

MSc Thesis

Young People and the Third Place: a Case-Study of High Wycombe, UK

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Abstract

Young people's use of third place is a poorly-understood phenomenon, and the lack of research means that placemaking guidelines do not adequately address the unique needs of this group. This paper fills this research gap, by identifying the characteristics of third place in the British town of High Wycombe, as perceived by the students of a local grammar school. Current understandings of third place are discussed and collapsed place theory is demonstrated to be applicable in this case. Found challenges to 'good' and spatially distinct third places include a lack of democratisation, lack of representation of young people's wishes, and contextual issues. These include economic burdens, poor accessibility, and time constraints. Austerity acts as a further restricting factor on the investment in third places. In High Wycombe, third places are found to be spatially indistinct to second places, such as the studied grammar school, further reinforcing collapsed place theory. The implications of this are clear: diminished opportunities for young people to socialise outside of their school groups, decreasing place satisfaction, and more restrictive, less diverse place functions. The thesis concludes with a five-step proposal to modify planning guidelines, with particular emphasis on repeated study, integrated planning, and youth participation in placemaking.

Keywords: third place, collapsed place theory, austerity, youth, placemaking

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
1. Introduction.....	5
1.1. Background.....	5
1.2. Study aim and research problem.....	7
1.3. Structure.....	9
2. Theoretical Framework.....	10
2.1. The Third Place.....	10
2.2. Young people’s use of place.....	18
2.3. Good placemaking.....	21
2.4. Conceptual model.....	24
3. Methodology.....	26
3.1. Case study.....	27
3.2. Data processing and analysis.....	34
3.3. Positionality and ethics.....	36
4. Results.....	38
4.1.Descriptives.....	39
4.2.Young people’s unique use of Third Place.....	43
4.3.Expectations of Third Place.....	49
4.4.Barriers to accessing Third Place.....	55
5. Conclusions.....	60
6. Recommendations.....	62

Equitable Placemaking and Third Place Planning63

Bibliography66

Appendix.....73

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In many developed countries, trust in communities and strangers is at a historic low (Putnam, 2020). This comes despite technological advancements such as the proliferation of social media, a normalisation of tolerance, and diminishing inequalities, and corresponds with a collapse in the number of free, accessible social places. The diminished trust, corresponding with this major drop in the places that allow us to socialise with each other (otherwise known as Third Places), impacts a multiplicity of outcomes: from a marked increase in populist rhetoric (Müller, 2016; Mazzola and Liveriero, 2023), to skyrocketing rates of mental illness and general unhappiness (Bauman, 2006). Both in developed and developing societies, humanity seems more susceptible to increased wealth and quality-of-life concentration than ever before, despite unparalleled levels of capital and aggregated quality of life (Putnam, 2020). This is at least partly caused by the increasing difficulty of finding a Third Place where people from different groups can interact with each other (Putnam, 2020). The loss of these places, which drive spontaneous interactions, directly correlates with this societal and market failure, and interrupting this cycle presents a unique opportunity to improve lives.

There is a diversity of academic literature examining the results of reduced cross-social strata interaction, mirrored by a corresponding level of nonscientific reporting- media is increasingly filled with articles that sow division, discontent, and dissatisfaction with the individual and society more broadly (Rozado, Hughes and Halberstadt, 2022). Yet, humanity has not surpassed the desire to connect, as demonstrated by a surge in parasocial relationships (*Artists & Fandoms*, 2020; *How To Be Hopeless*, 2021).

The loss of Third Places, and the related decreased trust in others, is close to my heart. Raised in a suburban setting, with countryside and city nearby, social spaces were completely

inaccessible without a driver's license, the substantial cost of entry and/or public transit, or a willing parent. Concerningly, this experience was common for many childhood friends, who, like me, felt increasingly isolated and frustrated with a lack of accessible places to 'chill'. If, for example, cost presented a barrier to socialising for a boy from an affluent family in a wealthy, relatively well-connected area, it must be a near-insurmountable barrier to those with less money, less mobility, and greater spatial separation between home and social place.

For affluent boys in the single-sex grammar school system of some parts of the UK, who share a lot in common with their classmates, there are few opportunities to be exposed to dissenting opinions or demographics (Understanding Society, 2017). It is telling that the first time I witnessed childhood poverty was after visiting a friend made at a Pride event in a neighbouring city, not from friends at my own wealthy school in my affluent area. The proliferation and acceptance of far-right and extremist rhetoric in same-sex grammar schools, illustrated by the cult-like status of Andrew Tate in many British boys' schools, is partly exacerbated by the rarity of interactions with non-male colleagues (NW, Washington and Inquiries, 2016). The resulting gender imbalances in social circles, which are almost exclusively same-sex and from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, lead to skewed worldviews. This creates cohort after cohort of wealthy, privileged, influential young men with unrealistic understandings of the world. Without Third Places, young people cannot break this cycle.

Social place drives the interactions and cross-class conversations that create informed, empathetic, and resilient societies (Oldenburg, 1989). For young people, whose social spaces are already restricted through time and distance barriers, and for poorer people, who cannot afford good places to relax, a lack of socialising both limits their indirect impact on power and worsens their mental health, drastically exacerbating inequalities (Christophers, 2021). It is, therefore, in the interest of all to create the best social spaces possible; Third Places which

empower rather than disempower, and generate the social interactions which alleviate societal ills.

Despite the clear negative results of diminished Third Place usage among young people, there is relatively little research examining its root causes. This dearth of research, particularly in a post-COVID and increasingly online world, is especially acute among young people, especially when considering the increasing democratisation of placemaking and implicit exclusion of pre-voters at a level beyond tokenism in planning. While some attention in academia is given to youth perceptions of social places, much of this focuses on the institutional approach to service provision and its withdrawal, often as a direct result of austerity (Horton, 2016). What limited research there is into third place perceptions mostly focuses on the perspective of children and examines their playing habits, rather than those in the immediately pre-voter demographic and on the actual built form of place (Lin *et al.*, 2022; de St Croix and Doherty, 2023). Young people's, particularly children's, geographies of place are framed primarily as constructed for them, facilitated by them, and without the agency to create their own social places- a direct impact of neoliberal programme defunding and planning process simplification in the UK (Horton, 2016). This lack of research is illustrated by the vast array of disparate responses to youth isolation and loneliness, which have been met with varying successes. This thesis examines one such cause of diminished trust- a perceived decrease in our social spaces, or 'third places', through a case-study of a location with both the demand and the capital to improve its third place provision. This research also seeks to elaborate on the policy recommendations put forward by Hall, Pimlott-Wilson and Horton (2020) to directly address the unique manifestations of inequality as experienced by young people.

1.2. Study aim and research problem

This thesis addresses the lack of research into young people's social spaces, specifically at the spatial distinction between first, second, and third places. A case-study approach is taken.

This empowers a comparison between theory and practice, in the context of High Wycombe, a large town near London, UK. High Wycombe is a particularly appropriate case study location because of a consistent local political history, which limits the standard investment-austerity cycles which many more politically marginal towns experience and minimises a potential mitigating factor for third place changes over time. The town is also wealthy, relative to the UK national average, which means that there is sufficient financial capital to experiment with third place in the future (Leman, 2021). Furthermore, High Wycombe resembles the understudied missing-middle of towns; while much attention is placed on national hubs, such as London, there are many more towns across the UK and world which represent High Wycombe; regional hubs with 100,000 or so inhabitants and local economies (Robinson, 2006).

The aim of this study is to explore how young people in High Wycombe understand the places they socialise in, and examine how their third places can be improved. The study objectives are to create a roadmap to improve the third places that do currently exist, as well as to create more adequate places in the future, as well as to understand the barriers to third places that young people face. A further objective is to provide evidence in favour of a more appropriate conceptual model for third place usage. This thesis can be considered a success if, ultimately, third places in High Wycombe are constructively examined from the perspective of focus group respondents, and if policy changes can be suggested to create better, more accessible, and more equitable third places both in Buckinghamshire and more broadly.

This leads to the chosen research question:

“How do young people interact with and perceive Third Place in High Wycombe?”

This research question necessitates several sub-questions. These are:

1. How do we understand Third Place, particularly for young people?
2. What barriers do young people face in accessing Third Places in High Wycombe?
3. What levels of spatial distinction exist between Second and Third Place?

1.3. Structure

This thesis follows the standard academic structure as described by Yin (2012), of introduction, literature review, methodology, results, conclusions, and evaluations. The introduction contextualises and justifies the project, and positions it within academia. The theoretical framework presents current academic understanding of the chosen topic, focusing heavily on Oldenburg and Brissett's Third Place Theory, and qualifies assumptions and choices made by the author in definitions, logic, and approach. This chapter also presents a conceptual model, and answers sub-question. The Methodology chapter describes what research was conducted, and presents this in a way that demonstrates transparency and facilitates replicability. There is some discussion on the appropriateness of using AI coding. The results chapter displays what data was collected, and presents this in different ways for legibility, under three particular focus areas and with some descriptives. The Results section also answers sub-questions 2 and 3. Chapter 5, Conclusions, discusses how the data gathered compares to prior literature and answers the main research question. This chapter also includes a reflection section on how the research process was conducted. Finally, the recommendations section provides a 'lessons learned' section for placemakers, planners, and those seeking to build better places both for and with young people.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section discusses third place, locates place itself in a geographical context by comparing it to space, and introduces the concepts of place barriers- of cost, austerity, and youth participation. Third Place Theory (Oldenburg, 1989) is contrasted with contemporary interpretations of Third Place, from a brief discussion on the ‘Fourth Place’ to recent developments in the seminal Collapsed Place Theory (Littman, 2021). The eight key characteristics of Third Place Theory are condensed into three core concepts: flow, sociability, and conversation.

Comparisons between Collapsed and Third Place Theory are discussed in the context of spatially restricted individuals, including the incarcerated, the elderly, and- most importantly- young people at school. The conflicting responses of young people to placemaking are discussed in the context of democratic participation, and tokenism is here acknowledged. This section ends with a discussion of the barriers faced by young people to third places, placemaking in general, and how austerity exacerbates this negative situation. Finally, this is summarised in a conceptual model which draws upon both Collapsed and Third Place Theory.

2.1. The Third Place

Place-separation has been conceptualised for as long as humans sought to understand what made places special. Early Geographers sought to understand why the places we love are what they are, and began to posit a suggestion of the functional (*Gesellschaft*) vs. the social (*Gemeinschaft*) space (Tönnies, 1880). However, this categorisation relied heavily upon separation at a macro-scale, of disparity between city and countryside, and did not address more localised placemaking (Kamenka, 1965). Understanding of third places first relied on a

more thorough distinction between the localised variants of *Gesellschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, or, as we know them, between space and place.

Understandings of space have evolved in line with geographical developments, and today are most commonly used to measure the success of placemaking policies (Cresswell, 2014). Definitions of space have historically emphasised its territoriality, and predominantly favour a distinction between private and public- or between 'private, semi-private, semi-public, and public' (Newman, 1972). Private spaces for Newman charge for entry, and use that charge for, among other things, maintenance. Public spaces, in contrast, are maintained by the users or through non-specific charges, such as public parks and youth centres. Semi-private and semi-public spaces describe grades between these extremes, and are crucially distinguished by their restrictiveness and maintenance burden. These semi-private and semi-public spaces have also been observed in more recent literature and described by activists as part of a 'pseudo-public creep' in the gradual privatisation of public spaces in London (Garrett, 2017). Distinguishing space by who is responsible for its maintenance may be problematic, however, as it implies that spaces are primarily defined by their material and capital costs- understandable, perhaps, given that Newman focused on the criminal space, in areas where damage to property is a major externality. This has been addressed by decoupling space from who has the responsibility to perform upkeep, effectively framing space in a way that does not start with criminality, and instead focusing on aspects of design which facilitate this, and also by focusing on positive social capital gains (Kamalipour, Faizi and Memarian, 2014).

This emphasis on the negative associations with space is illustrative of its positioning within academia- space is frequently seen as a bland, impersonal area, with a legally-delineated boundary (Lawrence-Zuniga, 2017). This favours quantitative research approaches, which is further illustrative of space being a non-human domain- as data is collected without engaging with its users. Interestingly, the spatial domain was broken into a first, second, and third space

before this was applied to conceptualisations of place. Space was defined in terms of the real, the imagined, and the fully lived- and designated as first, second, and third spaces (Lefebvre, 1974). This was the first time the experiences of a space's users were used to draw conclusions about space. This was, however, primarily used to justify the planner-as-expert by subsequent authors, and not necessarily to improve a theoretical understanding of space (Soja, 1996). This understanding of space is essential to later descriptions of place, owing to the evolution of thought from space to place.

