

Improving Community Well-Being Through Third Spaces

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Introduction

There are a plethora of diverse applications of the term “third space” in the world of academia and literature, ranging from a location where fluid gathers in the human body to a neutral space between differing cultures. Amid the clutter of these differing definitions, we conducted preliminary research for our project and found several perspectives that we will use as a starting point for our working definition:

- Spaces that facilitate social interaction outside of work and home and promote “public relaxation” (Oldenburg, 1999)
- “Living room of society” / “locations where we exchange ideas, have a good time, and build relationships” (Butler & Diaz, 2016)
- “What suburbia cries for are the means for people to gather easily, inexpensively, regularly, and pleasurably—a ‘place on the corner’” (Oldenburg, 1999)

From the sources above along with others found throughout our research, we have concluded that our definition of third space is “a place away from work and home that fosters the growth of its community.”

For this project, we are taking this idea of third spaces and applying it to university campuses. College is such a pivotal period in students’ lives. It often involves full-time residence for many, particularly freshmen at Virginia Tech. Because “work” in this stage of life often looks like being a full-time student and “home” often is living in dormitories on campus, it adds to the importance of college campuses having a variety of places to escape, decompress, connect, and engage in. The transition to college can be difficult. It often entails the first time being away from childhood homes. New stressors show up, like fulfilling academic and social expectations. As students navigate finding their tribe, they discover more about themselves as individuals. Their worldviews might even shift, as their perspectives widen. For all of these reasons and more, campuses should be looking for ways to improve student well-being. Our project looks to explore third spaces as a method of building community welfare on university campuses. By creating safe environments that foster community wellness, inherently there will be an increase in respectful engagement, reciprocal learning, exchanging of knowledge, and collaboration. All of these promote vibrant communities and a stronger sense of place.

Community Well-Being Through Third Spaces

Third spaces have potential to increase one’s well-being and quality of life due to their ability to unite people in one common location. Third spaces allow for effective communication and strengthening of relationships with one another which can have a lasting impact on an individual’s mental health. More specifically, third spaces relate to the psychological model named Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. In this model, there is one category which humans strive to fulfill which is “love and belonging”. Love and belonging according to Maslow contains friendship, family, intimacy, and sense of connection (Mcleod, 2024). However, since our context is third spaces which focus away from the home and work environment, our two

concerns are building relationships and fostering a sense of connection. These needs, however, cannot be achieved until physiological needs like food, water and shelter are met in addition to safety and security needs such as good health and employment.

Humans are motivated by what is called drive reduction theory. Drive reduction theory states that humans are motivated to relieve internal psychological or physiological states that deviate them away from equilibrium (Cherry, 2023). Once individuals are in the love and belonging state, a third space could potentially alleviate the symptoms of one experiencing internal conflicts such as a lack of friendships and sense of belonging. The reason love and belonging is crucial for well-being is because it allows us to feel accepted for who we are, and a third space can serve as the midpoint between these two facets of a stable mental health. Once love and belonging is achieved, it can advance our position on the hierarchy up to self-esteem which is a positive outlook of our characteristics. This will allow us to feel confident in our achievements and personality while also respecting others who are also striving to climb up the hierarchy. All in all, third spaces represent a central, physical space where people can come together to strengthen relationships and build a tight-knit community while also relieving psychological imbalances.

As we continue, the definition of community we will use as our anchor is “a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings” (MacQueen et al., 2001). Community is valuable because it elevates the wellness of its members through benefits like increased support in crisis and decreased reported depression, anxiety, and other negative mental health struggles (Bowe et. al, 2022; Park et. al, 2023). With the value of community established, we are ready to zoom in on one particular component of community: a space where community can gather.

When investigating spaces where communities can gather, one must consider the interplay between virtual space and physical space. For the purposes of our project, we decided to focus on physical space. Even within physical space, there are many possible areas of focus such as living space, work spaces, and others. Assessing these, we honed in on the concept of third spaces, investigating its unique attributes among other categories of spaces.

Problem Area

In our initial research of third spaces and their use, we found a gap between the benefits of third spaces and how planners go about designing those spaces. The existing literature on third spaces is fragmented across a myriad of terms, checksheets, and indexes, each with some overlap but different foci. This discord impedes a planner’s ability to design a third space that effectively accounts for the various factors academics have put forth in their research. To remedy this, we conducted a deep dive into the existing understanding of third spaces and aggregated the results into one product, distilling them into a comprehensive list of criteria that is usable for planners. We then applied those criteria to Virginia Tech’s 2047 Beyond Boundaries plan to assess how well the university’s goals align with the third space literature we found. This will serve as an example of our criteria in action, demonstrating their applicability. Finally, we created a list of qualitative questions based on our criteria that planners can use when designing a space. This

will provide a concrete tool to fill the gap between third space benefits and how planners design third spaces, providing greater clarity and support as they design the spaces of tomorrow.

