THE FOURTH PLACE AND RE-IMAGINING THE CITY

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It's 7 o'clock in the morning. I turn on my kettle to heat some water, adjusted the lighting in my living room and turned on my laptop to log into zoom: I was preparing to meet up with my friend for tea. Logging into a platform that was once reserved for work meetings has now become my primary mode of meeting up with friends. My living room has become our 3rd place.

Third-place is a term I became familiar with as a planner. It was coined by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg, referring to the informal public gathering spaces beyond Home (1st Place) and Work/school (2nd). It is often characterized as the pub, the café, community centres and now – my living room? However, this interaction was different from the pub as it demonstrates the intersection of both digital and physical space. Perhaps it might be the 4th place.

I would offer that as citizens in the 21st Century, we need to acknowledge that we are often straddling between our digital and physical realties. These relationships are not mutually exclusive and impact how we interact and use the public realm. We need only look as far as Generation Z, who are defining what it means to occupy the 4th place.

I see the 4th place as the intangible digital environments that have proven to be spaces of connection, or spaces of reprieve from social isolation during this time of COVID. 4th places are those digital communities that we are a part of or the platforms we depend on and facilitate human connection. In fact, the 4th place layers over the 1st, 2nd and 3rd place, but still maintains its own unique identity: it is an intersection.

The advent of smart cities illustrates this movement towards the intersection of physical space and technology. While much of the literature regarding smart cities considers how technology might make the functioning of the city more efficient, I would offer that the 4th place be considered as a factor in our public space design and fostering human interaction.

Both the intent and ethos of Innovation hubs and hack spaces offer an opportunity to bridge this relationship between the digital and physical space. They acknowledge the technological reality, but also centre on the need to make ideas real and equally these spaces might foster the human connection that is present in the 4th place.

The privilege of the 3rd place is the ability to make organic connections whose meaning may not be immediately clear. A characteristic of the 4th place is its subjugation to business models and algorithms that influence our human interactions,

stifling the organic connections that might have occurred IRL. It's almost like Oldenburg knew what the impact might be if the 3rd place was no longer accessible:

> **"IN THE ABSENCE OF INFORMAL PUBLIC LIFE, LIVING BECOMES MORE EXPENSIVE. WHERE THE MEANS AND FACILITIES FOR RELAXATION AND LEISURE ARE NOT PUBLICLY SHARED, THEY BECOME THE OBJECTS OF PRIVATE OWNERSHIP AND CONSUMPTION."**
> *(OLDENBURG, 1989, P. 11)*

We need to think about accessibility in the 4th place. COVID-19 has highlighted the magnitude of the digital divide. This refers to the gap between individuals in society that have access to computers and the internet connectivity and those that do not. Often this divide is along class lines, geographies (rural and urban) and predominantly impacts racialized populations.

So where do we go from here?

There has been a lot of discussion about what a post-COVID society might look like and I would argue if we are to create resilient cities that can handle this scale of shock (including future climate-change induced shocks) we need to respond to the question: How do we build an equitable 4th place?

Jay Pitter in her Call to Courage recommends "Acknowledge that urban design is not neutral, it either perpetuates or reduces social inequities." A call to embed equity is necessary: if we do not consider the 4th place in the future of city building, we risk further marginalizing populations. We need to interrogate the implicit bias built into these 4th places and how they might "unintentionally" perpetuate and entrench systems of oppression.

Movements like platform cooperativism and concepts like data dignity and digital civility offer human-centric approaches to our relationships in the digital world, might offer some direction in co-creating these spaces that we occupy.

The newness of this concept and of these technological realities offers planners and communities alike the capacity to bring intention to design. This moment in time demands that we examine the neutrality in which we perceive the creation of spaces we occupy.

We need to take this opportunity now and act in the 4th place.