THE ROLE OF THIRD PLACE IN COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
A summary of research findings from a pilot project to document, define and understand the importance of Third Place in a suburban Halifax, NS neighbourhood

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The purpose of our research was to explore the informal places in our neighbourhoods that bring people together and the importance of such places in our experience of community life. The scholarly literature calls these places 'third place'. Most of us, however, call them 'hang outs'. They are the places we visit when we want to be with others without the commitment of too much effort, planning or organization. Popularized by Ray Oldenburg with his book "The Great Good Place", 'third place' stands in contrast to the intimate home (first) place and the more formal work (second) place where we spend our private and productive time.

We became interested in the notion of 'third place' while conducting other project work in the Halifax Regional Municipality, NS community of Spryfield (population 4,460 in 2001) on the south Halifax Mainland, west of the Halifax Peninsula. Spryfield attracted our attention because we recognized a level satisfaction and community engagement among the residents that seemed at odds with the generalized socio-economic profile of the area (declining population, social assistance housing, young, single-parent families, but also long established neighbourhoods and families going back many generations in the community). We wondered if and how social connectedness might be responsible for the sense of community so often reported by Spryfield residents. Being community planners, we were curious about the physical spaces in which social connections are built and maintained.

Spryfield is a collection of neighbourhoods connecting to the 'main drag'- Herring Cove Road. The neighbourhoods comprise predominantly middle and low income families. The core neighbourhoods date back to the early 1800s. There are also recent and several very new developments (still in the construction stage). Some are dense arrangements of apartment buildings and townhouses, others are medium density mixed-use developments or low-density, single-family housing areas. The commercial and service activity strung out along Herring Cove Road is an eclectic mix of locally-owned businesses, fast food franchises, chain stores and service providers. There is one shopping mall (in the process of decommissioning) and two grocery stores. Spryfield has many churches and many are also social service providers. There is a recreation-library complex and a skating rink, a high school, two junior high schools and three elementary schools. Spryfield is distinguished by its natural areas – lakes, streams and woodlands – located not only on the periphery but also in the heart of the community.

Our primary research objectives were to develop an understanding of 'third place' through the case study of Spryfield and to link the experience of 'third place' to community health and well-being. As part of our study we completed an annotated bibliography of 'third place'. The literature is diffuse and intersects with many related topics or themes in social science and planning, particularly community planning and place identity. Our bibliography contains 65 references to books, articles in academic journals, magazines, and website postings covering the topics of: 'third place'; social life of children, youth, and the elderly; public places; computer

social networking; social capital; spaces for alternative culture; place meaning, identity and attachment; social connectedness; and civic community, among others

We also completed an inventory of the third places of Spryfield. We traveled through Spryfield identifying and cataloguing places that appeared to match the types of 'third place' identified in the literature, or places that we suspected might serve as third places in the community.

Upon completing our inventory we examined the third places of Spryfield by talking to people. We used group interviews (focus groups) to explore the type, location, character, use and significance of Spryfield's third places. The discussions allowed us to develop a fuller inventory and to understand the role of the third places in the community life of our study participants.

We worked with the Chebucto Communities Development Association and the Captain William Spry Library to recruit participants to the focus groups. We interviewed 42 residents in eight focus groups between May 28 and August 14 of 2007. Our groups included older teens (2 girls, age range 16 - 20); younger teens (6 boys, 4 girls, age range 11 – 15); mothers of young children (7 women, age range 18 - 35); younger and middle aged women (3, age ranges 30 - 50); men (4, age ranges 30 - 60); older adults (9 women, 1 man, 50 years and older); a mixed age group (8, 7 women, 1 man, 30 years and older); and a mother (age range 20-35) and son (age 11) pair.

Our mothers of young children group met at the Spryfield Single Parents Resource Centre. We held all other focus groups at the Captain William Spry Community Centre. Women dominated the focus groups (either by design, or by self-selection as we searched for participants for the older youth, mixed-age and older adult groups). Our discussions were guided by a series of questions allowing us to identify the location and types of third places in the community, participants' preferences for such places, the history of third places in Spryfield and the significance of these places to the study participants.

We transcribed the focus group discussions and employed a thematic text analysis. We looked for similarities and differences between third places described or reported in the literature and what our participants identified as third places. We also looked for stories about third places, changes in third places in the community, and differences between the groups in reporting third places that they use and their experience of third places.

Third places identified and described in the literature are dominated by privately run establishments: pubs, coffee shops, local diners, lunch counters are much lauded as neighbourhood hangouts. Traditionally these places are small, modest, locally run establishments nestled in neighbourhoods and frequented by the local residents. They are most often interior spaces although outdoor cafes are also third places. For authors like Oldenburg (The Great Good Place) third places are largely the domain of 'regulars'; they are reasonably predictable (one can anticipate what will happen in any given location and who, generally, will be there); and the atmosphere is relaxed and open-ended. Oldenburg conveys a sense of nostalgia for a by-gone era when he writes about 'third place'. He also suggests that third places are mixing places: generations meet and find common ground; differences are tolerated; and new ideas can be tested through playful or more serious conversation.

Increasingly, businesses, housing developers, and community developers are recognizing the role of 'third places'. Some businesses (e.g. Just Us Café) are overtly appropriating the term 'third place' and advertising themselves as such. Developers and community designers are building in opportunities for third places in their developments. In doing so they are relying on the

professional and popular literature for interpretations of third place. What we did not discover in the literature is a critical examination of the practice where by 'third parties' attempt to create 'third place'.

