Experiencing contemporary cafés and changes in the characteristic of third places

Yulia Nurliani Lukito¹ and Anneli Puspita Xenia²
Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

E-mail: yulianurliani@yahoo.com and annelixenia@gmail.com

Abstract. The fast development of modern cafés in the city is related to the creation of urban public space. The idea of a café as a public space is not new but how a café creates a convenience public space for people with different backgrounds is still an interesting phenomenon. Modern cafés like Starbucks and Crematology – famously known as a sign of globalization and consumerism – have spread to both campus and working areas. Oldenburg distinguishes “third places” as the public places on neutral ground where people can gather, interact and enjoy the surroundings (Oldenburg, 1991). In contrast to first places (home) and second places (work), third places serve as places for social interaction and often considered anchors of community life. This paper discusses how modern cafés in UI campus and working areas actually show modifications for the characteristic of Oldenburg’s third places. The study tries to connect how modern cafés appear to be a remarkably social space where some of the barriers to social interaction declines and in the end will promote social attachment. The argument in this paper is that modern cafés offer a comforting and neutral, yet generic enough to lend itself to whatever meaning people want to use it. The method conducted is through direct observations and qualitative analyses of the Starbucks café located at Universitas Indonesia Depok campus and the Crematology café near Sudirman, Jakarta, as the case studies.

Keywords: third place, café, public space

1. Introduction

Coffee shops are an example of third places in describing a place where local communities gather to discuss a broad range of topics. These places allow for community life to develop and become “a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” [1]. The category of third spaces falls between home and work, that fulfill people’s need of informal social spaces and provide an opportunity to connect with other people in communities as well as give a balance to the increased privatization of public life. Cafés can be labelled as “third places,” or public spaces that accommodate the regular, voluntary, and informal gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work. Third places have some criteria [1]:

- The third place is a neutral ground;
- The third place is a leveller;

1
Conversation is the main activity;
The third place is accessible and accommodating;
The "regulars" give the third place its character;
The third place is typically plain and has a "low profile;"
The mood is playful;
The third place is a "home away from home;"

The idea of "third place" is a term that echoes Habermas’ notion of the rise of public as the site of collective performance that brings together those who are different from one another precisely because they are different and Manheim’s thoughts on café and the rise of democracy [2][3]. It is the architectural nature of the classic seventeenth century coffeehouses in a form of a room with a large table and the nature of media found therein like people discussed news in gazettes that shaped our understanding of public.

There are many cafés in the city and their existence is intertwined with the social lives of consumers. Through the years, the idea of a modern café has developed mainly in relation to the expansion of globalization. Drinking coffee in an expensive and modern café becomes a lifestyle. Moreover, the development of information technology such as the web and email cause a replacement of conversation among people by gadget. Although the main function of a café remains the same, which is as a space for social interaction and networking, the idea of third place to some extent has a different meaning. Cafés are illustrated being successful through their connections to other actors, as well as the ways various actors find themselves diverted via coffee [4]. In addition, modern cafés offer not only good coffee, but also good settings such as the arrangement of the chairs, and a re-assuring greeting if we become a regular guest [5].

Some modern cafés like Starbucks has borrowed the idea of ‘third place’ and offers new technologies and internet for their customers as well as a comfortable setting of interaction. A remarkable thing that Starbucks does besides marketing modern lifestyles and technology driven by globalization is local adjustment to particular places [6]. Starbucks managers should understand the specificity of their store, its particular customers, and then make some adjustment according to local conditions. In Italy where espresso based drinks are already of a high standard, Starbucks opens a shop in sites where the costumers will be tourists from the USA.

The characteristic of third places are believed to be low profile, neutral, inclusive, accessible, accommodating, filled with regulars, conversational, and playful. Some people go to a café to meet neighbors and friends but still this café is part of their home or a living room of community. However, there are some assessments to the idea of Oldenburg’s third places. For instance, for some people third places can provide a more psychological support than homes do [7]. The concepts of "home" and "comfort" are deeply influenced by personal experience, cultural background, and social class and those concepts are used to feel and understand places that people visit. Some people use the coffee shop as an office when they do not have a designated office space or just want a change of scenery. Another assessment is that there is no neutral space instead space is related to social hierarchies [8]. The location of a café is not neutral because the presence of the café shows a reproduction of social norms of the neighborhood. For instance, there are some etiquettes such as unwritten dress code that guide the behaviors of people inside the café. Consumerism and consumption affects our societies and creates the contours of our identity by suggesting modern products and certain behaviors as part of normal standards.

