

Spatial Experience for Third Places in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

Ray Oldenburg coined the term third place through his magnum opus book, *The Great Good Place*, published in 1989. The third-place is supposed to be accessible for social interaction and knowledge sharing. It is a social space outside the home and works, and it takes a variety of forms such as cafes, coffee shops, bars, bookstores, hair salons, and other hangout places. The conversation is the main activity and attraction in third place. Thirty years after the term was introduced, third places in Bandung are far from the original meaning. It appears to be more oriented towards accommodating the digital lifestyle of young people. This paper is written based on the most popular third place among young people in Bandung. Undertaken in two cafes organized under the same management, the study aims to identify strategies and tactics in creating an atmosphere for social interactions to occur in the third place. Field observation and semi-structured interviews catered to the data collection on users' activities and preferences in third places during weekdays and weekends. The study results indicate that a third-place attractiveness is designed to the users' interest in favor of digital devices. The third-place can hold on to the users through spatial experiences that stimulate the senses and affordable goods and services. The management of the cafes is fully aware that a third-place should be selling memories rather than products. The cafes put high effort into the attractive interior design and spatial program.

Keywords: *Third place, Café, Spatial experience.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans are social beings. They greet neighbors, talk to friends, discuss with colleagues, tease siblings, and make friends with strangers. Those acts of social interactions offered personal and communal benefits. Social interaction could relieve personal stress [1], while at the community-level, it could strengthen community attachment. Social interaction is also crucial in adolescent psychological development. The presence of others in the interaction encouraged knowledge sharing to happen and shape self-identity [2].

Oldenburg [3] posited that the third place is the space where the most social interaction happened. Social spaces outside the home (first place) and work (second place) regularly offer democracy and inclusiveness, with conversation as the main liveliness. Until today, third places are necessary because home and work, the two mundane places we always evolve around, have some sorts of rules which can hinder voluntary contact.

Along with third places, the internet and technology have gradually changed the way people interact with

each other [4]. Humans are exposed to digital devices and virtual connections from an early age. Carrying a smartphone, laptop, and tablet becomes peculiar. A digital platform, such as a social network service (SNS), online gaming, and office utilities, has become a social interaction [5]. In short, bodily presence is barely needed for social interaction.

This study explores the role of physical third place in the digital era with social interaction. Café was chosen as the study case because it is a typical third place that survived until today [6]. It had been the space where society bounded, great ideas were born, and even revolutions begun [7]. Café also played a role as a space where people consume and making social contact with staff and other visitors at the same time.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Oldenburg firstly introduced the third-place concept in 1989. It was defined as the social space outside the home and work where interaction happened most [3]. Third places were proposed as the solution for mundane daily life, which only revolved around domestic and

professional responsibilities. In contrast to the first and second places, which regulated users and activities, the third places were accessible for everyone and had a loose use structure. It accommodated social interaction in any form the users wanted. Third places also existed daily, with business as the backbone. The appearance was mostly plain to put everyone on the same level and gave each other proximity simultaneously. By doing so, the conversation would happen as a vital activity.

Third places offered benefits for individuals and the greater good [3]. For individuals, the combination of various users and loose structure created 'novelty' in mundane daily life. Humor and laughter within the spaces generated from the collective norm could 'upbeat' personal mood and strengthening friendship. For the greater good, conversation, discussion, and knowledge sharing in third places played a role as community control. The political role of a community could be exercised in this space as well.

Examples of third places were mainly physical spaces. Oldenburg [3] started with neighborhood-scale places such as a pub, tavern, beer garden, street café, and coffeehouses. Departing from that, Slater and Jung Koo [8] suggested an art center as a new third place. Using the Tate Modern Museum and South Bank Center in London, they found that the visitors felt encouraged to gather and gained psychological benefits. Furthermore, Jon Hawkins and J. Ryan [9] outlined a music festival arena as third place for its inclusive, open, and flexible characteristics.

