

The Library as Third Place: Clayton State University Library

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### Abstract

This paper briefly explores the construct of the meaning and history behind the “Third Space” and how it relates to Clayton State University Library’s (CSUL) physical and online presence. The primary source of the third space construct is Oldenburg’s assertion that six characteristics that third places have in common are neutral ground, social leveling, conversation, ability to go alone and encounter acquaintances, unimpressive appearance, and playful mood (Fisher, Saxton, Edwards, & Mai, 2007). After surveying the research literature derived from Oldenburg’s original conceit, we applied Oldenburg’s characteristics to CSUL and quickly decided that CSUL does not meet the criteria of a third place. This stems chiefly from the institution’s orientation toward its academic mission, which overshadows all other concerns, especially those of a social orientation. Nonetheless, having examined CSUL both online and as a physical space, with an adjustment of management priorities, the possibility for it to become a third place certainly exists, and should be borne in mind as libraries of all types, public and academic and otherwise, continue to evolve now and in the future.

### **The Library as Third Place: Clayton State University Library**

The Clayton State University Library (CSUL) was the focus of Group Four's analysis. According to its mission statement, "The Clayton State Library exists to serve the students, faculty and staff of Clayton State University" while also serving "the local community by enabling area residents to use the library's collections and facilities for reading and research purposes" (Mission Statement, 2000). Examining the mission statement through the framework of the assignment allowed us to see clearly what the Clayton State University Library (CSUL), the object of our analysis, aspires to be. In this, on its own terms, it functions quite successfully. Nonetheless, by analyzing this institution through the perspective of Oldenburg's criteria of the "third place," our group was able to perceive it as with new eyes and wondered whether this institution, successful as it undoubtedly is, could be more? CSUL serves a student population of over 6,000 students. Its facilities are located on campus which is about fifteen minutes from downtown Atlanta, Georgia. Clayton State University (CSU) serves a high percentage of commuter students that represent a diverse population. Benjamin Lynch provided the summary for the third place background research, Laura Herndon completed the field study of CSUL, and Leslie Gonzalez analyzed the online presence of CSUL.

### **The Third Place: Origins and Evolution of a Construct**

Ray Oldenburg originated the concept of "the third place" in 1977 and entered more general circulation in 1989 with the publication of *The Great Good Place*. Oldenburg envisages the "third place" being distinct from the "first" and "second" places of home and work centered on a core contingent of regulars augmented by a steady influx of occasional visitors and one time interlopers (Oldenburg, 2003). Beyond this cursory definition, he offers six further

characteristics third places have in common: neutral ground, social leveling, conversation, ability to go alone and encounter acquaintances, unimpressive appearance, playful mood (Fisher, Saxton, Edwards, & Mai, 2007).

Oldenburg perceived such spaces as being in decline in post-war America, undermined by the decline of urban centers and the emergence of suburbs. Oldenburg contends third places, be they “general stores” or “coffee shops” or, to cite an idealized example, the eponymous bar of TV’s “Cheers,” remain essential to creating community and facilitating local democracy. Indeed, authoritarian and totalitarian governments throughout history, such as the Nazi’s crackdown on coffee house culture in Europe during the period of the Second World War, have habitually sought to eliminate third places to facilitate control through hindering public gatherings in third places (Oldenburg, 2003). Indeed, he perceived them as essential to the American experience, perceiving them as prevalent in churches, colonial inns and the bars, beauty shops, and soda fountains that followed them as America developed (Lawson, 2004).

Since Oldenburg’s initial conception, the third place construct has gained much traction in sociology and has been increasingly refined and expanded by other researchers, as well as Oldenburg himself in 2000’s *Celebrating the Third Space*. Librarians, in particular, have explored their own institutions using Oldenburg’s framework of the third place to focus their own research on the evolving nature of the library. Strictly speaking, the library does not, as studies of the Seattle Public library have borne out, squarely fit with Oldenburg’s conception of the third place, meeting a mere three of eight criteria – the library does offer neutrality, social leveling, and functions as a distinct locale between work and home. It does not, however, satisfy the others save through the most liberal interpretations (Fisher, Saxton, Edwards, & Mai, 2007).