One useful understanding of place distinguishes between the bland and impersonal *spaces* we pass through and the lively, engaging *places* we treat as our destinations (Jacobs, 1992). While Jacobs focused on identifying replicable design characteristics (both physical and social), further authors sought to distill these findings and identify their characteristics beyond the American context. Places are universally defined by their meaning to people, reinforcing Lefebvre's (1974) initial conceptualisations of space (Lawrence-Zuniga, 2017). This meaning results in extraordinary social contracts between users, establishing behavioural norms and practices which result in a great diversity of function, user, and form (Döring and Ratter, 2018). Places are, therefore, created by their users, and are ultimately defined by the people who use them (Yi, 1977; Norberg-Schulz, 2012). This resulted in a need to categorise exactly what makes places so unique and so in need of replicability, and led to the identification of three key design elements that make place so special: 1. Their location, 2. Their locale, and 3. Their 'sense of place'- as a meaningful spatially-bounded domain (Cloke and Johnston, 2005). The direct result of this for professional planners was an explosion of attention towards placemaking; turning spaces into places (StreetDots, 2019). With capitalist realism, the theory that capitalism is the default state for societies brought on by the end of the Cold War- running at an all-time high in the immediate aftermath of the Financial Crisis, however, emphasis was primarily placed on how much money could be thrown at placemaking, rather than context-

dependent and socially viable solutions (Fukuyama, 1992; Lawrence-Zuniga, 2017). This in turn resulted in a genericisation and privatisation of public places, which particularly gripped societies motivated by austerity policies such as the US and UK, although this has also been observed in other developed countries and even those which saw statewide defunding such as in post-Soviet Russia (Putnam, 2020).

While the field of planning was beginning to understand the distinction between space and place, sociologists observed distinctions of function in different locations (White, 2018). This derives from the three places most people experience; the home, the workplace, and the social place (Oldenburg, 1989). Here, home is the first place, the workplace- and, later, school or university- is the second place, and the third place becomes virtually anywhere else; an extension of the street, the local pub, the park, the train to work (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982). Crucial to this understanding of third place is its unique ability to foster informal, unpredictable meetings between both established friendships and new contacts. Third places, therefore, are entirely personal constructs- the park, which may be a first place for a homeless person, is a third place for the children and parents who relax there (Soja, 1996). While the local pub is a second place, i.e. workplace, for the bartender, her street may be her third place (Littman, 2021).

To Oldenburg, a first place is an established default setting, where our everyday lives play out. The home is a predictable environment, and a safe space to its inhabitant (Oldenburg, 1989). Indeed, the first place is the first location we experience; it is where we wake up, go to sleep, and where we reflect on ourselves. A second place, however, such as work or school, is by definition productive (Littman, 2021). These places are stressful environments because of their constant encouragement of competition- competing for grades, sales performances, and always with a goal that continually moves further away (Oldenburg, 1989). The risk of a second place is, however, mitigated by the fact that they provide the means to survive- skills, an income, and structure to the day. Oldenburg (1989)'s understanding of third place, though, is far more

than a refuge from work or a place to see friends. The third place, according to Oldenburg, is defined by eight key characteristics, along

with its spatial distinction from first and second places (Table 1):

Table 1 Oldenburg (1989)'s key characteristics of Third Place

Key characteristic	Explanation
Neutral , or a place without stakes	Where individuals are free from financial or legal obligations (Jacobs, 1992). "People can be sociable only when they have protection from each other." (Sennett, 1977, pp.311)
Level , or inclusive to all regardless of income	A relatively classless place without the same severe social stratification affecting the first and second place (Horton, 2016)
Conversational , or a place ruled by the sound of interactions	Somewhere which not only facilitates but emphasises conversation- particularly informal, entertaining conversations (Horton, 2016; Yazit, Husini and Zaini, 2020)
Accessible, accommodating , or where all are welcome and can get there	Given that the third place is the only 'optional' place, all must be able to access the site whenever they need to
Regular , or with at least some population of regulars	These are users who feel at home in the space and extend that homeliness to newcomers. These regulars act as anchors to the space- although all regulars were at some point newcomers (Persson, 2022)
Subtle , or with design characteristics which are recognisable and evocative to all without being gaudy	This is a place where nobody is unwelcome, thus it must cater to the lowest social class that can realistically access the place. The place must be incognito, low-key, and allow all to supplant characteristics of their own homes
Playful , or a place which celebrates the whimsical, the witty	These are playgrounds where, instead of climbing frames, users play with social interactions. Third places should fill their users with joy, and are the main reason for their continued success
A home away from home ', or somewhere you may even feel more comfortable and yourself than in your first place	This can be conjured by familiarity, but also by companionship, a shared experience, a collective memory. Third places are at their most successful when their users feel the most accommodated by them (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982)

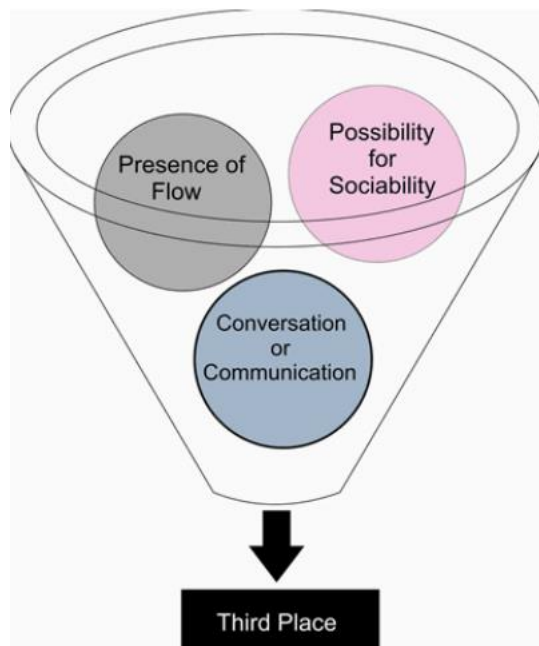


Figure 1 Third place conceptual model with three key aspects identified (Danesh Pajouh, 2014)

Third space literature, therefore, focused extensively on the sociophysical attributes that lead to its distinct identity (Danesh Pajouh, 2014). These have been further concentrated into the three major social aspects which contribute to a successful third place for the sake of brevity and measurability- flow presence, sociability capacity, and communication-enabling (Fig.1). These three aspects form the basis for this thesis for the same reasons that Danesh Pajouh (2014) chose to concentrate Oldenburg (1989)'s eight key

characteristics- brevity, but also because of measurability. Regularity and playfulness can, for example, both be examined through the presence of sociability, which simplifies measurement processes. However, by concentrating the eight characteristics into three, the space to incorporate changes to socialising resulting from the post-COVID and increasingly online world has been limited and excludes the organisational and even spatial role that the digital world can now mimic. Furthermore, a lack of engagement with young people, those out of work, and social minorities has limited the applicability of these three key concepts to non-normative social groups (Littman, 2021).

Contemporary Third Places

If we return to the example of the bartender, we can consider her work, the pub, to exist temporarily. During her off hours it may become her third place, where she socialises and interacts with those who were once customers but are now friends (Littman, 2021). This directly contradicts the established spatial boundaries of place that were found to be so crucial so third place definitions (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982). Summarising research in British

prisons, Littman (2021) demonstrated a new model for third places for those with limited mobility: the collapsed place theory (Fig.2). Littman (2021) suggests that this limited mobility may extend beyond the incarcerated; elderly people with confined locales, and even marginalised groups who are not welcome in available third places instead ‘cocreate sub-spaces’ (Littman, 2021, pp.33) which mirror first, second, and third places albeit without spatial distinctions. While these spatial restrictions come about because of incarceration, or immobility, it stands to reason that choice limitation, cost, and accessibility can restrict the spatial distinction of place unintentionally, and even exacerbate pre-existing inequalities.

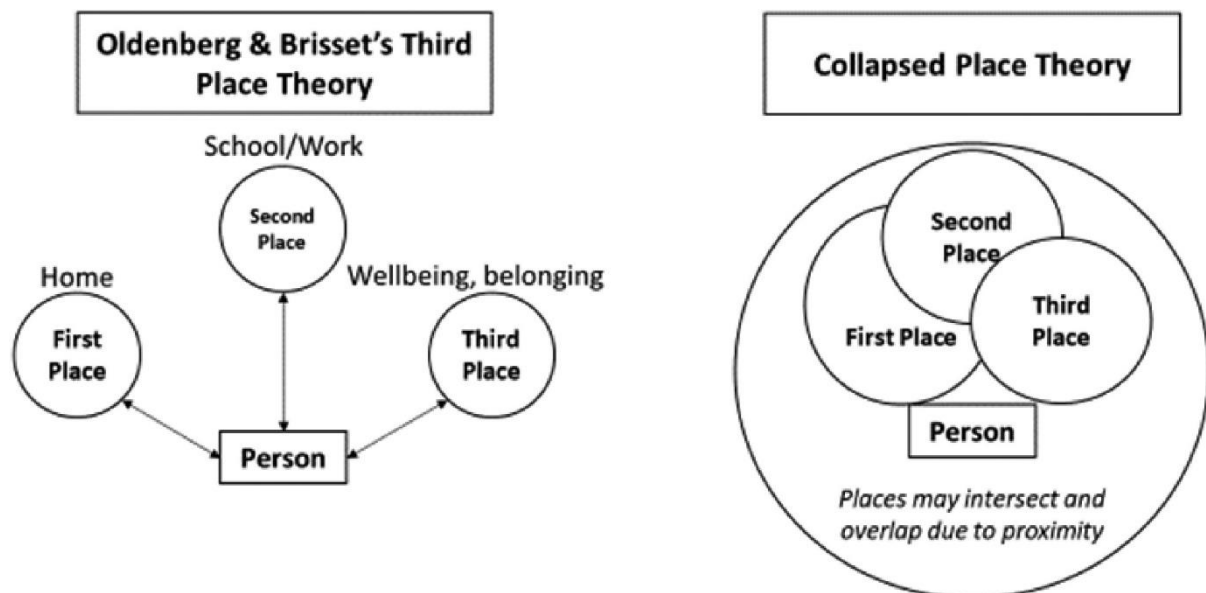


Figure 2 Established Third Place Theory compared to Collapsed Place Theory (Littman, 2021)

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, these collapsed places are becoming more well-understood. Lockdowns and quarantining led to a total merger of geographic place distinction, often with the only distinction between first, second, and third place being a door- if one was lucky enough to afford a residence with different rooms (Littman, 2022; Persson, 2022). This demonstrably proved earlier findings, that digitalisation and the internet had removed the necessity for some high-skilled knowledge workers to have a physical office (Morisson, 2017). Morisson prefers the term ‘fourth place’, referring to elements of multiple places being seen in another, while Littman suggests that these new sub-spaces should be considered overlaps of

the spatially distinct third, second, and third places (Morisson, 2017; Littman, 2021). As this thesis examines pre-established spatial domains and does not seek to introduce less discussed terminology, reference to ‘fourth place’ is limited here, and focus is instead placed upon the distinction between second and third place. ‘Fourth place’ as a spatially distinct category of place also excludes the possibility of a spectrum of places; a ‘fourth place’ does not adequately express the transition from distinct to indistinct spatial separation between places but rather suggests a new place, when one has not been created. Furthermore, the inclusion of ‘fourth place’ into contemporary literature has been co-opted by companies seeking to promote their workspaces in a bid to return workers to the office from home (Abd Elrahman, 2020). Quarantine specifically led to the introduction of a ‘fifth place’, where hyper-multifunctional place is enforced by strict confines to a degree even in excess of the prisoner-observed collapsed place (Abd Elrahman, 2020). This hyperlocal typology has, however, not yet been adopted into broader research, although it may apply to a limited extent to inmates in solitary confinement (Littman, 2022).

Third place research has also identified a distinction between private and public places, mirroring the aforementioned distinction between private and public spaces (although with greater emphasis on cost of access as opposed to maintenance burden) as well as between formal (i.e. institutionalised, codified) and informal (i.e. endogenous, spontaneous) third places (Littman, 2022). Considering these distinct place categorisations reaffirms how diverse third places can be and presents a number of different approaches which have been compared in some prior research, with no clear conclusions (Danesh Pajouh, 2014; Alidoust, Bosman and Holden, 2015).

Third place, therefore, is where we derive our wellbeing and sense of belonging. Conceptualisations of third place in the context of prisons has led to the formation of a collapsed place theory, which is rooted in indistinct spatial barriers between first, second, and

third place. This is a new development in understandings of place and, as such, less widely adopted terminology such as ‘fourth’ and ‘fifth’ places have not been employed. However, as a developing theory, collapsed place theory is still understudied.

2.2. Young people’s use of place

A group which has not yet been considered with regards to collapsed place theory is non-incarcerated young people, who are typically spatially confined by a lack of mobility and a lack of access to money. Although it is already known that young people experience place very distinctly to adults, particularly in the pre-voter demographic, their sense of place and spatial control are not explicitly understood (van Lanen, 2022). Young people’s habit-dependence when it comes to places, arising from a sense of place, differs based on whether they are in nature, at schools, or in explicitly constructed play spaces (Aitken, 2003; Goodall, 2020; Rantala and Puhakka, 2020). Further research has identified the impact of smaller communities in place usage, although primarily sought to address whether there were accessibility issues for those on the autistic spectrum in rural and semirural areas in Australia (Robinson *et al.*, 2020). While many of these focus on children as opposed to the 16-18 age group, commonalities can be drawn such as the importance of third place as a getaway, particularly among nature (Rantala and Puhakka, 2020). Within the school setting, the emphasis on feelings over function is evident- it is not so much about how a place is constructed, but whether people in the place feel accommodated, accepted, and able to communicate (Goodall, 2020).

