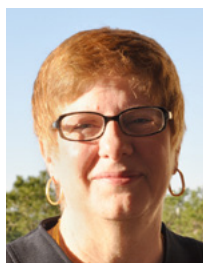# Library as third place
A strategic framework

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The academic library today has a long list of roles and responsibilities as we simultaneously provide in-person and electronic support for teaching and research, for students and academics, for local and distance users. And still, in the midst of this mix of activity stands the physical library. The naysayers have been proven wrong: the library as an institution remains strong, but the need to update and redefine our spaces and services is a constant. Decisions are often made day by day and case by case, but this can easily become disjointed and chaotic. The third place construct can provide a framework to bring decisions into a coherent model.

We begin with a book, of course. Ray Oldenburg posited in The great good place (Oldenburg, 1989) that to be emotionally healthy every person needs three places: home, work, and a third as yet undefined place. Home should be safe and comfortable, work should be consistent and satisfying, and the third place, which represents our informal public life, is where other needs should be met. Let's look at some examples. Janine is a professional accountant who lives at home with her partner, two cats, and a dog and works at an office in the city center. She has a nice flat, and her work suits her. However, it's not terribly creative, and she likes to make things; so time off is spent at her local bead shop taking jewellery-making classes and attending 'Bead and Blether', where like-minded people gather weekly to simply work on projects together. Her partner, Jack, is a telephone sales agent who sits at a desk all day, and enjoys the constant interaction with clients, but needs some peace and quiet and a chance to get some exercise after work. He spends late afternoons at the gym lifting weights and running on a treadmill while listening to music and chatting occasionally with his fellow gym rats. Janine and Jack have a comfortable home environment and fulfilling work, but need completely different outlets for their third place.

Our students have their own set of home, work and third place needs. They often live in university accommodation or private flats, which we hope are safe and comfortable, but may result in issues with roommates and space. Their work is defined by their courses and departments, and may be satisfying, but certainly comes with a set of stresses around grades and completion. This makes it all the more important that students find a third place to have their needs met that is readily available and free of stress. I believe that the academic library is a crucial, if not the only, third place for our students, and that the third place construct can provide a framework for decision making around use of spaces and provision of services in our buildings.

The set of characteristics that are used to define a third space are well within the library environment: a third place provides a level playing field, has long hours, is low stress, interactive, and has a loose structure. The primary characteristic of a third place is the idea of the level playing field. This is not a place where one group is prioritised over another. In your third place, you're not the boss or the employee, the parent or the child: all are welcome without prejudice. This is, of course, the very definition of a library. We may provide different services to meet the needs of differing users, but we are open without hesitation to all parts of our academic, and even sometimes our local, communities.

The majority of academic libraries today have long hours for most of the term, and even longer hours during revision and exam times. As a community we recognised a few years ago that students don't study within business hours. They keep late hours, and have part-time jobs that often fill their evenings, and need us to be open late. They also need us to be as low stress as possible. Students have enough stress without the library meeting them at the door with a list of 'thou shalt nots'. This is one characteristic of a third place that we may have to work toward. As a professional community it is easy to get caught up in protecting our spaces and applying the letter of the law over prioritising the needs of our students users, but as the student experience is emphasised

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more than ever we need to let go of rules that may no longer be necessary and concentrate on less stressful forms of interaction.

Interaction among our students has gone through major changes. The most used rooms in the academic library today are the group study rooms where students can either study individually, but within a friendship group; or they can work on group projects, which are increasingly prevalent in the curriculum. This brings us to the last characteristic – the loose structure which along with the low stress library is a challenge worth pursuing. It's one thing for us to have complicated staffing structures, and behind the scenes procedures that require a flow chart to understand, but the public face of the library should be clear and understandable for our students and academics.

At the University of Aberdeen we're applying the third place construct to build a framework for decision making on policies and procedures as well as on the use of space. For example, we've relaxed our food and drink policies to allow students to eat and drink almost anywhere in our libraries. There are exceptions: we still don't allow hot food, and special collections is exempted from this policy. This is a good example of applying the third place construct to decision making within the realms of practicality. We also moved our closing time to midnight, and started opening the library 24/7 during revision and finals. In an effort to provide a loose structure we relaxed our many rules around student society use of the building for non-academic purposes. This provides additional interaction and helps the students feel that the library is their place.

These are just a few examples of changes that were needed, and they might have happened without use of the third place construct. The difference is the ability now to make these decisions within a framework that is easily explained to students, staff and administrative decision makers, and makes a great elevator speech for those brief opportunities to explain the relevance of the library space in a digital world.

Using the third place construct to aid decision making and to assist in explaining those decisions to funders is not revolutionary. It is a shift in attitude, and in culture. It can also be pervasive. It's not difficult to look at options, small or large, and simply ask 'does this fit within the third place construct?' We also might want to consider other third places that students use on campus and consider whether collaborations might be useful for both parties.

We remain vital to our communities through innovation and adaptation, and the third space construct provides a framework for moving confidently through constant change. The subtitle of The great good place is *Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. The library as the 'heart of the campus' is a cliché, but this updates it nicely. The academic library as the heart of the community provides not only a strong stance for the library, but provides a place where our students can study, interact and relax within their schedules and without pressure.

Reference

Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place*. St Paul, Minnesota. Paragon House