offer a way to better understand new worlds created through complex webs of social interactions.

Third places are interspaces in multiple senses: they are spaces in between work and home, they offer a way to draw a boundary around complex webs of interactions, and they offer an opportunity to understand the broader social worlds created through conversation and interaction. By drawing upon HCC's "openness to new forms of thinking about the human-technology relationship," [1, p. 57] we claim that HCI practitioners and ICT designers could approach various types of third place designs in a way that fosters the possibility of emergent community conversations rather than focusing on HCI's more traditional approach of drawing upon and applying known patterns to "known" situations. But practically speaking, what sort of interspace might offer itself as a case study for drawing upon HCC to inform HCI and ICT designs for third spaces?

### **Museums and Museum Spaces as Third Places**

Contemporary museum design has broadly followed the recent trajectory of HCI in expanding its perspective on the complex web of interactions emerging in the

museum space. Much work has been done around the design of “interactive” museum exhibits and galleries under many different types of frameworks including interaction design, co-operative design, experience design, human-computer interaction, and participatory methods (see, for example, [2, 5, 6, 7]). While some work has been done to foreground the importance of “social interaction” which takes place among multiple visitors who may or may not know each other when engaging an exhibit [8], historically it is the more traditional interaction model which guides exhibit design. It is worth noting here that interest in interfaces and ICTs in museums goes both ways: museum exhibit designers and HCI practitioners both do work in the space and often partner on their research and practice. Further, just as HCI practitioners are today exploring the support of third places, the idea of museum as third place is of great interest to museum staff and leadership [12, p. 9-11] as they look to better understand and establish the basis of their place within their communities [12, p. 5-6].

To offer one possible example, the Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI) in Tampa, Florida has recently renovated a space inside the museum that was previously inhabited by a county-funded library. As county funding of the library was withdrawn when government budgets were cut in recent years, MOSI reimaged the space as the Idea Zone, a “new do-it-yourself laboratory with an open-ended platform to allow students of all ages to explore, learn and have fun” [9]. The conceptual basis of the Idea Zone draws in part upon the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) “fab lab” model and is situated as a semi-public maker space where participants and communities of all

sorts are encouraged to use it as a technological playground to make ideas real, as well as to make real ideas, perhaps in conversation with others. With fabricating machines, simulators, interactive video game systems, and television/video cameras among the “playground” equipment, the Idea Zone is open to museumgoers as part of their visit and also to the public through various programs.

The Idea Zone, then, within Tampa’s Museum of Science and Industry seeks to function for the community in many of the same third-place ways as Oldenburg noted in his preface: uniting the neighborhood; serving as a port of entry; providing “public characters;” bringing youth and adults together in relaxed enjoyment; hosting of meetings and serving as a place for friends to regularly gather; having fun together; and as intellectual fora. As what might be seen as a third place within a third place, we seek to explore how the Idea Zone in particular (and museums in general) may offer an opportune place to bring human-centered computing into the transformative conversations *taking* place (that is, locally re-appropriating place through conversation) at museums and other “great good places at the heart of a community” [10].

## **Methods and Inquiries**

With questions of community at the heart of conversations around both the modern museum and third places, an inquiry into either of these spaces should incorporate methods that provide a perspective on the content (such as the words spoken) and the processes (such as conversation) taking place while also offering a grounded stance to explore and develop practical interventions. The larger context for our work

with the Idea Zone at MOSI is an ongoing series of interrelated action research projects rooted in systems practice [14] and Don Schön's ideas of reflective practice [13] that has taken place over the past 15 years. The action research framework offers itself here as a method to conduct research *with* (rather than *on*) the various communities (of researchers, of visitors, of museum staff) in ways that are meaningful for each and that also balance the practical and theoretical implications of design and redesign, and of action and reflection, as a continuous cycle of learning. Specifically, we plan to host a series of World Cafés [3] within the Idea Zone itself. Through "conversations that matter" these World Cafés will bring together members of these various stakeholder communities for small-group exploration of the Idea Zone as a third place. It should be noted that MOSI has itself made use of the World Café to create "a culture of dialogue" [11] as a way to invite its staff and its communities into its planning and design process. In addition to the insights that we (as researcher-participants) and other participants may develop during the Café, a post-hoc analysis of the patterns across conversations among the participants and communities will allow us to further explore important questions at the intersection of a particular third place and its communities:

- What are the important third place patterns or affordances of the Idea Zone (for visitors, for designers, and for interfaces)?
- How do Idea Zone visitors navigate changes in the landscape or soundscape of the space (e.g. changes to the interface of computer-based exhibits)?
- What are the boundaries of the third place metaphor as a generative concept for the Idea Zone

and how are the boundaries constituted (by visitors, by interface designers, and by the communities)?

- If the Idea Zone is a shared third place for visitors *and* designers (and others), how might they co-design interventions (in the conversation, in the space, and in the interfaces) together?

Through this analysis and the possibilities available in exploring these questions, we anticipate learning about the processes involved and the patterns at play within the metaphorical and physical third spaces of the Idea Zone, as well as the emergence of practical interventions that visitors and interface designers together could use to support the generative conversations and tensions constituting third places. Most significantly, it is important to see the World Café, with its process basis as a network of conversations, as also helping to create community as participants collectively play together in the Idea Zone. Specifically, we expect that our choice of using the World Café within an action research framework will also foster, through community participation in the Café sessions, a commitment to make and re-make the Idea Zone as a third place.

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