

1001 Pennsylvania Avenue: Contemporary chandeliers and plush seating provide scale, warmth, and a welcoming touch in the entry vestibule to this iconic Hines building in Washington, D.C.

GARRETT ROWLAND

REDEFINING THIRD SPACES

Modern approaches to informal urban gathering places

MICHELE LERNER

LONG AGO, places such as museums were solely for admiring art, libraries were for reading and borrowing books, and offices were for work. These days, the boundaries between places and their purposes are blurred. Architects, city planners, and developers have taken note and now intentionally design "third spaces" for unexpected places.

For example, libraries have reinvented themselves and added "maker spaces," where people can work on art or craft projects, take classes, listen to lectures, or watch performances, says Elena Madison, director of projects at the Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a nonprofit placemaking organization in New York City.

"One town added a 'rent-a-kayak' service to the library ... others have tool libraries where you can borrow tools for home improvement projects," Madison says. "Designing buildings for these multiple uses brings people together informally in ways that go beyond your typical social structure."

Some building owners are marketing their buildings differently, especially if they don't have a lot of space but are in a great location, to highlight public third spaces in their neighborhood, such as restaurants, cafés, and parks.

"Developers know that the quality of third spaces in their buildings or nearby makes a big difference in how functional and attractive a place is," Madison says. "We're seeing lots more creative concepts and multipurpose third places, such as coffee shops that are also bookstores, yoga studios, or even laundromats."

The term *third place*, coined by sociologist Ray Oldenberg in his book *The Great Good Place* (1989), refers to a location for social interaction and public relaxation separate from your home and your office. Whereas most definitions of third space may refer to such places as coffee shops, libraries, community centers, bookstores, gyms, or theaters—places where people interact socially—third places today also include sites where remote or hybrid office workers can be productive yet not alone.

In a 2022 JLL survey, more than one third (36 percent) of employees said they work in a third place at least once a week.

"Third places are critical to what we do as architects and are important factors in our mixed-used and office designs," says Robert Holzbach, principal and director of commercial office for Hickok Cole, an architecture firm in Washington, D.C. "Even 10 or 15 years ago, when we were repositioning office builders and trying to compete with newer buildings, we focused on the idea of taking underutilized space and turning it into an amenity."

For example, beautiful "power lobbies," once a space to walk through and admire, were converted into spaces with appealing



The Aleck: Tenant lounge at 3rd floor amenity space. Multiple seating arrangements provide different opportunities for work or relaxation.

JENN VERRIER

furniture where people could gather and a coffee bar where tenants could meet clients, Holzbach says. Today, these spaces continue to evolve and link to public indoor and outdoor spaces, he says.

Public third places are also "inclusive spaces where people can connect," says Erin Christensen Ishizaki, a partner, architect, and urban planner with Mithun, an architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, urban design, and planning firm in Seattle.

"Research shows that third places that provide a space where people can mix socially improve the mental health and wellbeing of people," Ishizaki says. "Inclusive spaces can provide economic opportunities that have a multiplying effect. People you see casually can provide resources and opportunities that you might not know about otherwise."

Third places became critically important during the pandemic because many people, especially in cities, live in small "first" places, where they spend all their time, Madison says. Third spaces provide a location for informal connections. For example, New York City's Bryant Park, renovated in the 1980s as a third place through a public/private partnership, brings together people from all income levels and from all over the world.

The impetus to create third places comes from a variety of sources, including corporations, developers, city leaders, and neighborhood activists. In Philadelphia, the Center City Business Improvement District hired OLIN Studio, a landscape architecture firm, to renovate Dilworth Park for greater accessibility and visibility. The park has become a vibrant place for casual gatherings and programmed events.

"During the pandemic, large companies, nonprofit organizations, universities, and government agencies across the board immediately made a big swing to determine how much of what they're doing inside could be done outside," says Rebecca Popowsky, a landscape architect at OLIN and leader of the OLIN Labs research group in Philadelphia. "The idea right away was to incorporate [into designs] places to meet, work, and eat outside."

Even as the pandemic fades, flexibility is important, she says.

"The pandemic pushed [into the foreground the idea] that there's less of a division in how people spend their days," Popowsky says. "That means that ideas for third spaces are embedded in the design process of new projects from the beginning."



JASPER SANIDAD

Atlassian's Austin office: Mithun's design for this global software company's Austin location incorporates both socialization and work in a range of spaces where side conversations can occur.

Cultural organizations incorporating indoor and outdoor gathering rooms

Libraries, museums, and academic institutions seek greater visibility and inclusivity, and they're embracing indoor-outdoor spaces where people can gather.

At Seattle University's Jim and Janet Sinegal Center for Science and Innovation, Mithun incorporated flexible indoor and outdoor space for members of the community and of the university. On the campus side of the building, a courtyard is designed around boulders and trees for quiet conversations, whereas the city side includes an interdisciplinary workshop for collaborative engagement.

"The third spaces we build in academic settings are so important to relieve students' stress," says Dorothy Faris, a partner and landscape architect with Mithun in Seattle. "Also, researchers found that nearly half of students have spontaneous conversations in third places at least once a day. Building spaces to encourage social networks is so necessary."

Planning these third spaces starts with evaluating how people move through the area and how to build infrastructure for weather protection, places to sit in sun or shade, lighting, Wi-Fi, and possibly a water element to mask noise, Faris says.

"You also want to identify spots that are away from busy areas ... where people can [nevertheless] be seen, so they feel safe," she says. "Landscaping and topography can contribute to safety, along with feeling relaxed."