Along with developing a physical third place, Rheingold [10] indicated that technology allowed third place conversation to be performed in virtual space. This opportunity has led many studies to expand the third-place concept and typology in the context of the digital era. For instance, Ducheneaut et al. [11] showed a multiplayer online game that enabled social contact between users. The chat room feature in the game became a social space where players can communicate. Another example was on the Twitter platform. McArthur and White [12] highlighted the ability of Twitter to gather people who open opportunities for social interaction.

Most recently, Ferreira et al. [13] experimented third place in the digital era. Interactive digital installations were added in public spaces as an intervention to users' social interaction behavior. The result showed that the installations encouraged users to talk with each other, which promoted third place characteristics.

The current research on third places in the digital era has reduced third place core characteristics into a conversation. Simultaneously, a conversation occurs due to supportive spatial experience [14] because the physical environment influences personal mood and communal occurrence [15]. It means that social

interaction closely corresponds with perceiving architecture because experiencing space means fitting in ourselves in the physical setting [16]. In conclusion, this paper argues that physical features remain an important dimension for third places in the digital era, although virtual engagement and online gathering provided space for conversation.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the city of Bandung, café culture and business had been growing significantly for the last decade. Cafés did not only provide food and beverage products but also spaces with decent architecture. Two cafés in Bandung were chosen based on developing contemporary third places criteria, such as 1) supporting digital features, 2) accommodating activities broader than talking such as people watching and working, 3) accessible location, 4) affordable price, 5) having some sorts of virtual engagement, and 6) innovative business scheme [17], [18]. Observation and secondary data like news and articles were used as the basis of the decision.

The first part of the data collection was recording the cafés physical setting in December 2019. The physical details were recorded with an Observation Card, which was developed from prior models on the café physical setting [17], [19], [20]. The card consisted of three parts, i.e., urban configuration, architectural features, and interior ambiance. The urban arrangements looked at location compared to major roads, a function of the surrounding neighborhood, and accessibility. The architecture features recorded were the area's size, building style, signage, a striking exterior, and supporting facilities such as parking, toilets, and praying rooms. The interior ambiance focused on layout, furniture type and arrangement, finishing materials, color tone, lighting, ceiling height, view to the outside, sights of spaces inside, decorations, music availability, and any significant characteristics.

The second part was a participant observation focused on café visitors' natural manners [21]. It included visitors' appearance, belongings, companionship, events, conversation, and seating location. There was no intervention given to the activities, including information about being observed. In other words, the observer was detached from the observation object and become a complete observer [22]. Each café was observed during lunchtime (11 am-12 pm) and after working hours (4 pm-5 pm) on weekdays. In total, there were 152 visitors observed in this study. The data was recorded using a photo, video, and field notes.

The data was analyzed using correspondence analysis to see how social interaction corresponds with spatial quality. Thus, seating spaces and social interaction were characterized qualitatively by using

Corbin and Strauss [23]. During the coding process, the theory was not involved in developing categories and subcategories. The potential of inconsistency within the categories was reduced by regarding other aspects of the observation object. For instance, while talking appeared to be the most active, identifying whether it was an official discussion or heart to heart conversation was challenging. Thus, the proximity between conversation partners, laughter, gesture, and overheard topics was looked at to identify which talking belonged to which category.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Upnormal is a coffee shop brand under a big national corporation of Cita Rasa Prima Group (CRP) that expands by using a franchise system. The architectural configuration is highly standardized by the corporation. Both cafés are located on the main road, surrounded by a commercial, educational, and residential neighborhood. The facilities provided are also identical. Each of them is equipped with seating

spaces, parking areas, toilets, prayer rooms, and service areas, with a 1000Mbps internet connection.