Methodology

We began our project with some initial research through databases like the VT library and EBSCO to build a foundation of what third spaces are and how they relate to community. With this established, our next step was to find sources that explain what qualities are important to those types of spaces. We used an artificial intelligence called SciSpace to help us comb through various sources and bring them all together. The prompt we inserted was “how are public/third spaces measured?” We included public space in our prompt because the concept of third spaces is relatively new and we wanted to ensure an adequate quantity of search results. Public space is a concept that parallels third spaces and thus could provide insights meaningful to our specific area of focus.

The search in SciSpace yielded 40 total sources ranging from peer-reviewed articles to book chapters. Because we used an AI tool, we knew we could not assume the results were all valid. To ensure the relevance of the sources, we read the abstracts and removed all those that were not directly related to third spaces, with the exception of some that discussed public space in a way that aligned with our definition of third spaces. This data purge left us with 22 relevant academic sources, which we then divided amongst our team to read and identify which qualities an ideal third space should possess.

After compiling our individually assigned articles into one spreadsheet, we vetted them for common terms. We found 60+ terms that described different qualities third spaces should include. Within these, we identified certain themes that arose between sources, even though their exact parlance varied. To visualize and identify exactly how the sources could fit together into one common framework, we crafted a matrix that aggregated the sources based on theme. This allowed us to not only identify and visualize recurring concepts, but to explain how the meanings of certain terms varied from between sources. All these sources came together to inform our criteria for what makes a third space that effectively builds community.

Visualizing our Processes via Artifacts

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1pGYMCI9I06H4XOYT80bq19JZln8mbswoPNxOSQeOTO8/edit?usp=sharing>

Criteria

The 60+ terms different researchers have used in their various reports and evaluation rubrics when discussing the ideal qualities of a third space are unwieldy and extremely difficult to apply due to their scattered nature. To create a usable product for planners, we synthesized the research into seven criteria: flow, physicality, ownership, appeal, regenerative, sociability, and engagement. These criteria are explained as follows.

Flow

Flow is how user movement occurs within and around a given space. It covers terms such as circulation, churn, dwell, tempo, and capacity. If a space has positive flow, it is designed in a way that encourages staying behavior in users. This can be accomplished through positive design that considers how users can visit the space and why they might decide to stay.

Sources: (Honey-Rosés, 2019), (Borsellino et al., 2021), (Zebit et al., 2014), (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010), (Campbell & Muleya, 2020).

Physicality

Physicality deals with the location and spatial construction of a space. It synthesizes infrastructure, surroundings, and accessibility, among other terms. The location of a space has a large impact on whether community members will use the space. Considerations such as connection to sidewalks and the proximity of other third spaces promote space use and fall under physicality.

Sources: (Mehta, 2010), (Qin 2010), (Oluwadamilola, 2022), (Campbell & Muleya, 2020), (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010), (Oppio et al., 2021), (Praliya & Garg, 2019).

Ownership

Another way to evaluate a place to consider is its ownership. This can be split into two ideas. Firstly, thinking about ownership in terms of management. Great ownership seeks of a space is evident when facilities and areas are physically maintained and create a sense of safety. Another aspect to consider is whether or not a space is privately or publicly owned. It is an important consideration because at times this difference can lead to more or less behaviorally restricting spaces. Oftentimes, publicly owned spaces are more keen to encourage both community and personal use. This leads to the next idea of creating a sense of community ownership. Are people able to manipulate the landscape? Can they shape their own experience in some personal way? The more responsive a place is to people's needs, the more buy-in and excitement there will be.

Sources: (Ahirrao & Khan, 2021), (Campbell & Muleya, 2020), (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010), (Bosman & Dolley, 2019), (Németh & Schmidt, 2016).

Appeal

Appeal deals with whether the design of a space makes users want to spend time there. This criterion covers the largest number of sub-terms, with these ranging from aesthetic and attractiveness to security and comfort. Third spaces only promote community as much as the community gathers there, and community will only gather there if they see a reason or enjoy doing so. By considering the appeal of a given space,

planners can better evaluate the likelihood of its use and, by extension, the likelihood of its effectiveness in elevating community.