Third place usage is less explicitly understood. In mental health hospitals and Young Offender institutions in Sweden, for example, the belonging ascribed to social places is their defining trait (Andersson, 2022). This is backed up by secondary findings from the aforementioned nature study- namely, that the most preferable locations for young people to relax together were those with meaning and a sense of belonging (Rantala and Puhakka, 2020).

In the latter case, young people were found to particularly identify with nature areas and thus lauded them as their preferred third places. Comparing these findings to Oldenburg (1989)'s categorisation of third place, young people do not emphasise spatial distinction as significantly as early, workplace-driven conceptualisations- although there is very limited data on this subject. The implication of this is that spatial distinction is less relevant to young people in defining the places they like to socialise. Third places represent a unique location for young people, particularly socially- and a lack thereof represents a risk for young people's independence, community values, and- particularly concerning- trust (Putnam, 2000). The lack of third places also disproportionately affects those who rely on them most; disadvantaged people, who rely on formal and informal community structures and trust to survive (Gillespie, Hardy and Watt, 2021).

It is therefore clear that third places, particularly good third places, act as sites which empower and enable the most disadvantaged young people, as well as acting as safe havens. Well-built third places generate social capital, increase trust in others, and give young people in particular a sense of investment in their local areas. It is for this reason that young people experiencing a loss of third places suffer the greatest, effectively suffering service withdrawal, which in the long term drastically diminishes wellbeing (Horton, 2016). Young people make and require unique places themselves, which cater to their specific needs and traits.

Placemaking and Democratic Participation

Young people are used to being excluded from meaningful public discourse. (Quinn, 2018). While many authors have linked this accepted disengagement with a lack of political capital, few have researched the collapse of third places for young people following neoliberal austerity measures (Horton, 2016). Moreover, there appears to be almost no research into the post-COVID reclamation of public spaces thus far- which bodes poorly for countries struggling with a post-COVID recession and further potential austerity measures. Adults who become

involved with placemaking report higher place satisfaction overall, even when their actions do not directly impact the place itself- although this effect is significantly reduced when participation does not meaningfully alter the place (Weymouth and Hartz-Karp, 2019). These effects are worsened when participatory adjustments are ignored due to budgetary shortfalls (Bailey *et al.*, 2011). However, for children and young people, who cannot meaningfully take part in democracy, even the suggestion of placemaking becomes extremely political. Social exclusion exacerbates both the need and the desire to take part in democratic decision-making (Robinson *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, young people present unique solutions to problems when included in placemaking, although their inclusion may only act insofar as tokenism (Arnstein, 1969; Khor, 2017). One case, examining youth homelessness and displacement across the USA, identified interdependencies between young people when participation is afforded to them- with significantly greater empathies for their colleagues than would normally occur (Samuels, Curry and Cerven, 2021). This suggests that young people face both a unique need for democratic participation, and are uniquely positioned to suggest structural improvements not possible to be conceptualised by adults- however, that young people are systemically excluded from democratic participation. Furthermore, young people excluded from democratic participation are unable to adjust the places they need, or even vote them into being- and, in countries with politicised planning structures such as the UK, this is a particularly acute barrier to placemaking (Grange, 2016).

Ultimately, young people are structurally and implicitly excluded from democratic participation in placemaking. Part of this is down to a feeling of despair; why take part if there is no voice for you, but there is also malicious intent here. Young people can be seen as threats to planning establishment and their voices are subsequently routinely shut out of democratic decision-making, in favour of tokenistic approaches to participation.

2.3. Good placemaking

Placemaking, the process of turning a space into a place, and giving an area meaning for and by those who use it, has already been discussed extensively. Divided into accessibility, sociability, usage, and comfort, good placemaking features many of the same characteristics as good third places (Khor, 2017; Haleboua and Moon, 2021). However, as a process, placemaking is more explicitly influenced by individuals than the mere creation of a third place, which can completely ignore any illusion of democratic decision-making should it choose to. While placemaking often results in the creation of unique and distinct third places, it also comes with structural issues which result in two main barriers to entry: access, and cost. While these are particular challenges for private third places, which must turn a profit to justify their existence, public third spaces are increasingly restricting their accessibility both as a cost-cutting method and to deter crime (Newman, 1972; Crick, 2011; Wexler and Oberlander, 2017).

Access

Third places can see their accessibility diminished in many of the same ways that all places can- by restricting their opening hours, by limiting their space, and by introducing spatial barriers to access. If a park is only open from 9pm to 5pm, it is inaccessible to anyone who works a 9-5 job; similarly, if the bus service does not run to a golf course, only those who can drive can access it- it is gatekept from those without licenses or cars (Gil, 2016; Keleg, 2020). In Saudi Arabia, state-funded placemaking has been used to exclude undesirable immigrant construction workers from any meaningful social spaces through complex public transit systems, ghettoisation, and restrictive language legislation (Keleg, 2020). Inflexible third places, with highly restrictive hours and literal gates, such as the London parks, are closed between 10pm and 6am and thus both necessitate long detours for nighttime travellers and deny the homeless a safe sleeping spot (Crick, 2011). The societal norm of drinking in Ireland dramatically restricts the access to third places of teetotaler international students, who are

instead forced to create their own social settings segregated from the rest of the student body if they want to interact with each other (O'Connor, 2020). Placemaking, therefore, must navigate a careful course if it is to avoid the challenges that politicisation and gatekeeping that places themselves suffer from.

Cost

A further, and increasingly relevant, barrier to entry for entry to places is their cost. Staff at hospitals in the USA saw significant increases in stress when the financial decision to change green space to car parks was made, following the removal of a public transit connection and introduction of a paid parking system, the two of which were at least partially correlated (Covington, Fine and Poremba, 1986). Cafes and bookshops, two quintessential third places, were forced to increase their prices in the UK in response to the Financial Crisis (Crick, 2011; Wexler and Oberlander, 2017). This led to decreased footfall among both younger and older people, who were less able to afford the de-facto price to socialise in these places. The death-spiral of local pubs across the UK has seen those which remain able to charge monopoly prices for drinks; great for public health, yes, but dreadful for social capital building in smaller towns where the local pub is often the only place to unwind, especially after 5pm (Putnam, 2020). When cost barriers are added, those less able to afford the places are directly impacted by the diminished availability of social space and thus suffer significantly more. Young people make up a significant part of this group, and must, therefore, calculate cost-benefit analyses about whether they can even afford to enter third places, let alone whether they can get there. While creation and maintenance of places can be a justifiable expense, the approach to extract increasingly greater profits at the expense of the customer has been particularly challenging to young people, who have less capital available (van Lanen, 2017; Gillespie, Hardy and Watt, 2021). This limits the availability of third places for young people; particularly those who cannot afford any third places. This loss of alternative third places through cost increases means

that those remaining places are continuously concentrated and narrows distinct social circles through hyperlocal time-space compression (Golant, 2003).

The barriers that are challenging to third places are particularly problematic in a world of collapsed places, as a barrier to a social place becomes a barrier to housing, to work and study, and to social spaces. Cost, therefore, is expected to rapidly accelerate spatial inequalities in collapsed places in a way that is not yet possible in conventional third place theory.

Austerity

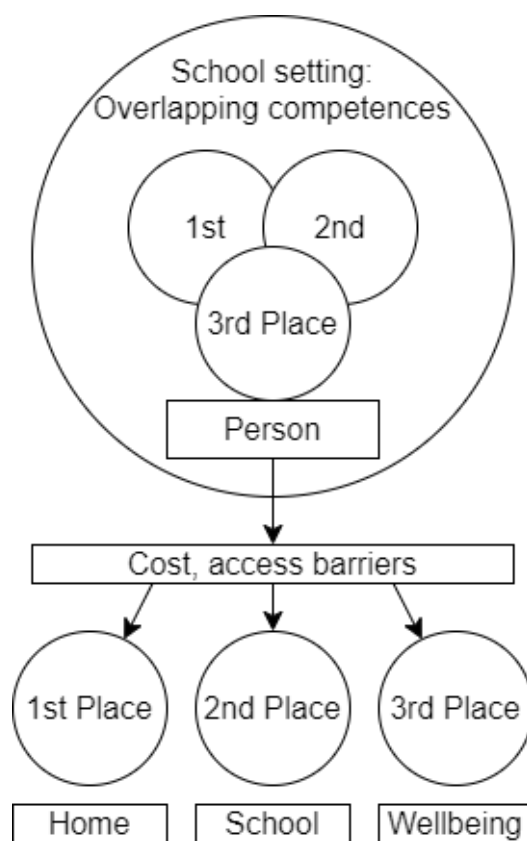
Following the governmental decision to implement austerity policies in the United Kingdom in 2010, public and communal organisations have had to fight in an increasingly competitive funding environment. 152,141 excess deaths occurred in the UK that were directly caused by austerity and cuts to social services, healthcare, and benefits (Watkins *et al.*, 2017). This number would have been significantly higher were it not for non-essential services being cut more readily before healthcare. This has led to an erosion of the ability of public entities to provide good places, as well as restrict the resourcefulness of local action groups and councils to counteract the corresponding diminishment of third places (Royster, 2020). This has only been worsened by an overall drop of funding for local authorities, who have had to cut any public services provided in order to avoid bankruptcy. For a sector based on trust, this has distanced any connections both between communal third place providers and local and national governments (Clayton, Donovan and Merchant, 2016). While this may have initially bolstered the few remaining private third place operators, the corresponding decrease in social capital only worsened the limited financial support available and trapped smaller business owners in debt, reinforcing the ‘genericisation’ of public places through natural market forces (Crick, 2011). This has also led to an acceptance of digital third places, as well as increased brand awareness for the larger third place operators, who were able to use placemaking to their favour by creating inflexible, competition-free locations (Crick, 2011; Horton, 2016). Not only have

user drawstrings been tightened, but prices have risen, and on top of this the public transit that supports younger people’s travel habits has become either prohibitively expensive or non-existent (Crick, 2011). Austerity has, therefore, exacerbated both major accessibility challenges of placemaking and drastically reduced vitality and social capital (van Lanen, 2017).

Austerity serves as a contextual factor which dramatically exacerbates other societal ills- costs become less manageable, third places are less well-funded, schools have to step in and run third places in place of independent organisations, and there is less time and budget for citizen participation in a cash-strapped system. While the perfect third place may not need to exist, but rather a series of ‘good’ third places covering each other’s flaws, all it takes is one weak point in the chain- a maintenance backlog in public parks- and suddenly there are no well-lit, free social places at night.

2.4. Conceptual model

Aspects of both the third place and collapsed place theories have been drawn together in Fig.3, to illustrate their interconnectedness in relation to the young person. While collapsed place theory conventionally refers to social environments with forced collapse of spatial boundaries, this research seeks to determine whether such collapse can arise from non-prison settings and conventional forces- such as austerity, and cost and access barriers. The context of the proximity discussed by Littman



(2021) has here been explicitly defined as a school setting, hence the decision to locate first, second, and third places with collapsed place theory

Figure 3 Conceptual model by the author. Compiled from Littman (2021)'s and Oldenburg (1989)'s conceptual models

visualisation within the context of the school. The school itself, stepping in to take over third place organisations which had to cease operation due at least partially to austerity, therefore acts as a background to the collapsed first, second, and third places within. Furthermore, to illustrate the challenge that schools present when considering place difference, their role with overlapping competences has been stated- schools feature characteristics of all types of space, after all. Within this school setting, the young person is physically restricted from accessing home, a non-school second place, and any chosen third place (in line with Oldenburg (1989))- although further access to any of these must filter through the dual barriers of cost and access. These places are subsequently experienced by the individual person operating within the context of the school setting while attempting to overcome cost and access barriers; the cost and access barriers which limit the access to a home, a school, and a place of wellbeing. It is these arrows which this research seeks to understand- the relationship between the individual and the barriers which impact the perceived different types of places. This can then be used to determine whether the three different types of places are in fact an appropriate visualisation, or whether what an individual perceives as three different functions is actually one larger, collapsed function.

Understanding of third place has shifted dramatically since its initial conceptualisations. While initial third place literature preferred to focus on the spatial distinction of places (Oldenburg, 1989), more recent research has instead focused on broadening this limited viewpoint to account for overlapping spatial boundaries, as well as to account for accessibility, limiting factors, and other mitigants influencing third places (Littman, 2021). Of particular note are conceptualisations of third place which represent non-majority viewpoints; in this research, those of young people, which revolve around restriction, boundary-breaching, and distinction from home life- though not necessarily from school (Wexler and Oberlander, 2017). Built into a spatially desegregated view of third place is an acceptance of the online domain- specifically,

as a distinct place-based entity, but also as a necessary tool to breach spatial boundaries in a post-pandemic world (Persson, 2022). Our understandings of third places have shifted significantly throughout time, until today, where, as planners, third places are seen as essential to the continued existence of cities, while young people in High Wycombe instead find that third places are inaccessible, poorly designed, and expensive. This ties into broader findings of service withdrawal impacting young people in myriad ways.

