

Third places, libraries and the public realm

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The notion of third places allows us to explore the social role of public libraries, and to relate that role to other places and spaces that promote informal encounters and social networks.

I suggest that it can be unhelpful to imply that certain places are or are not 'third places'. Instead I want to accentuate the ways in which places have *the potential* to contribute towards and to support positive social relationships. Being a third place is not something that can be prescribed and becomes absolute, like an accreditation: it is *circumstantial*, often *timetabled*, and *co-produced* by providers and users.

I want to explore the claim that public libraries are 'based in the community' but not 'community-based': it seems to me that, while valid, this is not necessarily a negative charge. I will argue that the central purpose of public libraries is to represent the public realm, and the principle of access to information and communication resources within the public realm. Just because print is no longer the overwhelmingly predominant medium does not mean that the role of public libraries is any less valid. At the same time, it seems to be fair to say that libraries, like parks, have a role as somewhere where people can go 'to be private in a public place'. Such roles seem to imply a tension for libraries: how can they be at once both 'publicly-private' places and lively convivial third places?

Third places are characterised by an emphasis on the informal. Participation in their milieu is non-obligatory, there are no formal criteria. They contribute invisibly to community cohesion. Policy should proceed with caution: third places require a light touch. They are precisely the sort of resource that, as a society, we fail to value until we find them missing. The Third Place Forum initiates a debate about ensuring that that situation does not arise.

Kevin Harris

www.Local-Level.org.uk