Creative third places in mixed-use and office developments

When tech companies upgraded break rooms into game rooms with golf simulators and added roof decks and karaoke rooms, that overhaul led to amenity wars in offices and multifamily buildings, Holzbach says.

"Then coworking spaces evolved and maximized the third-place idea to incorporate work instead of just relaxation," he says.

In new buildings, 30 to 40 percent of office space is devoted to alternative work areas, Holzbach says.

"What's new now, especially in offices with 4,500 to 10,000 square feet [420 to 930 sq m], is that tenants want these shared third spaces—gathering lounges, lunch lounges with a pantry, conference rooms and smaller workspaces—built in from the beginning," Holzbach says. "All the tenants on the floor can



KEVIN SCOTT

Heartline mixed-use development in Portland, Oregon: On the ground floor of the residential tower, a shared lounge and kitchen space opens out to the courtyard and features a variety of seating areas to accommodate individual work, collaboration, social gatherings, and more.

use these common spaces and reserve them through a central hub."

Third spaces can be part of a renovation, too. For example, Hickock Cole enclosed a former outdoor space at 1001 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W. in Washington, D.C., with floor-to-ceiling glass walls to bring in daylight and a 65-foot-long chandelier over seating areas in the lobby rotunda, which includes a private wine bar for tenants and guests.

Third places can be a way to entice remote workers to return to the office, Ishizaki says.

"Atlassian, an Australia-based tech company, asked us to design their office in Austin to encourage socialization and in-person collaboration to support the well-being of their workers," Ishizaki says.

Mithun's Atlassian design includes indoor and outdoor biophilic elements and small areas for individuals to work, sections with traditional desks, and couches and seating where people can relax and regroup.

Hickok Cole retooled a Phillip Johnson–designed building at 1300 Eye St. N.W., in Washington, D.C., by replacing its heavy bronze grillwork doors with glass walls and illuminated canopies that visually unite the building with Franklin Park. The lobby itself becomes a third space with a tenant-only café, while Franklin Park beckons as an outdoor third space for tenants and the public, Holzbach says.

In D.C., most clients want a private rooftop deck, so we step the building back if possible, to create terraces on every floor, Holzbach says.

At the Aleck in Washington, D.C., Hickok Cole redesigned a 1980s office building with an expanded two-story lobby and a winding interior staircase that links the lobby to a third-floor indoor-outdoor terrace for gatherings. The terrace includes a NanaWall that can be entirely opened.

"Mixed-use developers have also embraced the idea of third space retail, such as a café that's accessible to the public and directly from the building lobby," Holzbach says.



MARNA ABRAMS

Seattle University Center for Science and Innovation: Mithun designed an interdisciplinary maker space for hands-on exploration, to activate the campus entry and inspire more diverse student engagement with the sciences.

At the Heartline in Portland, Oregon, Mithun designed a block-long development with a tall residential tower and a low-rise timber-frame office building punctuated by a mid-block open space that functions as a third place for residents, office workers, and others in the neighborhood, Ishizaki says. The open space has programmed activities and art installations.

"The ground floor of the residential tower has a lounge and shared kitchen that [open] to the courtyard and has multiple seating areas," Ishizaki says. "The design allows for interesting views from the interior of the offices and residential units, plus it keeps eyes on the courtyard at ... different times for a feeling of safety."

At the Liberty Bank building in Seattle, located on the site of the first bank west of the Mississippi River to serve the African American community, Mithun designed a mixed-income residential building with a public courtyard flanked by a community room and bike workshop. The courtyard includes retail spaces where local entrepreneurs and Black-owned businesses could thrive, as well as multiple seating areas and space for community events, Ishizaki says.

Social benefits of third places

Popowskyand OLIN Labs are part of an ongoing multidisciplinary research project with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's LandCare program, the Urban Health Lab @ Penn, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the U.S. Forest Service Philadelphia Field Station to turn vacant lots into public amenity spaces and evaluate their impact on crime, as well as on the physical and mental well-being of nearby residents.

"The pilot study looks at whether just cleaning up the lot provides a similar benefit to providing a place to sit and stay that is meant to create ongoing community engagement," Popowsky says.

Third places can sometimes provide equity benefits to communities, such as the Times Square project by PPS that links people who are facing unstable housing or experiencing homelessness to service providers.

"The Times Square Recharge Station is a small cart in a very busy place where anyone can stop by to charge their phone or get coffee," Madison says. "We purposely designed it so all kinds of people stop by, but it's especially relevant to people who barely have a first place, much less a third place."

Urban planning and third places

William H. Whyte, the late mentor for PPS, advocated for bottom-up planning rather than the top-down model, in recognition of people's preference to spend time in spaces that are comfortable and easy to use.

"Designing a third place starts with the location and evaluation of who's around it, who might use it, and how," Madison says. "Sometimes, that comes from a business improvement district or an association, sometimes from a developer, and sometimes from local government."

Discovery Green, a 12-acre (0.12 ha) site of underused green space and parking lots in downtown Houston, was converted in 2008—with the help of PPS—into a park and event space.

"A lot of the stakeholders were skeptical, at first, because Houston is a car-centric city," Madison says. "Now it's become a catalyst for $1.25 billion in development nearby, with more than 1.5 million visitors and 600 free events every year."

Third spaces often occur organically and have been around for centuries—probably since the invention of the pub—but today, planners, architects, and developers take a more intentional approach to incorporate them into projects.

"Third spaces are not just leftover space. They're designed into buildings and outdoor areas deliberately, to encourage social interaction," Faris says. "Now that we've lost the boundary between work and home, and learned the value of social connection, third places are more important than ever to include." **UL**

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