

The Third Space: A Community Art Center as Public Space of Community Engagement

Introduction:

“In cities blessed with their own characteristic form of these Great Good Places, the stranger feels at home-- nay, *is* at home-- whereas in cities without them, even the native does not feel at home... Without such places, the urban area fails to nourish the kinds of relationships and the diversity of human contact that are the essence of the city.”

Ray Oldenburg
The Great Good Place (1989, introduction xv)

When I moved from San Francisco to San Diego to study at the University of California, I had to adapt to a new place. While the two places are within the same country, and even the same state, for me it was still a new place and a new community. I spent the first year of college mostly on campus, only venturing out to the city for trendy eateries and picturesque locations. Through an independent study and the Department of Education Studies at UCSD, I became involved with Art Produce, and subsequently found a home in San Diego -- a “Great Good Place” to ground me in my new city.

Art Produce is a non-profit community cultural center in the North Park neighborhood of San Diego. The space consists of a storefront gallery that is free of charge and open to the public, an edible garden and beer garden, a restaurant, a work studio, and a community space. Every Saturday afternoon there is a free community art class. These classes are sometimes structured, led by artists and interns with activities such as print-making or knitting; and sometimes classes are less structured, with paint and paper and other materials on tables for participants to use. Art Produce also holds artist residencies, dance performances, drawing classes, and school field trips, among other programming. Even with the multitude of events at Art Produce, it served as a

constant for me. Going to Art Produce nearly every Saturday afternoon, I could expect to be warmly greeted by familiar people (the owner Lynn Susholtz, interns, artist in residence, returning participants), meet new people, make art, and engage in conversation with those around me, both familiar and new. It became a place where I would invite friends to spend the afternoon. In these ways, Art Produce became my “Great Good Place.” For this reason, I am interested in the role that Art Produce serves in its community. Applying third space theory and ideas of community engagement and sense of place, I will explore the following questions: How does an urban community art center work to engage the local neighborhood and its greater city community? What types of engagement are fostered in this space?

Literature Review:

“The Great Good Place”

“The Great Good Place” is a term used by Ray Oldenburg in his book of the same title in regards to third spaces. Third Space Theory posits that the first space is the home; the second space is work/school; and the third space is a public space outside of home and work (Oldenburg 1989). According to Oldenburg, civic engagement and democracy are fostered in third spaces, and third spaces work to establish sense of place. It is in these spaces where the culture of a city is created. Oldenburg developed a list of characteristics of the third space, defining a third space as a space that is:

1. *“on neutral ground,”* meaning that it is a place where people of all backgrounds and positions can gather and meet informally, where all feel welcomed and none play the role of “host” (22).

2. a “*leveler*,” meaning that it is a place without restriction as to who its patrons are, nor has any formal membership (23). Oldenburg states that people generally select others in close social rank as acquaintances and friends, and that it is the work of the third space to expand the possibility of associations that a person has.
3. conducive to conversation. Oldenburg states that in a third space, “conversation is the main activity” (26). While third spaces may draw people for a specific activity, the activities usually aid conversation.
4. accessible and accommodating. The third space should be situated in a neighborhood, and should be a space where one can go alone most times of the day. It should be open beyond the typical work hours.
5. a place for “*regulars*.” According to Oldenburg, regulars give a third space its character and sets the tone for newcomers. It is also a place where newcomers can easily become regulars.
6. plain in appearance. The physical space should be plain in order to prevent pretension. One does not dress up to go to a third space, and the third space is not a space that is trendy and stylish.
7. playful and fun, where people may lose track of time and stay beyond when they had anticipated and have the urge to “return, recreate, and recapture the experience” (38).
8. “a home away from home” in that it is a space where people may “unwind,” feel that they can be themselves and have “the freedom to be,” and exhibits warmth in its friendliness and care (37-41).

These spaces offer personal benefits such as decreased loneliness and greater perspective, as well as serve a larger role in society in its political role. Ray Oldenburg states that though third spaces played important roles in history (e.g. the French cafe during the French Revolution, the agora in ancient Greek democracy), they seldom exist in America today.

“Community engagement,” “civic engagement,” “sense of community” and other similar terms are often discussed without definitions and, as a result, are usually understood vaguely. McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed an explicit definition and theory of sense of community in order to discuss how the various elements of a community work to produce the sense of community. The elements include: membership, influence (to feel influential and to be influenced), reinforcement (integration and fulfillment of needs), and shared emotional connection. These elements and the dynamics within these elements create a criteria to view communities. This definition and theory provides a framework from which to discuss the sense of community in a place or in a group.

Public spaces, ones that are high quality and frequently used, play a large role in creating a sense of community. They offer opportunities to meet neighbors and friends by chance, and an increased number of chance encounters is often how friendships begin and strengthen, and is associated with feeling a sense of community. Public spaces promote expansion of social networks and social capital, and involvement in these spaces contribute to sense of community. However, the extent that public spaces work to create sense of community is not by the number or the size of the public spaces, but by the quality of the physical space and the activities/events and resources available. In terms of physical space and the neighborhood, high-nature areas tend to promote sociability whereas people in low-nature areas report knowing fewer neighbors and

felt a lesser sense of belonging. Emotive qualities also contribute to sense of community. Feelings of friendliness and perception of safety are important aspects of public spaces to create a sense of community (Francis et al. 2012).