3. Methodology

This thesis applies a case-study approach to study the phenomenon of third place perception, and collects qualitative data to examine this phenomenon. Case-studies act as close examinations of phenomena, in examples, which can be later compared with a number of other cases and used to guide further research (Yin, 2012). Although a framework has been laid out for both collecting (van Lanen, 2017) and analysing (van Lanen, 2022) interview data, and has been applied to pre-COVID research in voting-age young people in the Anglophone world, there is a definite research gap into third place use by young people. Thus, this thesis works with some relatively new methodologies, particularly with regard to AI coding.

The research question and each sub-question have been answered in a number of different ways. The main research question, asking how young people interact with and perceive Third Place in High Wycombe, is answered in the conclusions section following a comparison of the literature review and data collected in the Results section. Sub-question 1, asking how young people in particular, and people in general, understand Third Place, has been answered in the literature review and further serves as context for subsequent sections. Sub-question 2, determining the barriers that young people face in accessing Third Places in High Wycombe, is addressed in focus group data throughout the results section, and makes use of AI-driven

sentiment analysis. Sub-question 3, on the levels of spatial distinction between Second and Third Place, is answered throughout the results section by comparing interview data and the literature review.

3.1. Case study

This section provides context necessary to understand High Wycombe. It is broken into four sections, beginning with an initial explanation of the unique policy decisions that planners in the UK must deal with. Third Places in High Wycombe are then positioned according to their barriers in both distance and cost, their limitations caused by the school day, and political disenfranchisement.

Third place research in the United Kingdom must deal with the context of austerity policies, politicised planning originating in Common Law, and consistent centralisation. Austerity policies in particular have been implemented in a unique, and uniquely damaging, manner, which means that public planning in the UK and Ireland act as examples for countries with extremely limited fiscal manoeuvre space. Furthermore, with at least one third of the European Parliament belonging to parties which laud austerity as a success (Speights-Binet, 2008; Sager, 2016), British and Irish planning acts as a valuable example for how to, or how not to, manage public-sector planning. Qualitative data collection, highlighting the individual and group experiences of one impact of this macroeconomic policy, is necessary to understand exactly how austerity policies impact the individual (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

High Wycombe itself is a large suburban town in the county of Buckinghamshire, on the main road and rail route between London and Oxford, and between London and the UK's second-largest city of Birmingham. 1930s slum clearance programmes demolished much of the historic town centre, and the post-World War II suburban sprawl grew the town over and across the hills that restricted its earlier growth. This growth led to the annexation of several smaller villages, each with their own cores, but did not lead to significant densification in the

town, which presented a spatial challenge to early planning by increasing services provision costs. The neoliberal agenda that caused the Thatcherite property booms and dramatic suburban sprawl means that today's Wycombiensians must travel further, at greater personal cost, to reach a central location than in many other towns. This is made worse by the austerity-introduced defunding of local bus companies, which makes those trips achievable by those who can't drive expensive and time-consuming.

The lack of social expenditure during the Thatcher years continued into the 21st Century which, coupled with the in-migration of middle-class commuters, only cemented the town's status as a Blue seat- a safe Conservative party constituency- and, with the decentralisation policies of the Blair (New) Labour government in the early 2000s, empowered the firmly Conservative District Council in the town to sponsor several large projects with state funding. However, following the Great Recession in 2007/8, most larger projects fell through and were scrapped or privatised. The Eden Centre, the town's flagship central mall, lost all civic functions but its already-completed library. With a drastic increase in shop vacancies in the town centre, the few remaining cafes, restaurants, and pubs began to increase prices- from an average of £3/pint in 2006 to £4.50/pint in 2011 (ONS, 2023). The District Council, faced with bankruptcy, sold its few remaining assets- mostly recreational facilities, office space, and youth centres. This left young people looking to socialise in High Wycombe with a choice- either pay the cost of entry to a café or illegally enter a pub, or socialise exclusively with schoolfriends in school-sponsored clubs and associations. The third places which did exist in Wycombe predominantly functioned during the school day, operating within the 9-5, which made them completely inaccessible to anyone actually attending school. The solution to the lack of third places for young people in High Wycombe, by coupling third and second place, further reduced the social space available to young people.

The cash-strapped District Councils, faced with bankruptcy, were forced to seek a merger with neighbouring district councils as a further cost-cutting measure. This resulted in the 2021 creation of the Buckinghamshire County Council, an organisation with the budget and legislative power to make serious changes across old district boundaries. However, this Council is over 80% controlled by a pro-austerity parties such as the Conservatives which, as of yet, has never actually faced an election since its creation. This has all but stagnated planning procedures in Buckinghamshire, an atmosphere which does not empower even voters to take part in democratic decision-making, let alone encourage the young pre-voter demographic to take part in purely voluntary and often-ignored public consultancies for minor planning processes. Young people in High Wycombe are deprived of agency to make meaningful change or even voice opinions, no doubt contributing to a sense of despair when thinking about socialising.

This exposition serves a purpose- to contextualise the position that young people find themselves in in High Wycombe. Young people seeking to socialise face structural barriers in both distance and cost. Furthermore, with most activity during the week controlled by school, the actual hours for socialising outside of the 2nd Place are severely limited. Under-18s are not even able to vote for the change they want to see, which deprives them of agency. The opinions of young people about the places they socialise in are crucial, therefore, as these are often ignored from planning and can lead to third places which address the needs of their intended users.

Focus groups

High Wycombe as a town had been selected according to the reasons discussed in the introduction: a consistent political history which reduces variables, enough wealth to experiment with the planning process (Leman, 2021), and its status as representative of the ‘Ordinary City’, the perfectly understudied, middle-of-the-road, average town (Robinson,

2006). A school, the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe (RGSHW) was selected for research. The RGSHW was chosen firstly because it is my old school, which gave prior contacts on the school site. The RGSHW also gives third place usage in High Wycombe the best chance- the school is a selective, all-boys grammar school, which means that its student population is more affluent and mobile than most. Therefore, the cost and transport barriers discussed in the Case Study section should be reduced for boys at the RGSHW, meaning that more focus can be placed on the physical characteristics of third place and time restrictions. As an all-boys same-sex school, the RGSHW allows for a proxy measurement to determine the diversity of respondents' social groups- the number of non-male friends each respondent has is a direct reflection of their access to third places, which are by definition places of social mixing. One further reason to study the RGSHW is that it receives significant state funding, and is a charitable organisation, which means that its school extra-curricular activities are *very* well-funded relative to the UK average. Boys, therefore, have a greater choice of school-related activities relative to the size of the town, which means they will engage socially with more people than the students of other schools in the local area while still providing evidence for services withdrawal (Horton, 2016). The chosen study group, of Sixth Form (16-18 years old) A-level Geography students, was selected due to their age in the immediately pre-voter demographic, their relative independence from their parents when considering their social spaces, and because Geography students have some prior knowledge of space and place and require less catch-up and, thus, less time to prepare the focus groups, meaning less time out of lessons.

The choice to use focus groups was made for a number of reasons- but especially for legal and practical reasons. The safeguarding challenges of being one-on-one with a child in a school setting, as well as given the limited time that pupils can spare from classes, made focus groups an adequate solution. In particular, though, focus groups afford the unique opportunity

for interactions between respondents; something which both lessens the effect of the researcher and increases participation among respondents (Citizens Advice Bureau, 2015). Focus groups are, therefore, more efficient approaches to data collection, and are also legally and practically easier to organise, as well as providing unique data which is distinct to the conventional interview approach used for much prior third place literature. While focus groups may mean that quieter members of a research group see their contributions suppressed, because focus groups introduce complex social dynamics to data collection, this was considered to be a necessary sacrifice- as data missing some voices in a room is better than no data at all. Mitigation for participant suppression took the form of directing prompts at individuals who were participating less, while also allowing them to hand the response over to another. An established connection with the author's old school was used for the purposes of this research- the author's geography teacher. This teacher was integral to the progress of the focus groups, and the possible ramification of having a teacher present are discussed in the positionality and ethics section below.

Conducting research in a school environment can be complex, partly because of the limited time that students have to focus on non-curricular activities. The schoolteacher was particularly concerned about potential lost lesson time. Monetary compensation for the boys was considered, following consultation with the supervisor, to be ethically problematic, thus the decision was made to give the boys a small 'university-style' taster lesson on the history of third place. This, therefore, could both act as revision material for the A-Level 'Space and Place' topic, as well as providing boys with the opportunity to experience university-style education before applying. This short 10-minute presentation also acts as a catch-up, ensuring that the boys understand what a third place is, and how they interact with it. The taster lesson slides can be seen in Appendix D. Following this, three focus groups were conducted. These were semi-structured focus groups and followed a rough guide as illustrated in Appendix C. The questions

themselves reflect similar methodologies used in prior research (Persson, 2022). This results in a division into four parts of introductory establishing questions, place- questions, people questions, and finally activity-driven questions.

The focus groups, following the interview guide in Appendix C, were conducted on the 24th April 2023, on-site in Geography classrooms at the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe. They involved a total of 17 boys, with a teacher present throughout, and were conducted from midday through to 15:00. The first focus group was a diverse makeup of 9 Year 12 boys (ages 16-17), followed by three Year 13 boys (ages 17-18) who included two Boarders at the school. The final focus group consisted of 5 boys also in Year 12. These focus groups lasted between 18 and 35 minutes, and resulted in over 3 hours of interview data, when conversations were disentangled. These time slots were, however, not long enough to allow a thorough investigation of all aspects of this research, and future research should allocate at least 1hr to each focus group, if not more. The boys represented a diversity of ethnic backgrounds, but were in all focus groups predominantly white British.

Site observations

Due to time constraints, site observations could not take place at the weekend, during school holidays, or after 5pm. All sites were, therefore, mostly lifeless, which does limit the role that these observations could have played in this thesis. While the observations were valuable for understanding the places which the boys had discussed, their emptiness does justify why observational data has not been made a central part of this thesis. Site observations have instead been used to generalise the claims of poor design and accessibility reported boys during the focus groups- for example, describing the local pub as a male-dominated space has been reinforced by observing the clientele of the pub and found to be true, at least in that instance.

A rubric first described by Persson (2022) was applied here, which analyses third places based on the qualities that distinguish them. This TPOT, or Third Place Observational Tool, has been extensively modified to fit the needs of this study and is visible in Appendix E. Specifically, all elements of Persson's (2022) TPOT (which was used as a staff shadowing device for observing interactions in third places) that relate to interactions between individuals, as well as staff observations and multiple-observation pre-post COVID cost increases, have been removed. These observations have been removed- no data for pre-COVID costs exists for all observational sites, and this thesis does not focus on the role of staff in creating third places. The TPOT used in this paper, therefore, examines five key areas of third places: physical attributes, i.e. the built environment and multifunctionality facilitated by furniture; openness, i.e. the ability for individuals to interact in diverse ways according to their preferences and diversity of users; comfort, i.e. the ease of access, availability of diverse pricing, and options for different place uses; and activity, i.e. the intended and actual activities occurring on site. Each of these key areas is broken down into multiple sub-categories, listed in Appendix E, and given a ranked score from 1-3. This results in a total score for each observed site of 69, which has been converted to percentages. Persson's (2022) TPOT did feature two sites with percentage scores within the margin for error (above 95%); this score was not achieved for any sites in this paper.

Site observations have been made at a selection of discussed locations, all in High Wycombe, and visible in Fig.4 (OSM.org, 2023): 1. the Eden Centre, 2. the Rye, 3. the High Street, and 4. a local pub (The Falcon). All observations were carried out following the focus groups, on the 27th April 2023, and are locations that the boys themselves discussed visiting. They were chosen for both this reason and their central location in Wycombe. These are, therefore, locations which are familiar to most if not all respondents, those which may appear in the respondent's minds when prompted with third place. These observations were measured

according to the modified TPOT (Appendix E) and then compared. The results from the TPOT, the third place observation tool, are visible in Fig.13.