The public domain also contains 'third places'. Libraries, especially, are self-identifying as 'third place'. They recognize an opportunity for a new role as a common meeting place and some market themselves as 'third place' on library websites (North Suburban Library, Loves Park, IL). Municipal parks can function as outdoor third places. 'Dog parks' emerged in the literature as important 'third places' as do 'tot-lots'. The popular literature also describes the mobile third places frequented by commuters – buses, ferries and trains. Shopping malls are third places of the quasi-public realm, particularly popular with young teenagers, much to the chagrin of adults and mall operators.

While we observed agreement and similarities between the types and traditions of third place described in the literature and what residents in Spryfield told us about their local hangouts, we also discovered that the literature does not adequately capture either the diversity of type or experience, or the nuances of third places, reported to us in our Spryfield case study.

The following table summarizes the third places in Spryfield.

	Used in Spryfield	Identified in Literature
Community centres and facilities	community centre, library, rink, gym	some libraries, gyms, saunas
Social clubs	Legion	clubs
Businesses	mall, grocery and convenience stores, pizzarias, fast food, coffee shops, Frenchies	locally owned coffee shops, bars, fast food, convenience stores, bookstores, laundromats, barbershops
Community service organizations	employment centre, food bank, community garden, youth clubs, resource centre	post office
Churches	occasional	self-identified
Community events	parades, church suppers, holiday events, yard sales	
Streets	street hockey, skateboarding	
Sidewalks	some streets, in front of some buildings	small town mainstreet sidewalks
Transit	bus stops, buses	ferries
Parking lots	skate boarding, hockey, apartment parking, church parking lots	
Schoolyards	basketball courts, fields, school doorways	
Parks, playgrounds, courts	playgrounds generally, lake and pond shorelines, beaches, lake skating	dog parks
Trails	most	
Woods	behind buildings	
Grey places	smoking areas, under bridges (youth)	
Beyond community	downtown malls	malls
Virtual 3rd places	CAP sites, Facebook	on-line games, chat rooms
Lost 3rd places	coffee shops, restaurants, theatres, mall lobby	

Spryfield today has very few of the typical third places – pubs, bars, coffee shops and eateries - that feature so prominently in third place literature. A visitor to Spryfield would be hard-pressed to locate the social heart of the community. The community doesn't lack third places, however, only the conventional ones that planners and community developers are more familiar with and attempt to emulate. Spryfielders do miss the sit-down coffee shops they once had; and they would certainly like those back. A significant vignette emerged from all of the focus groups – the story of the disappearing sit-down coffee shops, and the loss of the food court at the local mall – a significant social space in the community for all ages; so significant in fact that some

devote regulars still walk to the nearby 'drive through' Tim Horton's (that replaced the sit down version) for a coffee and then walk across the street to the mall to sit at the remaining tables and chairs in the empty food court, thus maintaining their social traditions despite the erosion of infrastructure to support them.

People in Spryfield know how to make things happen for themselves, which creates satisfaction and sense of community (reported by the older participants in particular). They adapt spaces and events to social purposes and they define social spaces according to the attributes and traditions of the community (the regular flea markets, festivals such as the Santa Clause Parade, church suppers, food-bank cafes). Outdoor spaces were a recurring theme in the descriptions of local hangouts. Kidston Lake, in particular, is purportedly used by many people in the community all year round. It is natural area and park that seemed common to the experience of all age groups. The local skating rink, built 30 years ago through community fundraising, was the other.

Youth in the community do not have many locations that adults would acknowledge as 'third place'. With the exception of the library which is a popular destination for the youth we spoke to, and the rink, many of their hangouts are outdoor spaces. They have their own version of a 'mobile' third places which is the side walks and trails of the community. The young teens described using the linear (walkway) and nodal (parks) outdoor spaces extensively (and the older teens and some adults confirmed it). Young teens wonder the community, congregating in playgrounds or behind schools for instance. Groups meld, dissolve, reform. They migrate in the general direction of the library where eventually they meet for youth group programming or to hang out at the computer terminals and join friends on face-book, MSN, and other social networking sites.

The older teens and younger adults complained that Spryfield offers them very little for social connectedness, with a few notable exceptions (the Single Parent Centre was an important parenting support facility but also an important social space). Some described the importance to them of on-line social space. Older participants were nostalgic about the lost third places (coffee shops, restaurants in particular), and lamented the lack of these places now. But they also described the importance of the many other meeting places – permanent, seasonal, temporary – that Spryfield offers. They noted particularly the ones that involve working together – church suppers (there are many), fairs, seasonally recurring events (plant sales, 'Seedy Saturday'); they described their role in making the community an especially friendly place. The older adults found more social opportunities in these community-based events and spaces than did the younger adults.

For those commenting positively on third places, our participants revealed places and experiences that derive from adaptation of existing assets (natural places and physical infrastructure such as streets, sidewalks, parking lots), self-organization (through volunteerism, long-term residency and allegiance to place) or opportunity seeking (joining a programmed activity more for social connections than the program itself). These strategies to create and enjoy third places cannot be overlooked but are not readily acknowledged in the professional and academic literature relating to 'third place'.

The research is broadening our understanding of third place diversity and also of the evolution of third places. Perhaps 'making' a third place (and how that happens) is as significant an experience as is participating in one. The findings will help to advance another research objective which is to operationalize the definition of third place, one of interest to planners and

community developers. The planning profession is beginning to position itself in the role of 'place maker'. We caution that 'place making' is not as formulaic as some developers and planners might expect. Planners need to ask: "Who makes places, really?" Our study provides some insights to the physical qualities and social experiences of third places not reported in the literature. We continue to work on making connections between third place and community health and well-being.