Preserving the Mild Life: Neighborhood Hangouts and the Social Spirit of the City

by Christopher Lasch

The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day

By Ray Oldenburg

EMERSON, a writer not usually thought of as an admirer of cities, once called Paris the “social center of the world,” adding that its “supreme merit” lay in its being the “city of conversation and cafes.” More than most, Emerson appreciated the value of solitude, but he also recognized the “immense benefits” of sociability; “and the one event which never loses its romance,” he noted in “Society and Solitude,” was the “encounter with superior persons on terms allowing the happiest intercourse.”

Jim Sleeper, in his recent book on New York (The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York), refers to city neighborhoods as the “crucibles of the civic culture.” Neighborhood adults, Sleeper points out, become models for the young, exemplifying “roles which the urban market rewards only indirectly, if at all: nurturer, defender, uplider, communicant, teammate, lover, friend.” The encounter with superior persons,

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to use Emerson’s phrase, gives us a glimpse of the great world beyond the immediate horizon of family and friends — a glimpse of “romance.” If Sleeper is right, it also schools us in the virtues essential to civic life: loyalty, trust, accountability. It tempers romance with responsibility. It encourages us to make something of ourselves, to impose difficult demands on ourselves, and to appreciate the satisfactions conferred by the devoted service of an ideal — as opposed to the satisfactions, say, of the marketplace and the street, which offer glitter without substance. Less showy but deeper and more durable satisfactions, according to Sleeper, can be found in many locales and many different kinds of activities; but “to an extent surely underestimated by the more cosmopolitan among us,” New Yorkers of all ages find them at least partly in neighborhoods, at the local parish hall or synagogue, and in the nearby tavern, diner, community center or park.

Informal meeting places, which sustain the life of neighborhoods, are the subject of Ray Oldenburg’s interesting book. An important attraction of such places, Oldenburg argues, is the fact that “whatever hint of a hierarchy exists is predicated upon human decency” and not on wealth, glamour, aggression, or even intelligence. Reminding us of the Roman proverb that “nothing is more annoying than a low man raised to a high place,” Oldenburg contrasts the informal society found in neighbor-
reason it is no exaggeration, Oldenburg thinks, to say that informal gathering places promote "more decency without proclaiming it than many organizations that publicly claim to be the embodiment of the virtues." As these observations ought to suggest, *The Great Good Place* is a more serious book than its subtitle would lead readers to expect. It isn't because "they get you through the day" that Oldenburg approves of taverns, coffee houses, beer gardens, pubs, and other such places, but because they encourage conversation, the essence of civic life. Conversation is most likely to flourish, according to Oldenburg, in informal gathering places where people can talk without constraint, except for the constraints imposed by the art of conversation itself. Like Emerson, he believes that conversation is the city's *raison d'être*. Without good talk, cities become places precisely where the main concern is simply to "get through the day."

The home of good talk, then, is the "third place" — a meeting ground midway between the workplace and the family circle, between the "rat race" and the "womb." This designation calls to mind the familiar realm of voluntary associations, so dear to sociologists and to social critics influenced by the sociological tradition, which allegedly mediate between the individual and the state. As Oldenburg describes it, however, the "third place" sounds more like the poor man's public forum. It isn't exactly a "voluntary association" — that is, an association of those who come together in order to advance some common purpose. Nor is it a "life-style enclave," the term used by Robert Bellah and the other authors of *Habits of the Heart* to refer to informal associations based on shared tastes and personal inclination. You can expect to find a core of regulars at the "third place," but you also meet casual acquaintances and complete strangers. Like the larger neighborhood it serves, the third place brings together people involuntarily united by the mere fact of physical proximity. "We may like some selected group better than the company of our neighbors," Mary Parker Follett once wrote, but "the satisfaction and contentment that come with sameness indicate a meager personality." The neighborhood, on the other hand, offers the "bracing effect of many different experiences and ideals." These differences, it might be argued, furnish the materials of lively conversation, as distinguished from mutual admiration and unchallenged agreement.