Nonetheless, Oldenburg's vision of the third place continues to excite the interest of librarians and information system specialists. Since Oldenburg introduced the concept to general currency, librarians have continued to make the case for libraries as third places even when they demonstrably fall well short of Oldenburg's construct, believing them demonstrably and ineffably "great good places," be they public or academic or otherwise – including online (Lawson, 2004). The literature continuously argues that American public libraries serve as a third place, and frequently rely on Oldenburg to support their own arguments. Indeed, librarians have used Oldenburg's work as far afield as Australia to demonstrate the salutary influence the addition of cafés to libraries to make them more welcoming can achieve (Harris, 2007). Others, contemplating the digital revolution still permeating society, particularly its deleterious effects on college students and their community, have sought to create third spaces online, expanding the third space beyond its original physical constraints, to some notable effect (Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth, & Sarker, 2005).

### **Clayton State University Library: Physical Space as Third Place**

Clayton State University Library's physical space was observed by conducting a walk through the facility and noting what factors contributed or detracted from its possible role as a third place for students and community. The observation was conducted on January 14<sup>th</sup> 2010 at 3:00p.m. The library has a few attributes that could make it a plausible third place but was found quite lacking in some areas.

The library is in a central area of the campus within reasonable walking distances of classes and dorms. The building the library attaches to is the University Center, which also contains the Center for Student Success, Instructional Development, Office of the President, the

cafeteria and various meeting rooms. Connected study carrels are provided in various areas around the stacks. Efforts have been made to accommodate study groups at tables placed near the library entrances while the rear sections have been cordoned off to promote quiet study. Natural light and a lovely view of the campus lake are provided by large windows adjacent to a row of study carrels running down one side of the library. The library lobby provides soft seating, art work, display cases and live plants for those that wish to be able to chat and use their cell phones; however, references materials are not permitted in this area. There is an enclosed group meeting room that is available on request but is often in use for classes or faculty meetings. The library provides wireless internet access throughout the building. Fourteen workstations are available to the students and community members, though most students bring their own laptops.

The library building itself is obviously dated. Though some improvements such as new carpet have been made, the shelving, paint, and furniture all show signs of heavy use and age. Space is at a premium. The collection is expanding to keep up with the demands of the growing student population and is continually squeezing out the students themselves as a result.

Concerning the physical space of the library itself, the library's physical location, along with its other notable attributes such as wireless internet access, make it a plausible third place as described in the research (Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth, & Sarker, 2005). Students do meet their friends and socialize here, and many spend a good portion of their day within the building (Oldenburg, 2003). Members of the local community are also welcome to use the library, though they are not permitted to remove items. However, strictly applying Oldenburg's criteria, this library clearly lacks many other qualifying factors. Food is not allowed and only water is

permitted within. The lack of space is another serious detriment. An informal atmosphere may not be encouraged in the library to the extent that the primary mission of providing a place of research and study is compromised, which, given Oldenburg's belief that the ultimate success of a third place often relies on the hosting skills of its managers, be it public or private, should come as no surprise (Oldenburg, 2003). That CSUL, with its management dedicated to realizing the stolidly academic ethos of the mission statement, does not seek to be a third place should come as no surprise. As long as the library's user community and its management conceive the physical space as being solely dedicated to research and learning with little consideration for other matters limned by Oldenburg, such as creating an engaging social atmosphere, this situation will not change (Oldenburg, 2003).

### **Clayton State University Library: Online Presence as Third Place**

Clayton State University Library's (CSUL) website has been visited and analyzed according to Oldenburg's six characteristics of a third place over several evenings in late January, 2010. The home page for CSUL's website presents itself as neutral ground for any of its population that has Internet access (Oldenburg, 2003). According to the CSU website, it is the third university in the United States to require that every student have their own Internet ready laptop. Thus, it is safe to say that their students do have access to the CSUL website. The social leveling aspect of the online presence is apparent in that the library only serves student, faculty, staff, and visiting researchers according to the CSUL Director's Welcome. The general public can visit the site and could even receive help through the online chat feature with a CSUL librarian, but the general public cannot access the databases, nor can they reserve or check out material without authorization.

