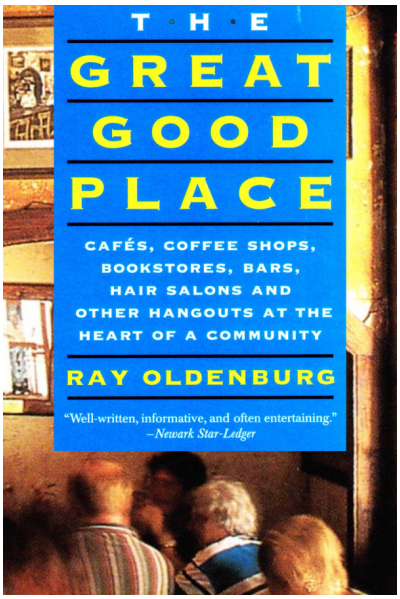
Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community

By Ray Oldenburg

The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community is 296 pages, with 14 chapters in three sections, not including the preface, introduction, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography and index. It was published in 1989 and has been revised.



Ray Oldenburg was an urban sociologist who taught at the University of West Florida in Pensacola when he wrote this book, which became a bestseller. He died in 2002.

This classic urbanist book awakened civic leaders to the importance of what Oldenburg called "third places"—and to their disappearance. The results of losing these places, he warned, were isolation, loneliness and a loss of connection within communities. Ultimately, he said, it would pose a danger to democracy. Thirty-five years later, his concerns seem prescient.

What are third places? They are gathering places that aren't the workplace or home, Oldenburg explained They include, as the subtitle suggests, mostly small businesses, from diners and coffee shops to bars, bookstores and barber shops. These are places, he said, where you tend to see the same people, again and again.

The keys to successful third places, Oldenburg went on, were relaxation and regulars—an easygoing environment with people you get to know because you see them there so often. This is important for good mental health, he wrote: "Much as the body requires a balanced intake, so does the mind. The irritations of modern life call for a counterbalancing kind of experience—for human association that is both pleasurable and gratifying *because* of the presence of others."

Problem is, he said, these places were disappearing in the decades leading to the 1980s. Oldenburg estimated that by then, America had lost half of the gathering places it had at the end of World War II—

“places that hosted the easy and informal, yet socially binding, association that is the bedrock of community life.”

Note: A research project called the Third Place Index, inspired by Oldenburg’s work, says the decline has continued and accelerated, due partly to the pandemic. It estimates that from 2003 to 2023, time spent by Americans in in-person socializing declined by more than 20 percent.

Why? Oldenburg’s explanation: We built “unifunctional” suburbs, places with mile after mile of single-family houses that trapped people in their homes by making travel possible only by automobile. In a post-war suburb, you could not walk to a neighborhood tavern, diner or hardware store because they didn’t exist. (In many suburbs, because people drove everywhere, developers dispensed with sidewalks all together.)

So what did people do after their long commutes home from work? They stayed home and watched television, Oldenburg said. Today, of course, there are even more diversions in homes, like social media and electronic games. These are activities you may do with family or by yourself. They offer no opportunities for meeting others.

And even if you do get in your car and drive to a supermarket, a big-box store or to a chain restaurant, he said, you will not spend enough time there to know others around you.

This dependence on home and work without a third place for friends and acquaintances will not make people happy, Oldenburg warned. “Where once there were places, we now find *nonplaces*,” he wrote. *“*In real places the human being is a person. He or she is an individual, unique and possessing a character. In nonplaces, individuality disappears. In nonplaces, character is irrelevant and one is only the customer or shopper, client or patient, a body to be seated, an address to be billed, a car to be parked. In nonplaces one cannot be an individual or become one, for one’s individuality is not only irrelevant, it also gets in the way. Toby’s Diner was a place. The Wonder Whopper, which stands there now, is a nonplace.”

Keep in mind that Oldenburg wrote this more than a decade before Robert D. Putnam’s influential book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, which also sounded an alarm about the loss of connection among people and its effects: a lonely, suspicious and divided nation.