It is this admixture of involuntary association that gives the

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third place a quasi-political character. In this milieu, recognition has to be achieved through force of character instead of being conferred by your achievements, let alone by the size of your bank account. As Follett wisely observed in her book *The New State*, published in 1918 but still the best account of the neighborhood's political potential: "My neighbors may not think much of me because I paint pictures, knowing that my back yard is dirty, but my artist friends who like my color do not know or care about my back yard. My neighbors may feel no admiring awe of my scientific researches knowing that I am not the first in the house of a neighbor in trouble." The contrast between voluntary associations and the sociability of neighborhoods helps to explain why decency, as Oldenburg puts it, is more highly regarded in the third place than wealth or brilliant achievements; and decency, we might add, is the preeminent civic or political virtue. These considerations make it appropriate to argue that third-place sociability, in a modest way, encourages virtues more properly associated with political life than with the "civil society" made up of voluntary associations.

It encourages political virtues in other ways as well. It helps people to overcome some of their everyday inhibitions and reserve, and to expand a little — to elaborate on the metaphorical implications of Oldenburg's spatial imagery — but it also deflates the balloon of pomposity and pretension. The consumption of alcoholic beverages and other stimulants that accompanies conversation in many third places helps the tongue-tied to find a voice, but conventions that discourage excessive drinking keep verbal exuberance in bounds. Wit and verbal invention are much in demand, according to Oldenburg, as long as they do not slide over into long-winded oratory or histrionics. Conversation is "less inhibited and more eagerly pursued," "more dramatic," and more often attended by laughter or verbal pyrotechnics. Because those who frequent such places "expect more of conversation," however, they have less patience than usual with those who "abuse it, whether by killing a topic with inappropriate remarks or by talking more than their share of the time."

It is easy to see why third places, historically, have been the natural haunts of pamphleteers, agitators, politicos, newspapermen, revolutionaries, and other verbal types. Before the rise of modern journalism, taverns and coffee houses (often located on turnpikes or major roads) also served as media in their own right, places where news was gathered and circulated. In totalitarian countries, they have retained this function to the present day. This history makes it doubly appropriate to emphasize
the proto-political character of the third place and to speculate — even if Oldenburg doesn’t — that the decline of participatory democracy may be directly related to the disappearance of third places. As neighborhood hangouts give way to suburban shopping malls, or on the other hand to private cocktail parties, the essentially political art of conversation is replaced by shop talk or personal gossip. Increasingly, conversation literally has no place in American society. In its absence, how — or better, where — can political habits be acquired and polished?

The third place, Oldenburg argues, recreates some of the best features of small-town life in the big city. Taking issue with those who see the small town as hopelessly insular, he praises its ability to amuse itself, its gregarious habits, and its capacity to provide a window on the wider world. He quotes from a letter written to him by a woman who grew up in a small Ohio town during the Depression, and who credits “all those conversations overheard at the drugstore” with supplying her a growing awareness that “the world was much wider than Barkerton, Ohio.” She suspects that eavesdropping as a child gave her a “lifelong interest in politics, economics, and philosophy (none of which were part of the world of home), but which were the core” of small-town sociability.

If the small town and its urban extension, the neighborhood, nurture an “interest in people and their infinite capacity to amuse and enlighten one another,” as Oldenburg puts it, the same thing cannot plausibly be said of the shopping mall, even though it is often touted as a new version of Main Street. Those who claim that malls promote a new sense of community “skate freely on the brink of total nonsense,” Oldenburg insists. Malls are populated by transients and serve corporations, not the community. A local Chamber of Commerce makes no bones about the mall’s purpose: it “welcomes shoppers, not loafers.” Bars and restaurants are designed for high volume and rapid turnover. A paucity of benches discourages loitering. Background music takes the place of conversation. Oldenburg calls comparisons with Main Street “ridiculous;” Main Street offers a “cast of characters,” the shopping mall a “drifting amalgam of nonpersons.”

The case for the suburban way of life as opposed to the small town or the old-style city neighborhood cannot very well rest on the claim that it promotes a sense of community. It has to rest on a critique of community — on the claim that small towns and city neighborhoods are narrow, ethnocentric, suspicious of outsiders, and intolerant of “difference” (the supposed celebration of which has became the hallmark of academic “postmodernism”). Mary Parker Follett reported that when she tried to extol the advantages of neighborhoods, those who disagreed would “at once become violent on the subject.”