The Upnormal café in Cihampelas plays a role as a brand representative and coffee factory. It settles on a site with an approximate size of 1500 m² in the main commercial corridor of Bandung. Hotels, shopping malls, factory outlets, and culinary businesses functioned every day around the outlet. This café operates in a refurbished historical residential building, with one additional building at the back as the coffee factory. The historical building consists of four seating areas and one lobby, which performs as a small museum (Figure 1). Whereas, Upnormal café in Cikutra is mainly surrounded by offices, universities, and residential neighborhoods. The building is entirely new and provides five seating areas: a large parking space and a garden in this outlet (Figure 1). Despite the differences, it is essential to highlight that the third place's seating spaces were typical. Three seating spaces types were found in this study, they were 1) Main Space, 2) Terrace Space, and 3) Supportive Space (Table 1).

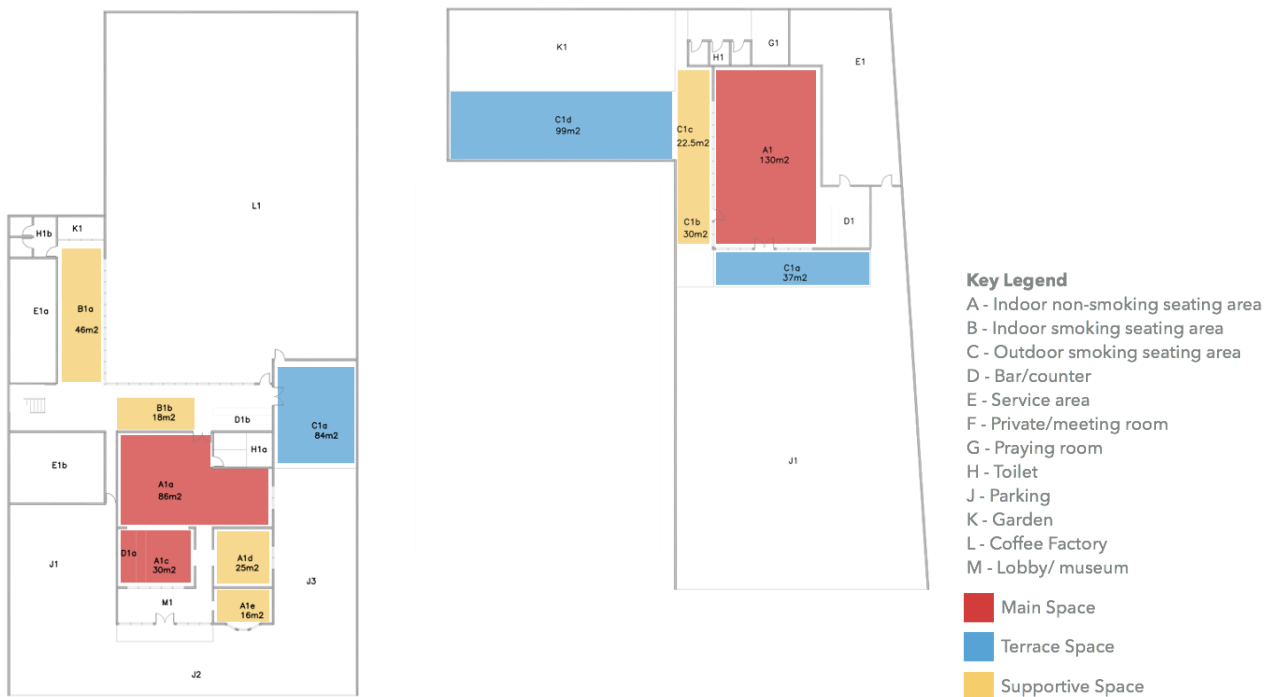


Figure 1 Layout plan of Upnormal Cihampelas (left) and Upnormal Cikutra (right)

No	Type of seating space	Description
1	Main space	The main area is the heart of the cafe. The ambiance of this space was spacious and playful. The shape of chairs and tables were varied, and they were arranged in moderate density. This space was decorated in a particular color tone with lettering, posters, photographs, and texture and had strong focal points such as big mural painting and/or 3D objects. The temperature was controlled with an air conditioner.
2	Terrace space	The ambiance on the terrace was fresh and straightforward. The form of chairs and tables were mostly homogenous, and they were arranged in moderate density. The decoration was limited to wall ornaments. This space was always directly connected to outdoor spaces and, thus, naturally ventilated.
3	Supportive space	Supportive space was small in size and flexible in function. It was a small room or connecting corridors equipped with tables and chairs. Sometimes they did not function as seating spaces but private events or circulation. The decoration elements were minimum.