Sources: (Borsellino et al., 2021), (Ferreira et al., 2016), (Mehta & Bosson, 2010), (Ahirrao & Khan, 2021), (Qin, 2010), (He et al., 2020), (Bosman & Dolley, 2019), (Mehta, 2013), (Oppio et al., 2021), (Praliya & Garg, 2019).

Regenerative

Whether a space is regenerative has to do with how the space fits within the larger pictures of the ecological and social environment. As such, it covers terms such as sustainability, economic value, and community use. Even if a third space vibrantly is incredibly popular and builds community within its boundaries, it can still be harmful to the broader community if it does so at the expense of the climate or local economy. By considering these external factors, planners can better place the third space into its proper place in the puzzle of community prosperity and create more holistic environments for human life.

Sources: (Oluwadamilola, 2022), (He et al., 2020), (Bosman & Dolley, 2019), (Oppio et al., 2021), (Praliya & Garg, 2019), (Németh & Schmidt, 2016).

Sociability

This criterion tackles the interactions that occur between users within a space. These interactions are shaped by factors such as inclusivity, civility, and space neutrality. While a space cannot by its design alone prevent all forms of discrimination or friction between users, it can be made in such a way as to reduce barriers to entry for particular groups and thereby promote acceptance among its users. This sociability is critical to establishing a space where users can interact and build relationships in healthy ways.

Sources: (Ferreira et al., 2016), (Mehta & Bosson, 2010), (Ahirrao & Khan, 2021), (Campbell & Muleya, 2020), (He et al., 2020), (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010), (Bosman & Dolley, 2019), (Mehta, 2013), (Oppio et al., 2021), (Anderson, 2016), (Praliya & Garg, 2019).

Engagement

The final consideration for a space is how it promotes engagement. This criterion includes sub-terms like democratic, space engagement, and engagement between users. Community is built when its members engage in healthy discourse. While this discourse is supported by the neutrality and openness covered under the previous criterion of sociability, it also demands a level of active engagement from its users, both with the space and each other. The level to which a space encourages this engagement is a large factor in how that space builds community and thus is a factor planners must consider when designing a space.

Sources: (Borsellino et al., 2021), (Moreno & Grinda, 2013), (Ferreira et al., 2016), (Ahirrao & Khan, 2021), (Qin, 2010), (He et al., 2020), (Martyanov & Lukyanova, 2022), (Mehta, 2013), (Anderson, 2016).

Relating to the 2047 VT Master Plan

To assess Virginia Tech’s commitment to third space as a means to uplift the Hokie community, we split up relevant sections of the Virginia Tech [Beyond Boundaries 2047 Campus Plan](#) and individually read through our assigned section to compile the plan’s specific goals. To determine relevant sections, we read through the introduction of each section and evaluated whether it discussed third spaces or adjacent ideas. We examined Part 2: Plan Drivers, Part 3: Campus Vision, and Part 4: Frameworks. We utilized Virginia Tech’s campus plan in order to illustrate that our criteria are capable of being applied to university comprehensive plans generally. By reading through each pertinent section, we identified specific goals mentioned in the plan that aligned with the growth of third spaces. We pasted these quotes into a Google Sheet, where we then associated each goal with its corresponding criteria. Some, but not all, quotes and their associated criteria drawn from the plan are shown below.

Plan Section	Corresponding Criteria
02: Plan Drivers	
enhance sense of community (32)	sociability + engagement
provide environments that encourage social, cultural, and academic engagement for resident students, commuters, faculty, staff, and partners (32)	sociability + engagement
create academic, research, and campus life facilities that accommodate a larger campus population (32)	sociability + engagement
support collaboration, innovation, and partnership objectives of VT (32)	regenerative + engagement
accomplish goals in a sustainable and efficient manner (32)	regenerative
acknowledge the VT sense of identity stemming from campus infrastructure by appropriately renovating/developing (33)	appeal + engagement + sociability + physicality
03: Campus Drivers	
utilizing the spaces for strategic research initiatives (44)	physicality
introducing ecological design and sustainable maintenance principles (44)	sustainability
This strategy utilizes the Western Perimeter Road (WPR) - a planned arterial designed in coordination with VDOT to relieve traffic pressure from West Campus Drive (46)	accessibility
Ensure that land in close proximity to the academic core is available to support educational and research activities (46)	activities + functionality/usability
The Master plan also recommends that the University identify as an opportunity to showcase its agricultural roots in an aesthetically sensitive way within the Agricultural Belt to celebrate and bring greater visibility to its agricultural heritage. (46)	aesthetic/attractiveness + communal place-based meaning + relations
04: Frameworks	
underlying patterns inform the open space and landscape structure (114)	flow
organized as an interconnected system of quadrangles and courtyards (114)	flow + physicality
proposed landscape framework builds upon the existing structure defined by the topography, hydrology, wooded areas, and formal development patterns of the campus (114)	flow + physicality
energy efficiency goals by shading buildings, thereby reducing the energy required for cooling (114)	regenerative