I have never understood why it inflames them more easily than other topics. They immediately take it for granted that I am proposing to shut them up tight in their neighborhoods and seal them hermetically; they assume that I mean to substitute the neighborhood for every other contact. They tell me of the pettiness of neighborhood life, and I have to listen to stories of neighborhood iniquities ranging from small gossip to determined boycotting. Intolerance and narrowness thrive in the neighborhood group, they say; in the wider group they do not.
The strongest objection to the neighborhood, these days, is that it oppresses women. Oldenburg’s “third place” turns out to be an all-male institution, for the most part; and this fact alone is enough to condemn it in the eyes of those who regard any form of sexual segregation (except of course for the self-segregation of emancipated women) as incompatible with sexual equality. Oldenburg does not flinch from this objection. He concedes “men’s dominance of the third place tradition,” but he argues that women used to have other meeting places of their own and that sexual segregation, moreover, served useful purposes. For one thing, it prevented men and women from investing all their emotional expectations in marriage. Oldenburg argues that it was a new and “basically flawed” ideal of marital intimacy, not the women’s movement, that undermined single-sex sociability. Like the shopping mall, marital “togetherness” was an essentially suburban invention, which led people to seek all their emotional satisfactions in private, leaving the public square to the single-minded pursuit of profitable exchange. Although Oldenburg minimizes women’s long-standing opposition to all-male sociability, I think he is right in linking this opposition to an ideal of intimacy that loaded marriage (as many other observers have noted) with more emotional weight than it could bear.

I think he is also right in his contention that the decline of sexual segregation has coincided with the rise of a more insidious form of segregation by age. The tavern, he points out, used to be an “important agency linking the generations and encouraging a young man to set aside the lesser habits of adolescence.” The corner drugstore, as his Ohio correspondent reminds us, could serve young people in the same way. In general, young people used to be more actively involved in the adult world than they are now. They had more opportunities to observe adults in unguarded moments. Today it is the young who are professionally observed by an army of well-meaning adults, in settings deliberately set aside for pedagogical purposes. As a result, children and adolescents have less opportunity to improvise a social life of their own and to appropriate adult territory for their own use.

Oldenburg points out that the suburban environment (which now includes the city as well, except for the deteriorating areas at its core) is not susceptible to “user modification” by the young, who spend much of their time, accordingly, in supervised activities confined to places designated for the exclusive use of young people. The organization of childhood by adults has to be seen as another chapter in the decline of the third place and the corresponding rise of “that powerful dissolving agent known as the American way of life.”

The most characteristic feature of this way of life, if we consider it from the point of view of changing patterns of sociability, is the substitution of choice and personal preference for involuntary and therefore somewhat haphazard, promiscuous, and unpredictable types of informal association. This is the common element in the breakdown of sexual segregation and the increase in age-group segregation. The networks formed by adults who share the same interests and tastes include both men and women, but they necessarily exclude the young. Networks, as Oldenburg points out, “are...anti-child.” They are also “elitist,” since most of them presuppose plenty of money and education, not to mention private transportation. They are designed, moreover, to shield people from the “neighbors fate has put next door and across the way.”

The attraction of personal networks, which depends on the equation of freedom with personal choice, remains today what it was in the time of Mary Parker Follett.

Oldenburg’s capsule description of the ideal embodied in the “American way of life” sounds just like her friends’ sophisticated objections to neighborhoods.

Each of us has his or her own personal community [as Oldenburg summarizes the “American ideal,” and its apologists make the network sound like an advanced form of society rather than an artifact of atomization. Those who have networks, we are told, are cosmopolitan. Their interests and relationships transcend the local neighborhood. The “networker” is “liberated” from local gossip and prejudice and is “free” to choose his or her friends on more rational and more personal bases than that of mere geographical proximity.

In 1991 as in 1918, the contention that the neighborhood is more truly cosmopolitan than the superficial cosmopolitanism of the like-minded falls on deaf ears.