Some critics disagree with the low profile character because in reality most people do not come to a café to meet strangers but they have their own plan. Moreover, people who come to a café make invisible boundaries to gain privacy. The claim that third places are for neighbors to meet each other does not necessarily apply to a big city, thus, cafés are not places that necessarily lead to an interaction with complete strangers. In relation to the regulars or customers who come frequently to a café and help determine its social character. Both people who come regularly and stays long in the café frequently and people who spend only little time in the coffee shop as regulars [8]. The fact that people come in and
out as well as stay and do not contribute as much to the social dynamic of the space adds to the coffee shop's flexible nature. Third places in contemporary cafés no longer have low profiles but to have at least ‘middle-class standards’ for cleanliness and interior in order to brand themselves and compete with other cafés. Nowadays, the quality of flexible spaces is more important than playfulness atmosphere because flexible spaces can accommodate different kind of interactions. Furthermore, cafés today have more formal and sometimes unspoken barriers to enter such as guests have to behave according to a certain standard of clothing and manners.

Mobile technology such as smartphones and cellular phones were not present when the definitions of third place was being developed. The emergence of electronic devices allows for virtual connection now dominate our communication and it is common to see people who communicate with other people through social media even though they are in a café. The use of communication technology like mobile phones in physical places isolates people [9] and some cultures even prefer the use of new technology over physical contact with other persons [10]. Gadgets and communication technology give virtual space for people to interact with each other, but in reality people still need physical contacts and a café offers an ability to transform online space into an offline space [11][12]. Moreover, a café can fulfil the need for and an opportunity of observing what others are doing in public spaces [13] and virtual spaces [14][15][16].

The paper discusses third places in both campus and business areas with Starbucks and Crematology cafés as examples of third places in campus and office areas. The study elaborate not only how modern cafés appear to be a remarkably important social space just like the idea of third places but also some new characteristics of third place that come up as the result of social interaction modern technology. The argument in this paper is that modern café like Starbucks and Crematology cafés offer familiar, comforting and neutral grounds for social interaction – just like the third places, yet adaptable to modern lifestyle and the use of communication technology. Starbucks café located at the central area of Universitas Indonesia (UI) campus in Depok and Crematology café located near Central Business Area in Sudirman, Jakarta, become the case studies since both cafés clearly show some modification of the characteristics of third places.

2. Methods
The methods for this research consists of literature studies on third places and contemporary cafés, as well as observation of the case studies. The focus is on how people behave in those third places and how the person-environment connection is structured through the organization of space. Therefore, it is important to observe what people do and feel about space and dynamics of events happens in that place. It is our aim to explore that the meaning of the public space to people and that in café as contemporary third places the dichotomy virtual-real does not work. Places we worked on were chosen to fit the characteristics of third places. The study took place in Starbucks café at the central area of Universitas Indonesia in Depok and Crematology in central business are in Jakarta in order to show the modification of the characteristics of third places happens as an adaptation to modern lifestyles.

3. Discussion
3.1. Experiencing Third Space at UI Starbucks Café
One of the most striking changes in the urban environment is the proliferation of smartphones and other portable technology. While walking, it is common to see people walk around streets looking down at their smart phone screens as they navigated down the sidewalks and through buildings. In cafés and other public areas, it is common to see people engage with smartphones or laptops instead of talking to each other. In campus and working areas, gadget are parts of daily lifestyles and communication.
Starbucks cafe is located on the ground floor of the central library building, Universitas Indonesia. Depicted in Figure 1 is the Starbucks cafe that faces an artificial lake. There are some other important buildings located near the lake: a rectorate building, a function building, and a central mosque. Being located in the middle of the campus, it is easy to reach the central library building from various directions (see Figure 2). The cafe occupies the biggest area among other retails in the building and it can be reached through the main lobby or the central plaza. There are some restaurants, a post office, a small grocery store, a merchandise shop, and a bookstore located on the lower floor of the library building.

UI Starbucks cafe is famous among students and known for having both unique exterior and interior designs. The central library building has grey color and solid appearance reflecting the idea of “Crystal of Knowledge.” A big part of the facade of the library building is made of glass walls so that one may enjoy the lake and the plaza from inside the building. With this kind of transparency, people at the plaza can particularly look inside the Starbucks cafe while visitors of the cafe can see clearly activities at the plaza (see Figure 3 and 4). The central plaza itself is one of favorite places in the campus central area for students to sit or meet up.
The Starbucks café has a high ceiling that makes the café looks spacious. The overall interior of UI Starbucks café creates a warm and modern atmosphere, probably because of the combination of big glass walls, dark marble like dark wood color to emphasize the warm atmosphere and modern interior. The artificial lightings are set quite high and this condition causes the brightness from the lighting comfortable, in addition to natural lights that come from the glass walls. The workstation for the baristas has three types of lightings – downlight, wall lighting for working station, and some decorative lighting near the food and merchandise counter. Tables in the café are made of wood, couches are made of red leather, and the chairs look modern and simple. These appealing attributes indicate that the Starbucks Café tends to look modern and does not mean to be low-profile like Oldenburg said.