We concluded that not only are our criteria aptly able to evaluate a campus plan, but that the Virginia Tech 2047 Beyond Boundaries plan is a prime example of a campus plan that prioritizes community well-being. Of course, each university is made up of diverse values and populations, and thus, will have unique plans – but the general process can be utilized across campuses. Virginia Tech effectively balances Hokie values and the prioritization of third places.

Next Steps

Once we completed our synthesized criteria from our literature review, we decided that indexing our categories would not be as beneficial as the implementation of a qualitative evaluation. Spaces are unique and so are their intended purposes. Furthermore, the benefits and usability of place varies between users. For these reasons, exploring the idea of place-based benefits and its impacts on communal and personal welfare is highly subjective and will change from place to place and person to person. Therefore, rather than trying to create a scorecard, we wanted our evaluation to be more geared toward inquiries. We formed a series of questions that correlates to our criteria that planners can use while designing third spaces. These questions have the goal of ensuring that community welfare is taken into consideration as built environments continue to be developed and expanded. Below are our starting questions.

Questions

FLOW	PHYSICALITY	OWNERSHIP	REGENERATIVE	ENGAGEMENT	APPEAL	SOCIABILITY
Are there places to sit?	Do the physical additions to the space support relationships?	Is the space owned and operated by an entity that actively supports the community?	Can the space facilitate community events?	Does the site support both passive and active engagement?	Does the site possess unique visual appeal?	Does the site help create communal place-based meaning and relations?
Is the space physically open?	Is the space within an urbanized area (at least 2,000 housing units or have a population of at least 5,000)?		Can the space be used for multiple purposes?	Does the site support engagement between users?	Is the site's layout inviting?	Does this space have low barriers to entry? Is it free to everyone?
Does it require vehicular transportation?	Is the space ADA-compliant?		Does the site possess current or potential economic value?	Does the site support open and unrestrained conversation?	Does the site promote a calm and laid back environment?	Does this place foster civility amongst a diverse range people?
Is it within walking distance (400m) of another open space?	Does the layout of the space support relationship building?				Does the site serve any number of unique purposes for the community on a consistent basis?	Does the site possess interactive boundaries?

It is important to note that these questions are from our first few iterations of this model. Many questions can be expanded upon and questions can be added as further research is explored. This list should be updated frequently in characterization and with testing to better adapt to our shifting systems of social ecology. Its evolutionary process should not end here, but rather, it should be understood that there are no final solutions for open systems such as this.

Conclusion

We have defined third spaces as a place away from work and home where people can relax, socially connect and build relationships. We recognize that third spaces can provide a myriad of benefits particularly to university students. One benefit of importance is mental health and well-being because they are both required for a high quality of life and success amidst a time of transition. Third spaces serve as a central location where people can alleviate psychological imbalances like stress while expanding their social network while taking a break from dealing

with daily stressors. However, we found that there is scattered research on third spaces which has given rise to a problem of how community at a university can be achieved when there is little knowledge university planners possess when building third spaces. It is important for university planners to consider aspects of strengthening community when building third spaces to promote community welfare and well-being. In order to attack this problem, we synthesized a literature review to help devise a framework for university planners to follow. Through the literature review we identified key criteria such as flow, physicality and sociability that create a third space that can establish community welfare. We also conducted an evaluation matrix where we collected all of our literature sources and checked boxes for which of our criteria matched with the sources that mentioned them. Then, we read through Virginia Tech's 2047 Master Plan and compared our framework to that to envision how our criteria lined up with Virginia Tech's future plan. In addition, using our criteria we formulated questions to ask university planners when building third spaces to ensure that they will be effective in achieving its intended purpose. Our complete framework strives to serve as a model for other universities to help achieve community welfare amongst university students during a critical time period.

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