The point Oldenburg wants to make about third places can be made most simply by setting them beside an antithetical institution, the private club. Clubs, as he reminds us, are exclusive, snobbish, and zealous in their guardianship of social privilege. They are “polar opposites” of neighborhood gathering places; and it tells us something about the social and political implications of “post-modernist bourgeois liberalism,” as Richard Rorty calls it in his well-known essay of that time, that it takes the club, not the third place, as its model of sociability. A “civil society of the bourgeois democratic sort,” which Rorty defends as the best hope for a new “world order,” resembles a “bazaar surrounded by lots and lots of exclusive private clubs.” A world in which ethnic and racial isolation is breaking down, in which diverse nationalities are thrown together in conglomerations that are unavoidably multicultural and multiracial, cannot be held together by common culture, according to Rorty; but a well-
ordered bazaar presupposes nothing, after all, in the way of common beliefs or shared values. It presupposes nothing more than acceptance of a few procedural rules. Conflicting values and beliefs do not prevent those who do business there from “haggling profitably away.” If they yearn for the company of people who share their own outlook on life, they can “retreat” to their clubs “after a hard day’s haggling.”

Rorty’s ideal world comes close to describing the world as it actually exists, at least in the United States; and many Americans are ready to accept it, I suppose, as the best that can be hoped for. Oldenburg’s book helps to spotlight what is missing from such a world: urban amenities, conviviality, conversation, politics — almost everything, in short, that makes life worth living. When the market pre-empts all the public space, and sociability has to “retreat” into private clubs, people are in danger of losing the capacity to amuse and even to govern themselves. As long as they recognize the danger, however, it is still possible to hope that they will find a way to reverse the suburban trend of our civilization and to restore the civic arts to their rightful place at the center of things.

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Major General Adam Stephen and the Cause of American Liberty

By Harry M. Ward


In Washington, D.C., the National Museum of American History exhibits a military waistcoat of Adam Stephen, Virginia officer of the French and Indian War and major general in the American Revolution. Thousands of visitors casually view this article of dress each year as they tour the facility, producing the unusual situation in which a garment worn by a historical figure has become better known than the individual himself.

With the appearance of Major General Adam Stephen and the Cause of American Liberty, Harry M. Ward has provided a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship which examines second-line figures in the Continental Army who have been neglected, like Stephen. Professor of history at the University of Richmond, Ward’s previous books include General George Weedon and the American Revolution, and Charles Scott and the ‘Spirit of ’76.’

Scottish born, Stephen (1721?-1791) was educated and trained as a physician at the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh. He served a brief stint in the Royal Navy before emigrating to America and settling in what is today Berkeley County, West Virginia. As captain under George Washington in the Virginia Regiment in 1754, he helped fire the opening guns of the French and Indian War at Jumonville and Fort Necessity. Elevated to lieutenant colonel and subsequently wounded with Braddock at the Monongahela, he was critical of the panicinduct of the British regulars there but took pride in the comparatively good performance of his own men.

By 1758, the major strategic question was how the British could strike at French Fort Duquesne — via the Braddock Road or by a new route across Pennsylvania. When the latter route was selected, much to the disgust of the Virginians, Ward demonstrates that Stephen did not exhibit the petulance, defeatism and immaturity that so characterized a bitterly disappointed Washington at that time. Stephen unhesitatingly threw himself into the physical opening of the new Forbes Road when, literally removing his coat and sword, he and his troops painfully hacked their way through the mountain forests. Serving throughout the conflict, Stephen functioned as regimental deputy to Washington and then (after 1758) to William Byrd III, ultimately receiving the senior position in August 1761. He returned to duty for the Pontiac War in 1763-64. As Ward charts this period, Stephen emerges as one of the most experienced officers from the decade-long conflict. In 1774 Stephen participated in Dunmore’s War against the Shawnee Indians in the Ohio Valley.

Stephen’s lengthy relationship with Washington sometimes flared into open hostility.

Stephen’s involvement in the War for Independence began as head of the Berkeley County committee of safety, Virginia Convention delegate and Indian Commissioner. After helping to expel the British from Virginia, he was named a regimental colonel in early 1776, and promoted to brigadier general in the Continental Army in September. He fought the Hessians at Trenton and the British at Princeton in the New Jersey campaign, which led to his February 1777 elevation to major general. Ward suggests that Stephen’s quick promotions in the army, making him by that point Washington’s ninth ranking general, had fed his already considerable personal pride, thus giving him a “flippant air” and an outspoken self-confidence. In the following months, Stephen skillfully conducted a grueling “war of posts,” in which he engaged the enemy “8 or 10 times a week.” In September, at the defeat of Brandywine, Stephen commanded a division, and rumors of his supposed intoxication reached Washington’s ears. The next month, after one of the major engagements of the war — Germantown — questions of alcohol abuse and incapac-