A disappointing aspect of CSUL's website as a third place is the lack of conversational ability and ability to go alone and encounter acquaintances. The social networking capacity available to users is minimal. CSUL has had a FaceBook page since October 31, 2008. However, it boasts only 115 members out of 6,000 students and 197 full-time faculty members (Appendix A). Since its inception, there have been only two actual posts by members, a few "likes" by mostly the same few members, and only 59 CSUL posts that are mostly about their calendar. On the other hand, the main CSU FaceBook page has 1,136 members and seems relatively active as a third place for students. CSU has also jumped on the Twitter bandwagon, but their library has not. How could the academic library capitalize on that to better serve their population as a third place? Furthermore, CSUL does not incorporate blog or wiki features similar to the social services that other social networking sites offers. As noted by Habib (2006), digital libraries can function as a third place "...by incorporating social tools such as blogs and wikis" (Appendix B). Having conversational ability and the ability to go alone and encounter acquaintances is not currently a focus of CSUL, as noted in the Director's Welcome. Director Dr. Gordon N. Baker states that CSUL "...provides users a comfortable research, study, and learning environment." The rest of his welcome lists the collection, staff, and information services that they offer. There is no mention of features or services that would qualify the online site as a place for conversational ability or the ability to go alone and encounter acquaintances

CSUL's web presence does qualify as having an unimpressive appearance, but does not present a playful mood (Oldenburg, 2003). The website offers clearly delineated margins that point out the basic features offered such as database access, account information, resource sharing, help features, and campus features. It is easily navigated, the font is large and easily read, and the space is not crowded (Appendix C). However, the only way to find the CSUL

FaceBook page is to click Contact Us, which includes an indistinct FaceBook link. This further inhibits the use of the website as a third place.

## **Conclusion**

Clayton State University Library's physical space and its online presence only meet Oldenburg's criteria as a third place in that it does provide neutral ground using the standards required by Clayton State University. All students and faculty have equal access to the materials offered and to the space offered and it has kept its website simple and user friendly. Although the physical space and social leveling does offer minimal opportunity for conversation where the online presence does not, the criteria of providing the ability to go alone and encounter acquaintances, and playful mood are deficient in both spaces. Harris (2007) points out that US architect Jeffrey Scherer believes that libraries that are serious about creating a third place must recognize "the four elements of an individual's life: live, work, play and learn." Under this construct, the CSU Library's physical space and online presence only targets the area of learning and work for the students and faculty. The CSUL physical space would need to expand its mission to begin to incorporate more third space criteria. The CSUL website could easily expand its role as a third place by prominently featuring its FaceBook link on the main page, implement blog and wiki features, and develop social networking features that allow users to connect through similar interests.

If our exploration of CSU's library as a third place demonstrates anything, it is that, much as librarians may wish to have their institutions counted among the "great good places" of the earth, a rigorous application of Oldenburg's criteria must exclude Clayton State's library - at least for now - but tomorrow never knows. Nonetheless, examining this library, its physical space and

its online presence, through the lens of scholarship derived from Oldenburg's original framework of the third place, provided our group not only with novel insight into the Clayton State library itself, but those, which are undoubtedly legion, like it. For those intent on pursuing a career in library science, the idea of the third place provides researchers with a vision of not only what is, but, perhaps more importantly, as libraries continue to transition from brick and mortar institutions toward an as yet unrealized future, it provides a valuable tool for libraries and their supporters, today and tomorrow, to envision what their institutions might be. It is the vision of the third place, not the reality or unreality of it in a particular institution at a particular time, which matters most.