Most of the visitors who come to UI Starbucks café are students which are considered as the regulars that give characteristics to this Starbucks Café. The café opens from 8 AM to 7 PM every Monday to Friday, while on Saturday the café closes at 4 PM following the general activity of students. The Starbucks café closes on Sunday because the central library is also closed. From our observation, there are only few guests in the morning – probably because most of the lectures and student activities are held in the morning - and there will be more guests come in the afternoon. Most of students come in a small group and there are also some lecturers come to the café. The most favourite place to sit in the café is near the glass walls and at the corners that looked to the lake and the plaza outside (see Figure 1).
5). The positions of the counter and the barista are at the corner, located not far from the entrance. In this way, it is easy for the workers and the barista to greet guest who come to the café. After ordering their drinks and food, visitors can hang out, or purposefully meet up, bump into one another in a small-world way and see whether they know someone in the café and may join in.

Depicted in Figure 6 are some preferences that visitors have when they come to Starbucks alone or in a group. Big tables with flexible chairs give options for guests who come in a group to arrange their chairs. Since the table is long, a group of visitors may share the table with other visitors. There are also places with seating arrangement that suggests closed group conversation such as chairs around a small table. Figure 7 shows how the chair arrangement around the big table allows people to sit across each other and implies both close and open group conversation. People who come to the café not as a group usually sit on the chairs near the glass walls or around the corners because of a privacy reason. Tables located at the center of the café offers less privacy than tables located at the corners or near the windows. From the observation, individuals who come alone spent more time with their laptops or gadgets and they do not like other people to pay attention to what they do. When some people come as a group, they are free to choose their seats and they can create boundaries by moving some chairs and configure their sittings to allow interaction with the group members or working together with their laptops.

Starbucks offers privacy to visitors through interior design and seating arrangement. One of the most noticeable characteristics of the UI Starbucks is that the chairs are arranged facing outward to the public space or the plaza. There are some areas in the café with tables surrounded with moveable chairs so that people can create boundaries necessary to have comfort zone. With glass walls, there is no sharp boundary between the café and the public space outside. In this way, visitors of Starbucks café can easily observe activity in the plaza while visitors are also engaged in their own activity, like talking and eating. The seating arrangement and the interior of Starbucks café support the roles of café visitors as spectators of people in the plaza. The role of visitors and spectators may be switched because people who sit at the plaza may become spectators of café visitors. Both people inside or outside the café usually carry on their normal activity as if no one was viewing them.

![Figure 6. Space users diagram. Source: Authors’ Illustration.](image1)

![Figure 7. Activities diagram. Source: Authors’ Illustration.](image2)

In contemporary café like UI Starbucks, there are some modification to the characteristics of Oldenburg’s third places. Visitors of Starbucks café have to buy a drink or a food – the price is relatively
expensive for students – when they want to socialize in the third places and this was a challenge to neutral characteristics of third place. Instead of interacting to a person near-by, visitors use mobile phones in the third place. People very often are online connected while in third places and as an effort to attract customers third places also offer a presence of digital connection. In this way, people may have multiple focuses while talking, which is not mentioned by Oldenburg. Although people are in a physical third place that affords the ability to talk to each other, they may choose to temporarily access a virtual place or occupied with their phones and laptops or have online conversation.

3.2. Experiencing Third Place in Crematology Café

Some people work in the café to have different atmosphere. Surprisingly, a group of people want to have a meeting in a café to have less distraction and interruptions than in the office. In the café, there are still some minor disruptions such as table-finding or noises from other guests but there is no significant disruption from secretaries or colleagues. Although a café is a public place, it is disconnected from the day-to-day situation such as in the office. With the atmosphere of the café, a person may hope to be able to think out-of-the-box or just have a refreshment.

Crematology café is located on Jalan Suryo, between the central office area of Sudirman Central Business District and elite residences of Kebayoran Baru in South Jakarta. Visitors of the 220-square meter café are mainly employees working near the business district area. Crematology café has a warm ambiance, probably because of the wooden tables, dim lightings, and earth-toned sofas. There is an outdoor smoking area that consists of two large tables. The exterior of the café still resembles the idea of a comfortable house and modern appearances. Concrete walls and glass windows are two dominant materials seen from the outside, that seem to wrap the three-storey building. The concrete columns in the interior are both functional and decorative since those columns are covered with coloured ceramics.

Figure 9 shows the position of openings in the café and the seating orientation. Most of the chairs it can be seen that openings can make people either facing to the parking lot and main road, or to the wall and plants. At the seating in the center and near entrance, people can look up to the outside that consist of parking lot and main road. While seating at the corner and at some seat can face the wall and plants. The barista table faces the main road and it is functional because they can say hello to the people that walk in. The opening that faces the smoking area functions as marking so that people know where the smoking area is.