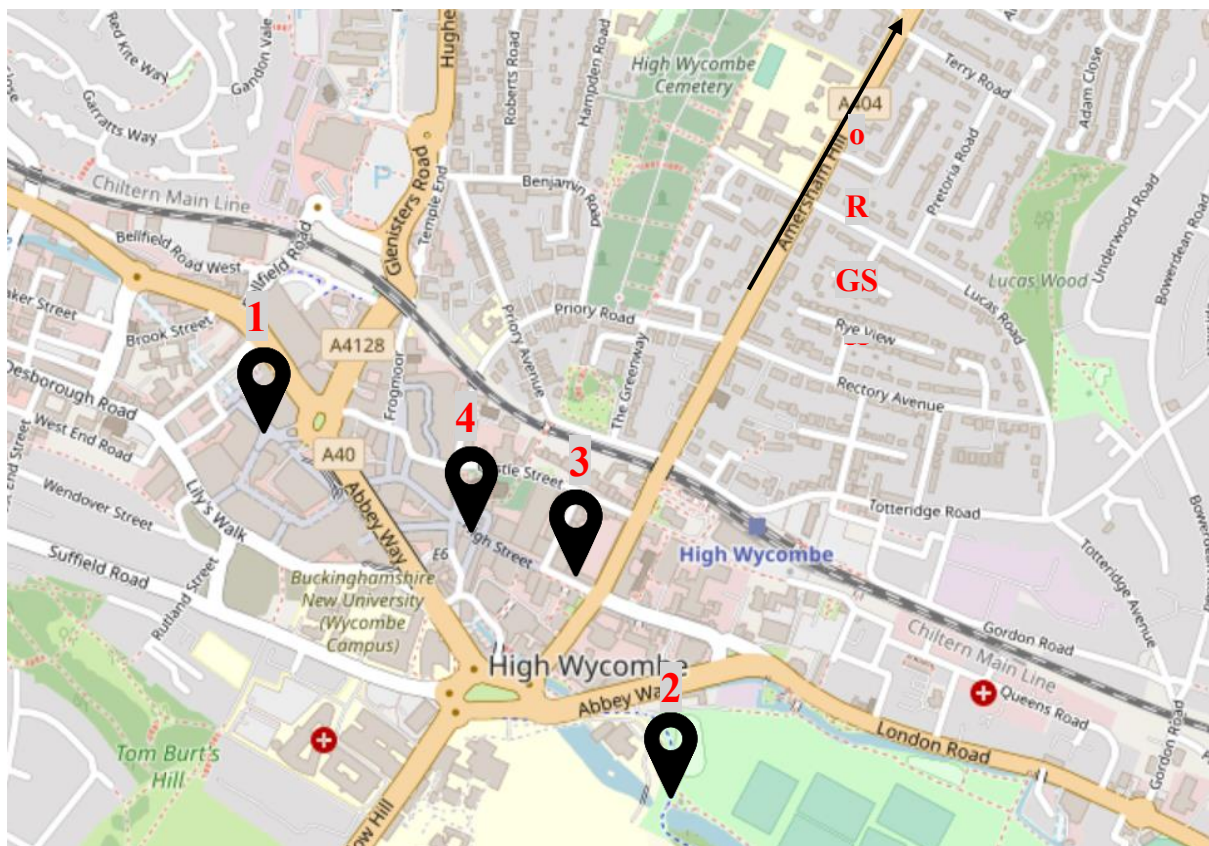


Figure 4 The centre of High Wycombe, with marked TPOT locations (OSM.org, 2023).

3.2.Data processing and analysis

Focus group data was collected and transcribed with help from the automated transcription software Otter.ai. Unfortunately, owing to how heated some discussion could get in focus groups, some data has been lost completely- this resulted in some sections of transcripts being less than complete. However, as much relevant information as possible has been included. As none of the boys wished to choose pseudonyms, these have been assigned based on the most common baby names for their respective cohorts. The data was fully pseudonymised and, as there was no need for identifying information such as birth dates, addresses, or other confidential information, only basic geolocated data was included. This made anonymising the data particularly easy. This pseudonymised data was then fed into the qualitative research analysis software Otter.ai, where it was AI-coded and then, as errors were

found in controlling this, manually coded into the barriers faced and the type of place (first, second, third, and different types of third place) discussed. This coding and coding approach was common across all focus group datasets. Focus group data is, therefore, an aggregate of all individual focus groups. This also facilitated quote mining practices, which are integrated into the results and conclusions sections. Further analysis has been conducted on focus group data too; the quantity and validity of data facilitated the introduction of qualitative analysis methods such as code co-occurrences, illustrating the correlations between place and barriers, and second and third places more directly. Code co-occurrences do not perform functions on data, but rather are a way of aggregating coded data into more displayable forms such as Sankey diagrams. This means that trends can be observed in the data which are not visible at the quotation level, although it can lead to reductive interpretations of data and cannot explore the sentiments behind co-occurrences, which are by definition purely correlative and absolutely not causative. Any causative relationship in this data can be observed in code co-occurrences, but not proven until comprehensive analysis of quotations has been conducted.

AI-driven sentiment analysis has also been performed, which displays positive and negative framings from respondents for particular codes. This data was used partly as an exploratory tool, to examine whether, despite barriers, respondents were still satisfied with third places, and also to determine which specific types of third place were seen in the most positive light. AI sentiment analysis is a unique tool, which comes with a number of positives and drawbacks, and the choice to use AI coding for a sentiment analysis was not taken lightly. While new models of AI coding such as the GPT OpenAI programme employed by Atlas.ti have developed significantly and are considered to be comparable to a C1 language speaker in their ability to code simple sentiments (positive, neutral, negative), there are still major challenges faced with context and euphemism which are currently insurmountable, as acknowledged in a conference paper funded by Atlas.ti itself (Hamborg and Donnay, 2021).

However, these findings have been replicated and any coding errors can be controlled through random sampling of quotes (Cambria *et al.*, 2022). While it is true that AI coding has two major drawbacks, of missing a sentiment, or of misunderstanding and falsely coding the sentiment, these were found to occur at roughly the same frequency when randomly controlled in this research. 8% of the total focus group transcript was selected randomly, manually coded, and compared to the AI-driven sentiment coding, and while errors did occur, these had no discernible skew to either side. In short, AI-driven coding is a powerful tool and saves roughly 90% of the time, and is best used for coding simple, limited-variable topics. However, this cannot be conducted without careful controls and consideration for the limited scope of only testing small, limited variable topics.

TPOT observational data, collected from the TPOT in Appendix E, has not been a primary focus of this research. This has not been statistically analysed, but rather used as a demonstrative piece for the strengths and weaknesses of existing third places in High Wycombe. Because TPOT data excludes any interactions or conversations, it has not been analysed, but used to illustrate the points made by boys in the focus groups.

3.3.Positionality and ethics

Being a former student at the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe, I have some stake in the research process and a subconscious bias towards collection data which reinforces my assumptions and frames the boys in a positive light. This positionality is a direct result of me being a former student, but without this established link it would have been challenging to collect any data at all. The only people with whom I had any contact while attending the school were the teachers, and all focus groups were conducted with boys I had never met before. By anonymizing the respondents, little possibility was afforded for repercussions to individual students. However, certain statements can be directly linked to respondents, and given that teachers were present during interviews as a mitigator to safeguarding concerns, it is likely that

boys refrained from being fully honest, particularly when discussing taboo topics or areas which negatively reflect on themselves. This limited the responses received, owing to an unwillingness to address illegal aspects of young life, but was mitigated at least partially by the use of euphemism- rather than discussing marijuana, respondents mentioned age-inappropriate activities at night in parks and alluded to activities which run contrary to school rules but that they found important to mention. However, as this research does not seek to discuss which specific illegal activities were performed by a number of respondents, this does not present a major challenge to data validity as it is merely illustrative of the boys not having a safe space to perform illicit activities. The presence of the teacher may in some cases have been beneficial, as it prompted boys to get back on-topic when tangents with a possibility of controversy were introduced, as often happened. This may have reduced the benefit of focus groups as discussed earlier- the benefit of spontaneous responses, and discussion. This is a factor that could not be mitigated without removing the teacher from the classroom, which could not be done for safeguarding reasons. The best that can be done, therefore, is to acknowledge that without significant subsequent research, this thesis cannot provide the whole story. Nonetheless, the data presented in this thesis is still relevant and the focus groups will have been more direct than longer, freer conversations with them. This supports the stance of this research as a pilot study.

The school itself is a single-sex grammar school, which limits the applicability of conclusions to situations broader than all-male groups- although the sample of boys was relatively representative of the school's population more broadly. The gender imbalance in research was initially challenging to acknowledge, due to the implications of male-oriented research into a field where, undoubtedly, non-males face greater challenges. Given that many of the challenges faced by males in third places are microcosms of those faced by social minorities, this thesis can act as a pilot study, with the scope to make mistakes with a research

demographic who have the social status to act as a guinea pig for a novel research method without causing damage to more socially sensitive populations.

Conducting studies in same-sex schools such as the RGSHW also introduces the possibility for proxy measurements to determine social networks. As it is an all-boys' school, determining the gender imbalance of boys' friend groups directly measures their exposure to non-school (or non-second place-based) social groups. Furthermore, as single-sex schools are relatively common across the UK and significantly overrepresented in their Russell Group referral rates (top universities admit same-sex school students at greater proportions than co-ed students), studying such schools is a study of power and privilege (School Guide, 2022).

4. Results

This chapter displays the data collected by focus groups, the TPOT, and a number of quotations. Analysis of the focus group data is performed and displayed in a number of different ways; the AI-driven sentiment analysis and a code co-occurrence analysis as Sankey diagrams, and a further code co-occurrence analysis as a force-directed graph. Data in this section is presented in accordance three key areas of focus, in addition to the descriptives section. This begins with a section examining young people's use of third place, and how this use of place is unique to the demographic. The second section examines youth expectations of third places, and how respondents perceive the places they currently use. The final section discusses the barriers, both perceived and actual, to third places in High Wycombe.

4.1.Descriptives

The focus groups involved a total of 17 boys, all in the 6th Form (ages 16-18). This means that none of the boys could have participated in the last General Election or any local elections, which occurred in 2019 and 2018 respectively. The focus groups followed a rough guide, which can be found in Appendix C. All boys signed a consent form (Appendix A) and were given a contact card (Appendix B).

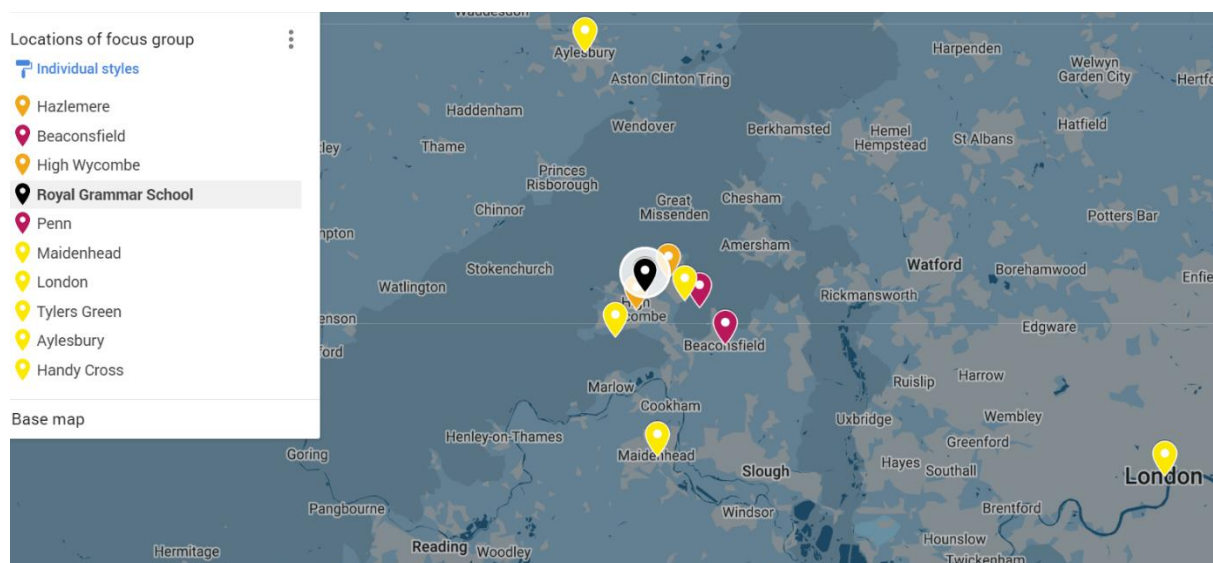


Figure 5 Map displaying homes of boys. Dark red = 3, Orange = 2, Yellow = 1, Black = school (with 15min walking radius)

All boys were asked to locate their first places- or homes (Fig.5), which provides an indication of the distance, and thus the time and financial cost, to common social places in Wycombe. These homes range from, in some cases, actually at the school- two boys were boarders at the school- to Maidenhead, a large town south of High Wycombe. The boys were then asked to state how long it takes them to get to school. The diversity of transport mode use reported (Fig.6), including multiple different modes of transit, indicates that these boys do not rely on one single mode of transit, but whatever is quickest- a factor confirmed by some boys choosing these 'on the day' depending on traffic, weather, and parental accessibility, which is a barrier to accessing any place. The diverse transport modes also indicate how important it is that places have multiple different options for arriving at them; if there is no bus stop near a

sports ground, then when a boy's parents cannot drive them there, the sports ground becomes entirely inaccessible.

The time taken to get to school (Fig.7) indicates that many respondents do not have to make a substantial time investment to get to the centre of High Wycombe. This is particularly important for considering common third places- as, while all boys have visited the centre of High Wycombe, many do not frequent the place. However, most boys live close enough to school, and therefore the centre of High Wycombe, to treat the town as the major centre for their social circles and thus to have overlapping social contours. All boys were at least familiar with some examples of third place in High Wycombe and the immediate area, even those living at a greater distance. Questions asked to the boys about their third place choice will, therefore, result in some place-based responses being common across groups, reinforcing data validity. Furthermore, as the RGSHW is a mere 15-minute walk from the town centre, most boys do not need to consider transit time as a major mitigating factor to reaching a third place in Wycombe.