Art spaces are unique spaces of engagement in communities that serve several roles of a public space. They may serve as the art school, museum, resource/outreach center, and a space for community gathering. Art spaces offer a “local uniqueness” that is often overlooked or unnoticed, but plays an important role in community development. As a public space, community art centers typically offer a variety of events and programs to attract large and diverse participants. In this way, participants from “all walks of life” are able to engage and interact in a way that they do not in other spaces. Art spaces often also provide a site and visibility for underrepresented groups such as people of color, immigrants, elderly, and disabled (Grodach 2009). Economically, art spaces can work to revitalize a community by occupying and restoring vacant buildings, as well as by attracting patrons who subsequently supports other local business (Grodach 2011).

Methodology:

Over the course of half a year, I have collected data through interviews -- both formal and informal, and observations -- as a researcher and as a participant during the Saturday Make it Yourself classes. In the summer, I looked specifically at Once Upon a Body, a series of workshops led by the artist in residence at the time, Bhavna Mehta. Using these interviews and observations, I will look at the ways in which Art Produce serves as a third space, a public space of community engagement in the North Park and greater San Diego community, including: Artist

in Residence program, Saturday Make it Yourself classes, university-community partnership, and the function of the physical space of Art Produce.

Artist in Residence

Art Produce hosts artists in residence who create interactive and engaging installations. These residencies involve the community in creating the installation, and invite participants to gather and work together on a project. One residency, led by artist Michelle Montjoy, is “DomesticACTion” and featured large looms that seat four people. Participants would sit around the looms and work on large-scale knit projects, and in a sense, physically add to and influence their communities. The task of working on the looms is simple and accessible for everyone, from young children to older adults. The simplicity of the task allowed for conversation to be the main event during the workshops. This residency also brought in Burmese refugees from the local Karen Organization of San Diego to teach methods of traditional backweaving, sharing knowledge that the rest of the community would otherwise likely not know, and highlighting those in the community who are typically marginalized. This creates a “community of practice” where there is not an expert with all the knowledge and students waiting to learn, but rather everyone in this community of practice has a certain knowledge to be shared (Wenger 2011).

Another residency that took place during my time at Art Produce is titled “Once upon a Body” by artist Bhavna Mehta, using stories and drawings of clothing and patterns to inspire wearable paper sculptures. For this project, workshops were held every week and invited participants to make small books and to share a story about an item of clothing or jewellery that has significance. Participants would share memories of these items, reflections on why they are

drawn to their items, and stories and traditions surrounding the items. Similarly, this residency lends itself to conversation -- meeting people and creating bonds through storytelling. "Stories have always been a way for people to connect to one another," Bhavna said on why she wants her art to tell stories of the community. Through these workshops, participants have the opportunity to engage with one another and to learn the stories and backgrounds of their neighbors.

Saturday Make it Yourself:

Every Saturday afternoon, there is a free art class at Art Produce. The participants include regulars of all ages and backgrounds, members of social groups, people from the neighborhood who stumble upon Art Produce on a stroll, and people from around San Diego and beyond who learn about the space through the newspaper or through friends. This class is accessible in that it occurs outside of normal work hours, is situated in a neighborhood, is free of charge, and is open to all skill levels. The class makes use of materials that are commonly found such as crayons, pencils, markers, and clay. Participants paint with cotton swabs, create stories to share on paint chips, and create masks from falling palm tree fronds. In this way, the Saturday Make it Yourself class follows Oldenburg's idea that third spaces maintain a low profile that is homey, wholesome, and not pretentious (1989).

University-Community Partnership:

While most universities today have some form of university-community partnership or a service-learning program, the nature of the partnerships can differ. Historically,

“university-community involvement” means that a community or an organization serves as a real-world classroom for university students, and in turn, the communities are aided by student helpers and expertise from the university. This partnership sometimes creates an imbalance where power and knowledge are top-down, with the university seen as holders of knowledge and expertise, and the communities as needy and unknowing and as sites for experimentation and research (Bringle, Games and Malloy 1999). A “partnership,” however, should be truly mutually beneficial, and a healthy partnership should carefully consider the interpersonal relationships of university faculty, students, and members of the community, as well as examine the distributions of power and equity in the relationships (Bringle and Hatcher 2002).

Art Produce serves as a site of community engagement for Education Studies students at University of California San Diego. Masters of Education students at UCSD use Art Produce as a classroom to learn ways to integrate art into curriculum, to think about teaching and education as being within a community, and to learn about some community resources for students. On the partnership, Caren Holtzman, who is a faculty member in the Department of Education Studies, says: “... everybody comes to the table with something to contribute and something to learn.”

Physical Space

In a study of community art centers, Carl Grodach found that most issues of accessibility are due to physical space. Few of these art spaces are designed to be inviting and accessible spaces. Grodach found that most spaces he encountered had street-facing parking lots and deep building setbacks, suggesting that the spaces are designed around automobile access rather than engaging the public before they step foot in the building (Grodach 2009). The physical space of

Art Produce is situated in the North Park neighborhood of San Diego. It has storefront windows that allow pedestrians to peer into the space, and enter on whim, without reservation.

Discussion/Conclusion

Art Produce serves as a third space in the community and in San Diego. It is committed to engaging the community through its constant and diverse programming, most of which is free of charge. It is accessible in its location within a neighborhood and in its low profile and approachable materials and activities. Art Produce offers a space for participants to both learn art, and to engage and talk with the people in the community. Ray Oldenburg writes that: “[t]he course of urban development in America is pushing the individual toward that line separating proud independence from pitiable isolation.” Recently, loneliness and social isolation have been seen as health risks and issues of public health (Hafner 2016). To have a space that offers community members the opportunity to meet one another, and to engage in activities works to combat these issues of isolation and loneliness. Third spaces are important features in a community that facilitate community engagement and foster a sense of community, and should not be overlooked.

Works Cited

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