So, if we were to create third places that connect people, as Toby’s Diner once did, what should they offer that the Wonder Whooper doesn’t? Eight things, Oldenburg writes. Among them, that it be “neutral ground,” where no one plays host and people can come or go as they please. It must be a place that encourages “leveling,” where economic or social status is not a barrier to meeting others. It should encourage conversation and have a “playful mood.”

There’s more: It should be accessible but informal. No one should feel out of place there. In time, it will attract “regulars,” people who spend time in the place because it feels like “a home away from home.” A good test, Oldenburg added, is what happens if one of the regulars goes missing. In a good third place, he said, someone will notice and call to check up on him or her.

We need these places, Oldenburg wrote, because most humans need not just close friends and family members but an array of acquaintances. It’s a “paradox of sociability,” he said, that in the right settings and under the right circumstances, we can get along with people not the least bit like ourselves.

This is important, Oldenburg wrote, because acquaintances “complement more intimate relations.” Put another way, we need to know a lot of people to appreciate our closest friends. But knowing a lot of people also has a social benefit. It reduces the frictions of difference and diversity and is, therefore, good for democracy.

In the first third of T*he Great Good Place*, Oldenburg lays out his description of third places, their importance and their decline. In the middle third, he describes third places in different countries and different eras (sidewalk cafes in Paris, the 17th century coffeehouses in London, American taverns, German beer gardens, and so on), and how they worked.

The final section is about why third places declined in number and what has been the impact on American life. Oldenburg lays much of the blame on city planners and suburban real estate developers. He has, he said, read scores of books and manuals about city planning only to find almost no mention of lounges, taverns, bars, doughnut shops, pool halls or coffee shops. “These places apparently don’t belong *anywhere* in the thinking of the planners,” he added.

His final chapter is titled “Toward Better Times … and Places,” and it amounts to Oldenburg’s hope that Americans will come to value what has been lost, neighborhoods with small, lively gathering places that people could walk to. He saw signs of this in the 1980s “through grassroots efforts in reaction against the brutality and banality of urban-renewal programs.”

When the turn comes, he predicts, it will be driven by the need for greater convenience in people’s lives. In a way, then, *The Great Good Place* is an early advocate of what another urbanist book, The 15-Minute City: A Solution to Saving Our Time and Our Planet, suggested in 2024. Let’s bring everyday needs back into our neighborhoods, “where,” as Oldenburg wrote, “an easy walk secures postage stamps, dry cleaning, groceries, a magazine or a sweet roll and a cup of coffee.”

Change could also be driven, he continued, by a recognition of the role acquaintances play in good mental health and in helping build more connected communities and a stronger democracy. Finally, he said, it may involve a recognition of “the power of place”—that is, how important buildings, small businesses, public places and everyday routines are in shaping our lives.

Oldenburg ends with an exhortation: “If there is one message I wish to leave with those who despair of suburbia’s lifeless streets, of the plastic places along our ‘strips,’ or of the congested and inhospitable mess that is ‘downtown,’ it is: *It doesn’t have to be like this!*”

Footnote: In *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg does not mention New Urbanism, though he lived less than a two-hour drive from one of most acclaimed examples of New Urbanism, the planned community of Seaside in Florida’s Panhandle. Construction of Seaside began in 1981. Ray Oldenburg may have missed this early, influential effort to create a community built around walkability and third places, but there’s little doubt he would have approved.

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are "big ideas" in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we will discuss Ray Oldenburg's book about the loss of third places. We and look for lessons for Urban Atlanta.

Our meeting will be **Sept. 2, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307**.

There's more information about this discussion at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website.

How to get your copy of *Key to the City*:

- You can purchase a hardcover or paperback copy from a local bookstore, such as Virginia-Highland Books.
- You can download an e-book edition from the Barnes & Noble, Apple or Amazon websites.
- You can borrow a copy from the DeKalb County Public Library.