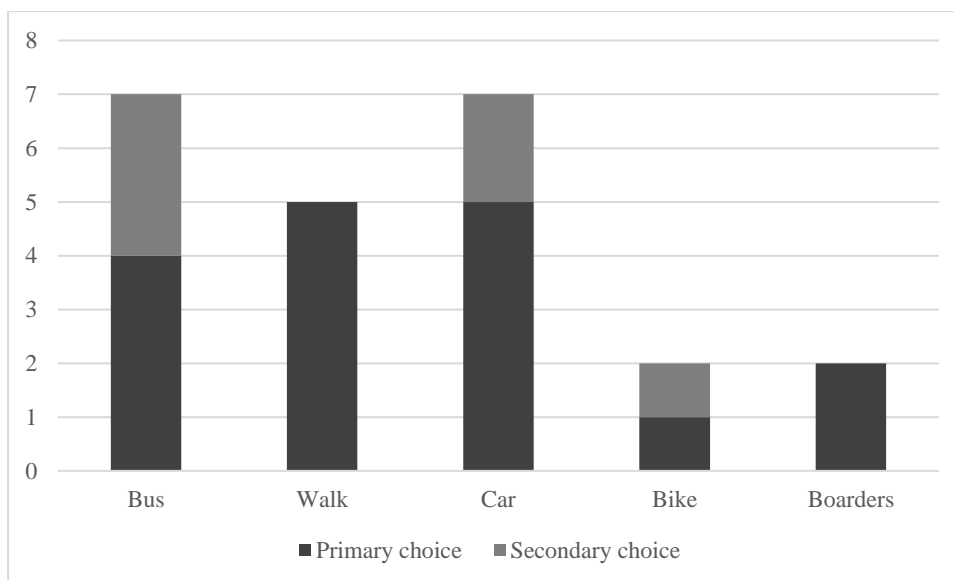


Figure 6 Transit mode choice

‘boarding’, ‘CCF’ (or Combined Cadet Force), and ‘school’, which is a cursory suggestion that third and second places are not particularly distinct. Further data extraction of these words is not appropriate; while a verb analysis might reveal many action verbs (‘go’, ‘walking’) these are more context-dependent and fluid in their meaning. Thus, Fig.8 reveals that school and third place have some link; third places separate from school are not discussed as readily as those which are attached to it.

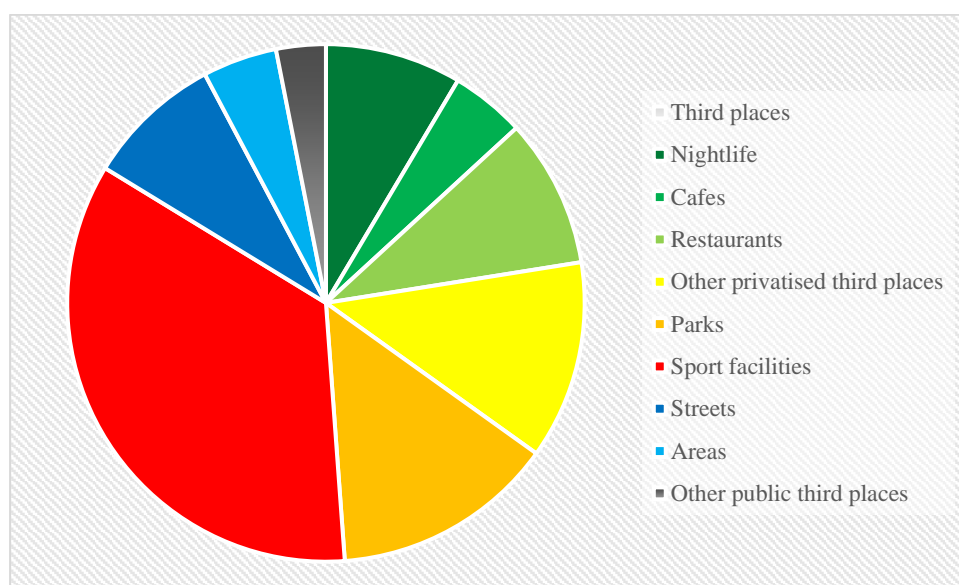


Figure 9 Breakdown of third places mentioned during focus groups (raw mentions by proportion) of 129 mentions of places.

Fig.9 displays the total number of (manually coded) third places mentioned during the focus groups, colour-sorted for similar types of third place. This was conducted manually; for example, each individual mention of the nightclub “Trilogy” was counted as a separate instance of ‘Nightlife’. It is notable that sports facilities form the vast majority of mentions of third places; this is partly because at least two boys were taking part in orchestra rehearsals during the focus groups, but also partly due to the majority of sports clubs (70%) being directly affiliated with school, and therefore close to, or at, the second place; a conclusion which reflects Fig.8 and, ultimately, supports the relevance of collapsed place theory.

These descriptives, while exploratory, bring concepts to the forefront which are seen throughout these results: a notion of collapsed place and the dissolution of spatial separation

of place, the introduction of barriers as a defining feature of place, and the diverse but overwhelmingly distinct experience that young people face when interacting with their third places. Furthermore, these data begin to suggest correlations between barriers to socialising, such as lack of transit options, and the diminished use of third place separate from school among respondents.

4.2. Young people’s unique use of Third Place

Literature has already discussed the particular importance of third place for young people, particularly for those in same-sex schools. Third places, in providing diverse social networks which do not resemble the RGS HW boys’ school-based friend groups, are among the most significant drivers of cross-class socialising that young people are exposed to (Putnam, 2020). This also means that young people use these third places in unique ways; from using transit routes as places, to the collapse of place distinction which defines initial definitions of third place theory.

	● First Place Gr=10	● Second Place Gr=46	● Third place Gr=113
● First Place Gr=10	0	9	7
● Second Place Gr=46	9	0	28
● Third place Gr=113	7	28	0

Figure 10 Code Co-Occurrence analysis for first, second, and third place

A Code Co-Occurrence analysis was performed on coded data sets, for first, second, and third places. This produced a table for common mentions in specific quotes (Fig.11). The relatively low figure, a ‘9’, between first and second place means that nine first and second places were mentioned in the context of each other (i.e. the boarding house acting both as a home and as an attachment of school):

“If I saw a normal member of staff walking around in, like, school grounds I knew from Boarding, then I would probably relate to them in a different way to how I would in Boarding”- ‘Sam’

‘Sam’ himself was a boarder, and reflected on living in school by discussing temporality- at 16:00, the role that teachers at the school perform shifts from instructor to guardian. Nonetheless, even despite this separation, for ‘Sam’, once a teacher took on a guardianly role in the boarding house, this could not be fully reversed during the school day. The same was true for the school site itself; associations of the school sports facilities were inexorably linked to the social activities that took place there after hours- in other words, for ‘Sam’, first and second place (and even third place in this regard) resembled one homogenous agglomeration, distinguished primarily by function and time rather than being spatially distinct. However, ‘Sam’ was a boarder, so this evidence in favour of collapsed place was somewhat expected. The low figure in Fig.11 demonstrates that this was not a particularly common occurrence; in the mind of the boys, first and second places are only slightly linked, and first and third places barely linked.

This was not the case between second and third place; quote mentions of third place and second place are very high. This means that, during the focus groups, 28 of the 113 coded instances of third place were mentioned together with second place. In other words, there were 28 mentions throughout these focus groups where a boy’s work or school, and social place, shared the same, or a very similar, spatial domain:

“I do the gym for- partly for rugby, which is part of school so it's, like, a bit of a crossover, perhaps with that- and then the same for football as well.”- ‘Kian’

This clearly showcases the collapse of distinct second and third places, in two distinct ways. The first is the clearest: ‘Kian’ socialises with his schoolfriends while playing rugby and football, and while in the gym. The distinction between Kian’s social space and school is limited, and he chooses not to socialise with others while playing rugby. The restricted

distinction between second and third place mirrors findings of prior research (Littman, 2021). However, there is greater meaning in this quotation: the RGSHW does not have a football team, as it is a rugby school. To socialise with schoolfriends while playing a sport which is explicitly against the school rules (at least on-site) makes clear the fact that, for 'Kian' and his friends, the preferred use of a third place is to socialise with schoolfriends, even when explicitly separated from school. The limited distinction was reflected on, both with and without prompting, by several of the boys, who noted that, reinforcing the earlier assertion of mainly male friend groups, they often socialise with schoolfriends. Reasons for this were discussed and mostly consisted of time costs and geographical distance rather than spatial characteristics. 'Hamza' acknowledged that when socialising in High Wycombe, schoolfriends were the preferred group "because it's much closer". Others agreed with this: "You can just walk down to the centre [from school]"- 'William' stated, in a dialogue with 'Hamza' about why his social circles were mostly based on school- because of the geographical proximity of High Wycombe and RGSHW, there is less time investment socialising in the regional centre after school as opposed to travelling to the centre of Wycombe just for the purposes of socialising. It is a smaller time investment, and less of a cost. These friend groups, classified as friendships of convenience, are common for many young people who have less opportunities to interact with multiple people (Putnam, 2020). The spatial distinctions present between first, second, and third place as displayed in Fig.11 are, therefore, highly limited- particularly between second and third place.

The complex interactions between young people and place, partly driven by convenience but also by geographical location and time, aroused some curiosity on whether respondents enjoy the third places they use. To understand this, AI-driven sentiment analysis was performed, to determine which elements were discussed positively, negatively, or in neutral tones. Fig.11 displays the resulting sentiment analysis, and directly contradicts

expectations of negativity- by and large, responses to third, second, and third places were positive, with only barriers to these places being framed negatively. Therefore, despite criticisms of place, interviewees still perceive these places overwhelmingly positively. Even barriers to third place, discussed in greater detail in the final section of this chapter, were overall perceived with positive sentiments; challenges to overcome which demonstrated the worth of third places in the minds of respondents, or which restricted undesirable interactions in third places. Third places in general are more likely to be framed neutrally than specific types of third places, with area-based third places framed the most positively:

“I enjoy walking and going between places as part of an experience.”- ‘Toby’

‘Toby’ describes the importance of flow in his enjoyment of Third Place, but also frames the areas which connect places as positive, and distinct, places in their own right. This place is here defined by the function it fulfils as a connecting space; by giving this particular place a purpose, even one as simple as being a transit corridor, it can be made meaningful and positive. Young people, such as ‘Toby’, strive for meaningful places, and this particular place has meaning by connecting a number of different places. This does, however, include the stipulation that there must be enough third places close by to make such routes meaningful.

All focus groups discussed using the internet either as a way to organise encounters or as a pseudo-place in itself; however, neither prior research nor this thesis identified the online domain as an acceptable substitute for in-person interactions. This was an unexpectedly anticlimactic result of internet fatigue caused by overexposure to the online world during COVID-19, and ran contrary to the expectations of both the teacher present and the researcher, that interviewees value in-person interactions very highly.

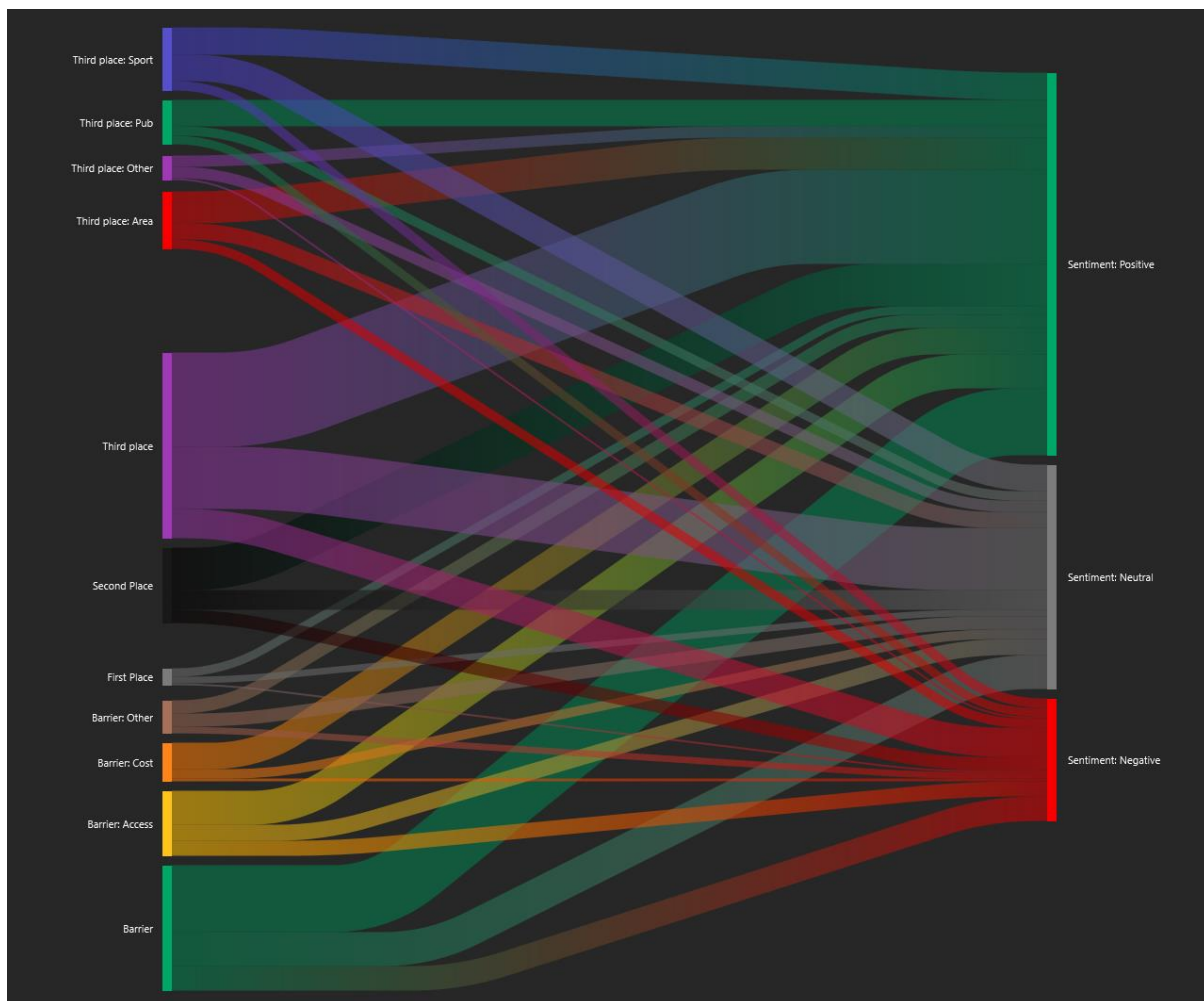


Figure 11 Sankey diagram of a sentiment analysis for different places, as well as different barriers

Considering the three main metrics of third place; flow, sociability, and conversation, respondents did not mention flow as being central to their understandings of it, but rather a way to determine the worth of a place. Respondents discussing the flow of space in Wycombe workshopped drawbacks in the spatial domain, calling out multiple possible failures of this domain; in particular, limiting factors such as the lack of space encouraging exploration, spontaneous activity, and funnelling features.