Table 1 Type of seating spaces in Upnormal Cihampelas and Upnormal Cikutra

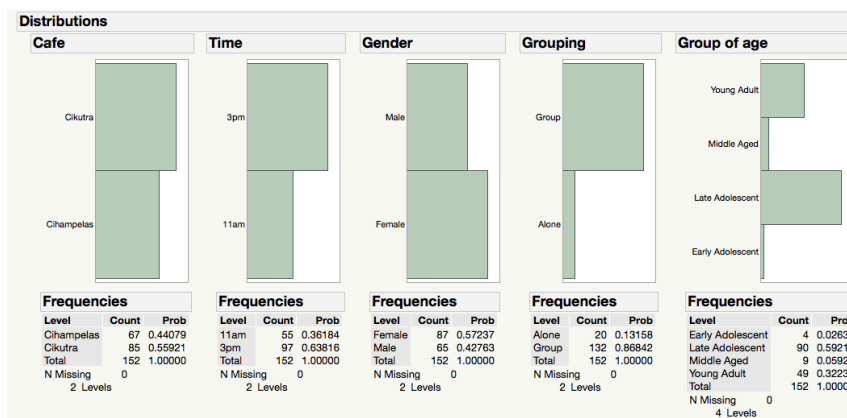


Figure 2 Distribution of visitors' profile

Visitors' profile, age groups, and interaction activities were developed by identifying their appearances, personal belongings, companionship, an overheard conversation, and occurrences during the observation. This study's personal belongings were handbags, backpacks, books, wallets, to cigarettes, including consumed food or beverages on the table. Digital devices such as cellular phones, laptops, chargers, and headsets also emerge as carried and used goods. Furthermore, nine activities occurred in the cafés, such as laughing, virtual communication, discussion, meeting, working using a laptop, scrolling the phone screen, watching a movie, playing a digital game, listening to music, and smoking.

According to that points, the visitors' age group was divided into four. The first was early adolescents, visitors who were in junior and high school age who were identified from their uniform, school equipment, and school-related conversation. The second was late adolescents, visitors who were university age and highly characterized by T-shirts and jeans, gossip and jokes on friends, and class assignments they were working on in the third place. Young adults were the third group identified from professional work they worked in the

third place, the semi-formal to a formal outfit that sometimes office uniform with a nametag. The last group was middle-aged, who were recognizable from their facial look and a formal shirt.

There were 152 observed visitors, 67 in Upnormal Cihampelas, and 85 were in Upnormal Cikutra. Distribution analysis (Figure 2) shows that number of visitors was higher in the afternoon and rarely found to come alone. In terms of gender, the female was slightly higher than the male. Furthermore, the distribution analysis also illustrated that the third places were not limited to middle-aged male. Instead, the third-place was highly dominated by young people.

The observation data also illustrates that the third place's social interaction was broader than talking [24]. Four types of interaction were identified in this study: face-to-face dialogue, mediated conversation, leisure, and working (Figure 3). The frequency of face-to-face discussion arose as the most interaction happened, followed by relaxation, working, and mediated conversation. Although characterized into four, these interactions took place concurrently. It meant one visitor could have done more than one interaction during the observation time.