## References

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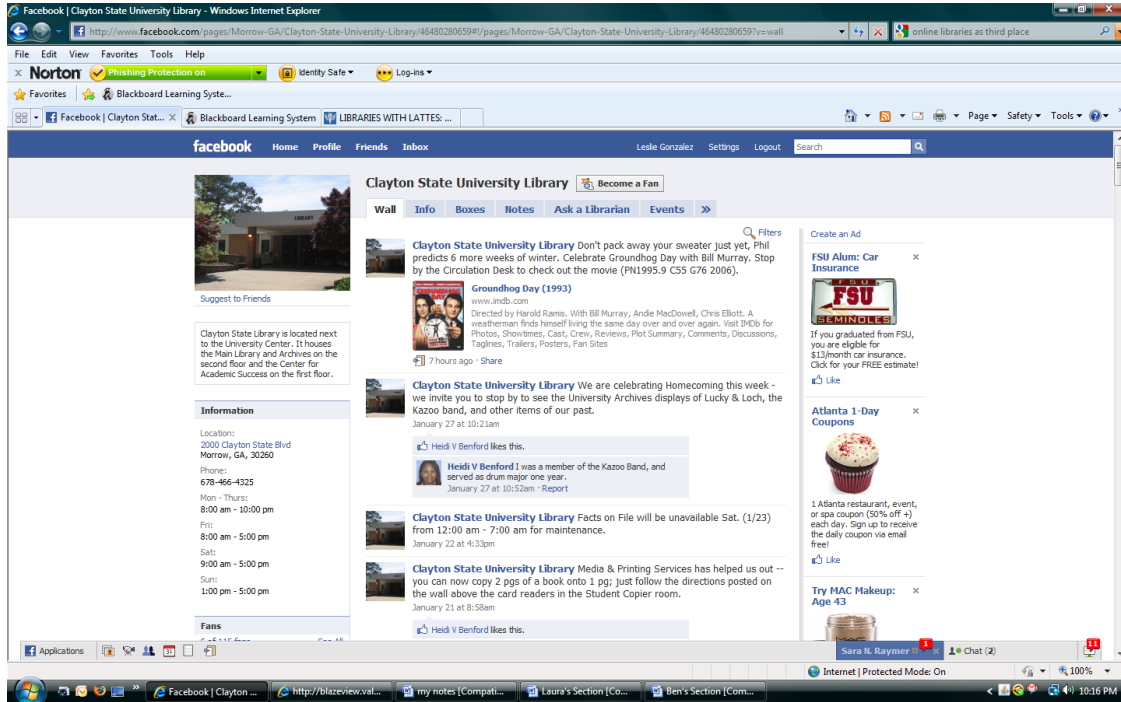
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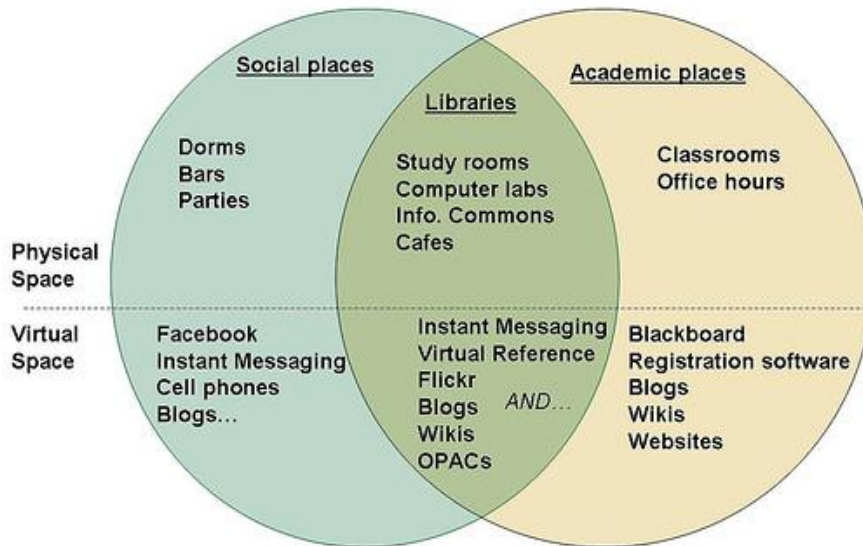
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Appendix

Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C