Sociability played more of a central role for respondents:

“I'll go to Costa, go do some work. I'm an acquaintance with the barista there, we have a chat every now and then. Ask her how she's doing, what her daughter's up to.”- ‘John’

The importance of a friendly face, of a familiar setting, was for ‘John’ a key factor in choosing to frequent this Costa (a chain café). This is placemaking in action; the process of

turning a Costa into the one Costa that he is particularly familiar with, where he chooses to do work. The sociability of this particular third place is what makes it unique and special to him, and is therefore the reason for its success. The layout of a space was carefully considered by the focus groups, even before prompting, and 'John' also described how this Costa does not have any solo seating, which theoretically leads to more spontaneous interactions between customers- although this was in practice not observed regularly by 'John':

"... never seen anyone randomly go up to someone else in the cafe and start having a chat with them."- 'John'.

Perhaps this Costa does not encourage a socialising mood; after all, data suggests that most people who visit a café in the UK do not stop and talk (ONS, 2023). It may also be the case that cafes are not intended to facilitate spontaneous interactions, despite the seating layout, or that there are other third places which better facilitate interactions and thus concentrate such interactions there. Part of this may be that people do not often enter cafes in larger groups. All focus groups discussed group size to some extent and sought to address relative size, with the appropriate size of focus groups depending on contextual factors as well as setting- broadly, the intimacy of a setting and the size of the group impacts the willingness to be open to new interactions, although this was also discussed as self-selecting bias- if one looks for interactions, one will go to a place which facilitates these interactions. Underage drinking was mentioned as a particular facilitator of spontaneous interactions; when asked what helped him socialise, 'Thomas' responded:

"Alcohol, alcohol. That's a good one."- 'Thomas'

Such practices are undoubtedly unhealthy, but by lowering inhibitions, social activity among young people can be facilitated and mitigate the poor design of certain places, such as the Falcon pub in High Wycombe (Fig.13).

Place comfort was also highlighted as being primarily driven by sociability, but was not mentioned as strongly as a shared activity, such as sport, experience, such as camaraderie, or

senses, such as drinking. Further illegal activities, described extensively using euphemism such as 'late-night walks in the park' followed by the acknowledgement that they couldn't discuss the specific activity in front of a teacher, were seen as ways to introduce place comfort to somewhere that several boys found to be an uncomfortable and antisocial place; a poorly-lit park at night (as 'Ben' discusses later in this thesis).

Conversation was seen as arguably the most important factor of third places. While sometimes unwanted, it was seen as the primary indicator for a third place's success and vitality. Age diversity in responses to conversation was similarly addressed by several respondents, who also showed an understanding for the unwillingness of certain groups- i.e. women- to converse with unpleasant characters, particularly when alcohol was involved. Conversation was made easier by shared experiences from users of third places, and made people feel seen.

Overall, we see that young people use third place in distinct and unusual ways. While young people are positive about the places they interact with, even despite friendship circles biased towards schoolfriends and excluding of non-school activities, there are limiting factors to these social places such as their proximity to school. Flow, sociability, and conversation are all important to young people when using place, but conversation and sociability are uniquely essential here. There is significant evidence for both place satisfaction and collapsed place theory- while the places that respondents use are not purely out of necessity, there is a lack of distinction between second and third place.

4.3.Expectations of Third Place

No boy reported having more non-male than female friends, and from those who counted, an average proportionality of 3 male to every 1 non-male friend was reported. 'School' and related words feature highly in mentions of third place (Fig.8) and associated clubs make up the largest minority of visited places for respondents (Fig.9), which reinforces this lack of non-male friends. There is, however, an understanding and acceptance that at least there is *some*

provision of mixed-sex third place, although even this results in a complacent attitude to egalitarian places (Quinn, 2018):

“Our friendship groups are mainly all boys. Well, mine are anyway. [...] Trilogy [local nightclub] is also quite male-oriented.”- ‘Alex’

This sentiment was present throughout all focus groups; the gender imbalance in friend groups, that aforementioned proxy, is indicative of the compressed distinction between first, second, and third place. The result of this, as discussed in the literature review, is a skewed social circle, with limited exposure to different social groups (Horton, 2016; Littman, 2022). In this particular quotation, however, there is a suggestion that preferred non-school social places are also same-sex dominated. This could have been as a result of self-selection bias: with more experience in male interactions for all respondents, the places they choose to socialise (illegally, as nightclubs are not accessible for under-18s) are likely to share traits which are not preferable to non-males. These predominantly same-sex spaces can be unfriendly to non-male groups, as has been discerned by TPOT observations (Fig.13), where the pub struggles for physical attributes- physical attributes which include visitor diversity, availability of non-cost options, and diversity of function. Despite evidence suggesting that lack of exposure to different groups results in a lack of empathy (Bauman, 2006; Müller, 2016), respondents showed great empathy for social minority groups. Even the respondent who had no close female friends reported that:

“...we don't always get excited to see [the pub man's] face.”- ‘Jamie’

The Pub Man refers to a pub regular, typically an older man, who drinks constantly, interacts with strangers, and can act unpleasantly towards women, BAME+ clients, and cannot easily be dislodged (Rous, 2018). The Pub Man is a symbol of life where unaccompanied women face additional stresses as compared to men, and an expression of distaste from a group which faces at most an uncomfortable story from an unwanted character shows compassion

(Fig.12). ‘Jamie’, and others, expect third places to be at least somewhat accommodating towards non-majority social groups, which is an expectation that cannot be fulfilled by compressed places where schoolboys form the only accepted clientele, such as school rugby clubs.

Figure 12 The Pub Man and the strategy for removing him (Rous, 2018)



‘Local character with a fund of interesting stories. Buy me a pint and I’ll clear off’

Young people expect more than accommodating places, however. The results from the TPOT, the third-place observation tool, are visible in Fig.13. This modified TPOT specifically measured physical attributes of place, place activity, reported openness, place comfort in furniture and setting, and other aspects, and each location’s best-scoring section has been included here. All images were taken by the author on the day of observations apart from the final image of the Falcon pub, which is an open-source photo, as permissions on the visitation day from subjects in the photograph were not obtained.





Location	Maximum score (/69)	Best section?	Worst section?
<p>1. Eden Centre</p> 	40 (58%)	Physical attributes (75%)	Activity (44%)
<p>2. Rye</p> 	46 (67%)	Activity (90%)	Physical attributes (0%)
<p>3. High Street</p> 	32 (46%)	Openness (100%)	Activity (22%)
<p>4. Falcon (Spoons)</p> 	29 (42%)	Comfort (77%)	Physical attributes (8%)

Figure 13 Results from TPOT

These results suggest several things- first and foremost, that no selected location was the ‘perfect’ Third Place, with a score of 95% for each location; although as discussed earlier,

this might not be an aim worth pursuing as places can cover each other's faults. Secondly, the best selection options are indicative- the pub is a comfortable location, the Rye is well-suited to being active, and the High Street, the only street, is very open and modifiable. The Eden Centre has positive physical attributes such as lighting and seating available- "Well the Eden Centre in the day is, like, naturally lit."- 'Alex'. However, breaking down the results further, it is clear that each location had drastic shortcomings. As discussed earlier, as long as nearby third places covered each other's deficiencies, this would not be a problem. The Rye is relatively inaccessible, with only a poorly lit footpath between it and the Town Centre. The High Street is not conducive to a great diversity of activity, with quite fixed usage owing to the dominance of cars in the space. The Eden Centre, which has relatively average scores across the board, has very poor participatory spaces with a great deal of function separation and an atmosphere conducive to shopping, but not conversation. The pub, where observations were conducted at 15:30, was populated by a number of older men with some levels of physical impairment- a fact which somewhat disagrees with time-client data, which suggests at least some younger clients (Statista, 2023). This may, however, be sampling bias as a local football game was taking place at this time, which may explain its relative emptiness and gender imbalance. Sadly, owing to time limitations, revisiting the pub was not feasible; however, as no other observations were significantly populated, this has somewhat been mitigated. However, as is evident, some expectations of place are not universal- though this is discussed in more detail in the following section. Safety, for example, is an expected feature of an egalitarian third place, but is trapped behind a cost barrier. The free public spaces mentioned in focus groups, such as the Rye, were not worth visiting after dark even despite the lack of cost:

"... during the day, they sort of are a nice place to be- a nice place to walk or whatever. But I wouldn't go there at night."- 'Ben'

Young people's specific expectations of third place, such as safety, seem to take priority over the barriers of cost. There is, however, another cost to safety- the lack of autonomy that is exchanged for safety, or merely a free place, which comes about from merging third and second place, by socialising increasingly in the school setting. Socialising in second places, however, has one problem which 'Ben' acknowledges- school clubs cannot be supervised at night. 'Ben' recognises the temporality of space discussed earlier, and in literature, by arguing that flexibility of place function can also be a negative, by turning what is a safe place during the day into an unsafe place at night (Kamalipour, Faizi and Memarian, 2014). These choices, which effectively mean paying for safety, come about at least partly as a result of the austerity policies which led to the closure of free third places like supervised youth clubs and a lack of maintenance in the still-existing public spaces such as parks. High Wycombe is particularly challenged by this history of austerity, as has been discussed earlier, due to the local authority's budget challenges. Comparable research into first place conceptualisations has identified similar effects on living spaces for young people (van Lanen, 2022), and understandings of austerity as presented earlier in this paper mirror those findings- of young people, depoliticised and deplatformed, unable to introduce the places they meaningfully rely on to socialise and interact (Clayton, Donovan and Merchant, 2016).

Respondents to this study expect third places to first and foremost satisfy their needs to socialise, as well as having diverse place functions. Nonetheless, this cannot come at the expense of the safety and accessibility which 'Ben' and 'Jamie' discuss. While design aspects such as good lighting, physical comfort, and openness are appreciated, expectations of third place among young people are more dominated by the dichotomy of cost and accessibility than positive spatial elements. When compared to specific dimensions of place, all TPOT-surveyed locations were lacking on several fronts: their levelling effects were minimal, and they did not feel like homes away from home. However, certain aspects were emphasized in different ways-

all places were, at least during the day, accessible to the less mobile and did at least have some public transit provisions. Intended activities in all locations were supported well, although at times the diversity of activity was minimal. Conversation, however, fluctuated across all environments. The pub was eerily quiet on the day that data collection occurred. The Rye was virtually empty. The High Street was the place with the highest level of conversation, with the Eden Centre coming a close second, which one would not expect from their primary functions as shopping areas.

4.4. Barriers to accessing Third Place

There has already been significant discussion on the barriers faced by boys in accessing and experiencing third places to their fullest. These barriers, as discussed in the literature review, can be grouped into financial and accessibility costs. All such costs are linked. Despite satisfaction with third places, and even positive framing of costs, these barriers are still challenges to many- if to the affluent and privileged students of RGSHW then for all other young people in High Wycombe.

