Third Places Are Being Reimagined—and Welcoming Travelers

By Laura Kiniry

1. Every Wednesday morning, Erin Klenow leaves her apartment in San Francisco and heads to the city's Aquatic Park, where she spends up to 40 minutes swimming in the frigid waters of San Francisco Bay. For the last several years, Klenow has been a member of the South End Rowing Club, a historic athletic club dedicated in large part to open-water swimming.

2. "You just feel great afterward," says Klenow, "and can go about your day with a fresh perspective." But while the swimming is often meditative, it's in the club's showers and sauna where things really get social. "Sometimes there are women aged 70-something in there, reminiscing about the old days," she says. "Or on days when there are organized swims, everyone's enjoying the showers' hot waters and talking."

3. San Francisco's South End Rowing Club is what's known as a "third place," a social environment outside of both home ("first place") and work ("second place") where people can socialize, connect and build community. American sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term third place to describe these informal gathering spaces, in his 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*. Today, the concept is a part of the common lexicon, referring to places like cafés, parks, libraries and community centers where people go to gather, interact and relax.

4. Third places are nothing new. In the 1960s, coffeehouses like Caffe Mediterraneum in Berkeley, California, and the Gaslight Café in New York City served as meeting spots for musicians, artists and intellectuals. Not only do third places provide an alternative to home and work life, but they are also good for us, offering a sense of belonging. For example, in 2022, the Survey Center on American Life found that 58 percent of Americans feel close to their neighbors when they have third places—such as parks, coffee shops and gyms—that they visit regularly.

5. "When we think about thriving cities and how they're set up, we don't just think about economics," says Kimberly Burrowes, a senior manager at the Urban Institute. "We also consider, can you work there? And also, can you *live* there?" This includes third places. "Part of livability in a city is really thinking about those places where you might go to really foster social connection."

6. While third places exist across the U.S., Burrowes stresses that not all third places are created equal. “We look for places in a community where you’re able to foster connection, it’s free of charge, welcoming, and the quality of the place is kept up,” she says.

7. Here are several types of third places that fit the bill for both local residents and visitors alike.

Urban parks

8. “Parks are very interesting because if you have quality park spaces, you increase social capital,” says Burrowes, referring to the positive connections between individuals. “You’ll see people volunteering, riding bikes … and they’re flourishing.” San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park is a great example. This 1,017-acre public space offers activities like pick-up volleyball, live music and free outdoor swing-dancing lessons every Sunday.

Board game cafés

9. For a small fee you can spend an afternoon or evening playing games like Exploding Kittens and Monopoly with like-minded souls. Places like Game Point in Nashville, Sip & Play in Brooklyn and Victory Point Cafe in Berkeley all offer a large selection of board games with the option of food and drink—to help keep your body nourished and your mind sharp.

Reading rooms and community spaces

10. Along with libraries, reading rooms are wonderful spots to find a collective community beyond home and work. San Francisco’s Radical Reading Room provides a free place for reading and study during select open hours, and it also hosts various events and meet-ups, such as comedy shows and song circles. Brooklyn’s Free Black Women’s Library is a literary hub, Black feminist archive and community care space with free public programs and a backyard garden.

Food halls

11. Beyond eating and drinking, many food halls (like San Francisco's Saluhall) serve as central hubs for local communities. Swing by Essex Market in Manhattan's Lower East Side for free Zumba classes, cooking demos and occasional tango dancing. In Los Angeles, the century-plus-old Grand Central Market hosts local artisans and makers twice monthly, as well as family crafting days.

12. Whether you're a local or just passing through, third places offer something that home and work simply can't: a chance to connect with others and feel like you belong. From a rowdy board game café to a quiet reading room, these spaces are proof that some of the best parts of city life are free, open, and waiting to be discovered.