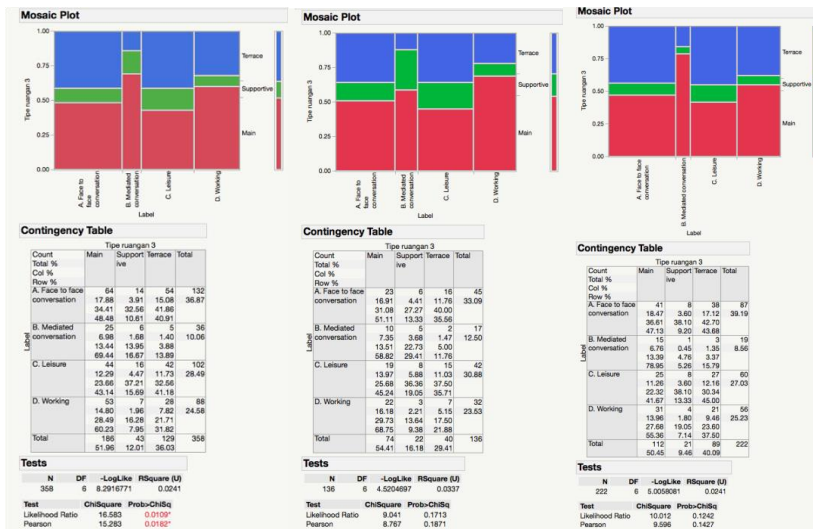


Figure 3 Correspondence analysis of seating spaces by interaction in overall time (left), during lunchtime (center), and after working hour (right)

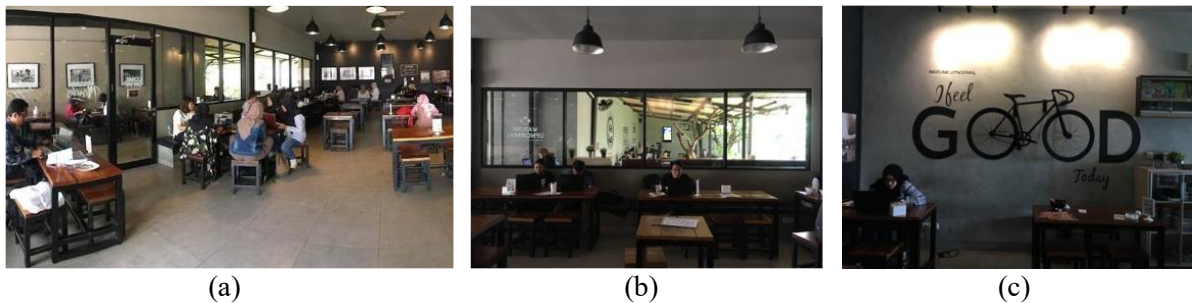


Figure 4 The ambiance at Upnormal Cikutra Main Space (left). Visual connection with outdoor seating area and garden (center) and specific decorative fixture (right) have created playful ambiance

Correspondence analysis was made to see the relation between spaces and interaction in the third place (Figure 3). The result showed that Main Space was predominantly used in all observation times, especially for the mediated conversation and working. These two types of interaction used digital devices, such as phones and laptops. Working requires high concentration. Thus, it demands solemn yet lucid space [25]. User needs to focus on the screen and get inspired by watching invigorating environment interchangeably. For instance, in Upnormal Cikutra, the main space was 130m² in size with transparent and opaque walls (Figure 4). The transparent walls created a visual connection with the garden, while the opaque side provided a playful ambiance by using exposed brick, photographs, and three-dimensional objects as decoration fixtures.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that physical third places still prominent in the context of the digital era. These cafes accommodate social interaction, which was broader than talking. A face-to-face conversation remains the heart of the third place, regardless of the use of digital devices.

Making use of digital devices and virtual interaction has become part of conversation activities rather than an obstacle. Spatial experience constructed from architectural features created an ambiance that encouraged social interaction.

The methods of this study were limited to participant observation. In other words, the point of view from the participants is still unexplored. Further research is required to deepen the exploration of third place in the digital era.

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