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1We conducted some interview from April until May 2017
The barista’s table is located across the entrance so that the café workers can easily see people who enter the café. With this central location, guests from various directions can see the barista preparing their orders. Therefore, how the barista makes coffee becomes an attraction to guests. Barista table is also near cashier and display for pastries.

In the Crematology café, there are some areas that can be shared with other guests as depicted in Figure 10. People who sit in those areas usually come alone or want to work with their laptop. The café, with its good interior design, strives for a distinctive identity and seems to be an encounter to the concept of a third place.

Figure 9. The plan and the seating arrangement at Crematology Cafe. Source: Authors’ Illustration.
The material for the floor outside the building is dark wood while the floor inside is either exposed concrete or wooden floor. The exposed concrete floor gives an attractive stone color and neutral ambiance to the room. The dark color of the floor outside is carefully chosen in order to emphasize the furniture and become a neutral background. The Crematology café has some levelling accent that accentuates tactile experience of the café as well as create boundaries. There are almost no walls inside the café that makes the interior looks spacious. Walls are present only to separate the public and service areas such as storage, kitchen, staff room, and the toilet. There are walls at the corner that support the privacy of the guests. The walls are mainly covered by wood finishing.

![Figure 10. Shareable and non-shareable spaces. Source: Authors’ Illustration.](image)

The Crematology café has five types of lighting: downlight, wall-washing, decorative, uplight, and background lighting. Downlights are placed on the ceiling as general lights (Figure 12). Wall-washing lights function to lighten the walls and adds tone to the surface. Decorative lights are placed near the deer horn hung at the center of the room, at the barista’s area, and some of the walls. Uplights are used to enhance the stairs. The effects of those lightings is not only emphasizing the area but also defining boundaries and creating warm atmospheres.

![Figure 11. The interior of Crematology. Source: Authors’ Collection.](image)
During weekdays, the Crematology café is mainly visited by office employees who either want to work or have a meeting rather than to hang out. Some high school and college students come to this café to meet their friends or to hang out. The café is set to specific tones for the meeting because the comfortable atmosphere removes the formality of the meeting. From our observation, most of the people coming as a group choose sofas located at the center of the room, probably because this place has big sofas with good lightings. The lighting helps to create a more private space for the group. Individuals who come alone usually choose to sit in the corner since the seating arrangements give more privacy. The lighting is dimmer, and the area has some electrical plugs. During weekends, the Crematology café has more various visitors ranging from individuals, family, and employees.

With contemporary society’s focus on convenience, efficiency, and speed, visitors of café use gadgets and social media as part of everyday life. Often, online communications are the preferred method of communication in our current era due to favoring increased automation and immediate fulfillment. Modern social media has served as space for people to communicate often in a café that previous generations used as meeting places. Most café’s visitors use smartphones, laptops, and other mobile devices. But some even do not communicate with others in the physical environment except for
ordering drinks and food. In some cases, the café’s visitors who come as a group only exchange a few words and then quickly goes back to his laptop while others proceed to use their smartphone. A café is still a third place, but there is a disconnectedness in communication with café visitors seldom speak to each other [15]. The seating arrangements of the café is meant to be used by visitors and is designed to accommodate adjustment and create boundaries but at the same time a comforting zone like a living room.

4. Conclusion
Cafés as third places still become places for people who want to expand their work and home activities. In cafés, a group can act as a group in public and may have a privacy of discussion according to the arrangement of chairs and interior design. Being alone in cafés means a privacy in public since people are engaged in modern communication. The connection of people to physical spaces has changed because of internet, online conversations and social media rather than cultural specificity originally proposed by Oldenburg. The characteristic of third places has been changed because of modern culture and communication technology.

UI Starbucks and Crematology cafés remain a neutral ground where people can easily come in and out. The physical conditions of the cafés such as the seating arrangement and the interior show neutrality as well as offering flexible spaces for different kind of interactions. Third places no longer have low profiles but to have at least ‘middle-class standards’ and some rules that guide visitors’ behaviors inside the café. The interior of the café usually enhances those standards to attract people and to be as appealing as it can be. Modern cafés do not predominantly encourage interactions between strangers but accommodate the need for working or relaxing and doing multiple conversations through social media. Café may increase privacy between groups and individuals by creating boundaries. Even though conversation is still the main activity at third place, many people use their electronic devices alongside face-to-face conversations. Contemporary third places also give a possibility to observe others physically as an addition to virtually observe others such as via social media. Contemporary cafés appear to be a remarkably important social space where some of the barriers to social interaction declines but still promote social bound through observation and interaction. Cafés offer a comfortable and neutral, yet generic enough to lend itself to whatever meaning people want to use it.

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