Boys reported a variety of employment statuses, from unemployed to volunteer, and to part-time on a variety of weekdays. While some level of work was anticipated, the reasons presented for this were unexpected: one boy worked to supplement his family's income, and other boys worked in order to access third places at discounts. 'Rajun', for example, told a story of working to have free gym membership:

"I work at a leisure centre, so I spend a lot of time at the gym [...]. I get in for free because I work there. It's about £5 per session for the boxing gym, though."- 'Rajun'

'Rajun' then described why, for him, it is worth working to overcome this cost barrier:

"We're all getting beaten up. So we all have that shared experience, too, because we will have one thing in common. We kind of, just kind of start getting drawn in together."- 'Rajun'

'Rajun' described a place attachment wholly separate to school, his second place, and the lengths to which he would go to continue accessing a place where he can share an

experience with an ever-changing, yet always familiar, environment. For 'Rajun', this almost home-away-from-home setting was worth even physical pain, which if anything contributed to the shared experience of place. This, plus the £5 cost of entry, was a barrier worth overcoming for the sense of place, community, and camaraderie which such a third place could offer. However, in needing to work for this luxury, there is a clear sense of struggling to actually access this place- and the financial cost of socialising does not just refer to the cost of entry.

Many barriers can be entirely insurmountable, such as in the following case, with a transit barrier to reaching a local sports ground:

"If you say a child ticket, [a bus ticket] is £2.20!"- 'Nathan'

"Often [the bus] doesn't come at all."- 'Hamza'

The first point here is that, immediately, the cost of socialising for 'Nathan' is breaking the law and paying £4.40, just to go to town to access third place. The second point here is that, by relying on one single connection- the bus- many places become completely inaccessible as soon as faults in the schedule occur. The direct impact of this is that young people cannot access the private third places they can afford, or choose to stay at home and save £4.40 and a possible police caution. Businesses seeking to provide young people with social places, which, owing to a lack of state funding, must charge for the service, lose customers to these cost barriers, and many eventually close (Hall, Pimlott-Wilson and Horton, 2020). This results in increasingly fewer places for young people to socialise outside of the school environment (Horton, 2016). This diminishes supply but, rather than increasing demand, this instead lowers the benefits of a cost-benefit analysis for travelling to town by lowering the number of alternate destinations, leading to a further decrease in visits to the limited public third places available (Gil, 2016). The indirect implications of this on young people are clear, who begin to perceive third places as inaccessible apart from very infrequent visits:

"If I do any big sort of trip, I'll go to London."- 'Alex'

The mental cost-benefit analysis of socialising in Wycombe was, for ‘Alex’, not worth it. The aforementioned lack of third places to socialise in, as well as the not insignificant cost of travelling to Wycombe, meant that it made more sense to work for three weekends each month and travel to London on the fourth. This means that the social places ‘Alex’ and his friends visit in London fill less of the roles of third places, in providing a space for regular, conversational interactions, as ‘Alex’ said that he and his friends do not have a regular place to relax in London itself. This only deprives the commuter town of High Wycombe of valuable capital, and, while separate to school itself, concentrates the friendship circles built while at school by closing off possible interactions with strangers. While third places are essential to the continued existence of cities, particularly in providing a regular flow of money, young people in High Wycombe instead find that third places are inaccessible, poorly designed, and expensive, and instead choose to spend their money elsewhere. For some, such as ‘Alex’, the barriers to socialising in Wycombe are insurmountable.

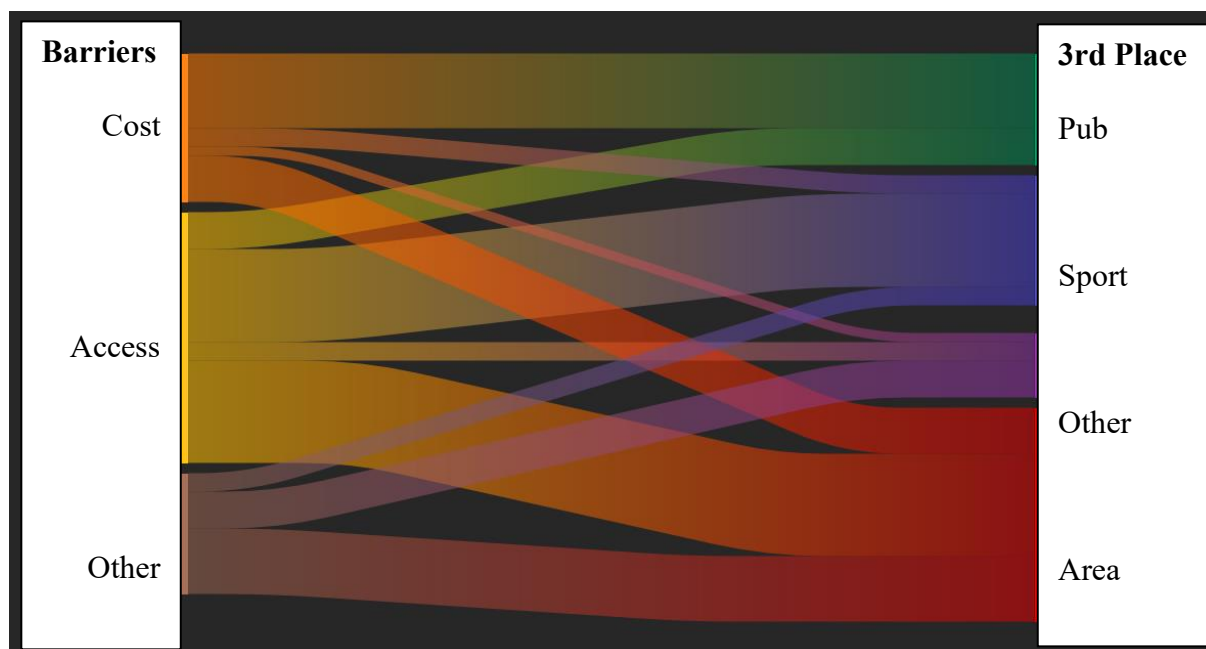


Figure 14 Code Co-Occurrence analysis Sankey for place and diverse barriers

A Code Co-Occurrence analysis was performed on different categorisations of third place, compared with different identified barriers (Fig.14). Code Co-Occurrence analyses can be used to determine term linkages within quotations. This Sankey diagram demonstrates the associations between particular third places and the barriers that are faced. The categorisation 'Pub', is for any food or drinking establishment. 'Sport' refers to places where sports are the primary and intended activity, such as football grounds, and 'Area' refers to parks, woodlands, and streets. 'Other' is included as a catch-all case. Some ties are explicit- 'Other' categories are common across both sides as an outlier and exceptional case link and therefore include very small n, whereas pubs face disproportionate barriers to cost- as they are inherently privatised and one must pay for a drink to remain inside- and sports grounds face access challenges, as they are conventionally located further from town centres, and thus have fewer public transit options- we can consider the £2.20 child ticket evidence of this. The following example illustrates how cost can act as a barrier:

"Yeah, I think there needs to be some sort of activity that everyone can do that's fun and can last for long enough that it's worth the journey together."- 'Thomas

The implication here, of third place being activity-driven, is a general statement and thus is coded as 'Third place: Other'. The suggestion of worth, and that the third place must be worth the cost of a journey, is therefore classified as 'Barrier: Cost'. 'Thomas' describes the cost-benefit calculation that all people make, even subconsciously, when considering where to socialise, and indicates that this is also a decision that can be taken as part of a group. This both highlights the importance of others when considering the choice to socialise, and also reinforces the empathy that 'Jamie' showed. This also proves a further point- a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and a friend group can only socialise together if all can overcome the barriers to entry. However, in aggregate, the sentiment analysis (Fig.11) did reveal that most barriers can still be overcome. The poor examples of third place found in High Wycombe and

the surrounding area (Fig.13) instead led respondents to consider criminality of place. Boys described locations such as the local pub, which many were not legally allowed to enter, as the only places in town where they could socialise:

“Something to do with the odd age, though, isn't it. You've grown up past, like, going to the arcade and things like that. But you're not quite, you know, can't go to pubs, go clubbing, I guess. Because once we're 18 it opens up a little bit and changes.”- ‘Daniel’

‘Daniel’ was met with nods and audible agreement from many of his colleagues, and the teacher, after saying this. The experience of being unable to socialise in the one place left in town after 5pm without breaking the law perfectly encapsulates the struggles that young people in High Wycombe face when looking to socialise outside of the school setting. It accurately mirrors the struggles faced by teetotaling international students in Cork in their struggles to find a social space where they don't have to drink (O'Connor, 2020). This has undoubtedly been exacerbated by austerity politics in High Wycombe and the surrounding area- the closures of third places in the Great Recession, the spread-out town layout which disincentivises agglomeration benefits, the cost of transit, and the competence overlap of school absorbing many third places (for who else would provide services if not the school?) have together de-facto criminalised third places for young people after 5pm.

Perhaps this does not serve as evidence for collapsed place theory, but resembles the prison social environment in criminalising the few third places left. Young people cannot meaningfully choose where, when, or how to socialise, and overcoming the barriers of cost and accessibility, exacerbated by austerity, can be insurmountable to all but the most financially and socially privileged.

5. Conclusions

This study discusses the third places of High Wycombe, and frames them from the perspective of young people at an all-boys grammar school. Insofar as they exist in High Wycombe, third places are relatively spatially indistinct from second places in the minds of their users. This is evidence of collapsed place theory (Littman, 2021). and the existing third spaces in High Wycombe do indeed most closely match those with serious spatial limitations, as opposed to the conventional model of third place (Oldenburg, 1989). However, young people may not actually perceive these limited intermodal spaces as unpleasant or even restrictive. Third places in Wycombe have been found to be broadly positive by the users, suggesting that the observational data findings contrary to this are inaccurate for measuring third place success.

Young people interact with third place in High Wycombe in myriad and nuanced ways, and perceive third place at both an individual and group level. This suggests that future third place planning must consider the views of young people when seeking to construct socially cohesive areas, as the interactions between young people and third places can be surprising- an observational tool, for example, is not a sufficient metric for whether a third place will be accepted by its intended users. There is, however, serious demand in High Wycombe for more, better third places, which shows that the social places currently in town are not sufficient.

Often, third and second place overlaps result in limited social circles, which presents the unique challenge of school limitations- opening hours, enrolment- to using third place. This is in addition to the barriers which are known to impact third place accessibility- of financial cost, and accessibility. The conceptualisation of third place which most closely mirrors how young people interact with third place is the Collapsed Place Theory, owing to the spatial overlap of first, but particularly second and third, place. This spatial distinction has broad implications- young people in High Wycombe, who are confined to school-based friend groups,

are unable to access the benefits of third places such as dissimilar contacts and, therefore, new ideas (Wexler and Oberlander, 2017). The implications of this are drastic- young people may find themselves in increasingly insular, inward-looking friend groups, and become polarised against dissenting opinions (Crick, 2011). This research therefore acts as a springboard for future research into our collapsed places, and provides further evidence for the acceptance of this theory into broader discourse.

The financial and accessibility costs to accessing third places both arise in inequality and significantly enhance the unequal distribution of public places in the UK broadly, and High Wycombe specifically. This has led to the criminalisation of socialising for young people, and has also placed a charge on safety. This has severe implications for young people, who may not be able to afford this cost, and thus find themselves at risk or socially isolated. The situation is particularly acute for those with lesser financial and social means, who suffer social segregation. Ultimately, even the illegal activities of young people deserve to be done in a safe space, with support nearby.

This research seeks to promote a more nuanced understanding of place. By doing away with spatial boundaries of third place, conceptual models can instead focus on the elements of third place which distinguish its social functions from first and second (and 'fourth') place: its role as a place of joy, and as facilitating communication across class boundaries (Yazit, Husini and Zaini, 2020). Thus we can more concretely understand the actual distinctions between first, second, and third place, beyond merely being aware of these distinctions- an area for future research. The places that we make today must be better than those we made yesterday, and this can only be achieved by including the wishes of every demographic in their design- especially young people.

6. Recommendations

This section acts as an evaluation for the research process, guiding future studies into third place, and also seeks to present actual improvements to local authority management in High Wycombe. This has been guided by the focus groups conducted with boys, as well as from literature into placemaking, and discussions with a number of planners.

Evaluating the work put into this thesis is a challenging feat; initially, I had hoped to guide research towards income inequality identification. However, it quickly became apparent that the scope of such research would be so broad as to be impossible to work with. This led to the refinement of the research process later on than anticipated, which also presented challenges in the organisation of data collection. Lessons learned here are primarily those of time management; investing early on saves a great deal of stress later in a long-term project such as a thesis. A major takeaway from this is that collaboration with academics, as well as non-specialists, is why projects succeed, as demonstrated by the support of a number of experts and non-experts in the creation of this thesis. Reinforcing the importance of collaboration is the impact that transparency has had on the project workflow; primarily, transparency on the part of the researcher over mitigating factor for deadlines, stress, and life events. This thesis has lasted the best part of one academic year, and has not been made easier by uncertainty with housing, illness, family and friendship issues, and burnout from the aforementioned poor time management! However, at every stage, communicating- not necessarily in a third place, but in a relaxed setting- has helped the project get back on track.

This research acts as a proof-of-concept for several research methods, all within a case study framework. However, more time was needed in focus groups to discuss all material; the 35 minute slots used for this thesis were too short. Removing the teacher from the room would

also be a benefit, although, as this comes with safeguarding concerns, this may not be a reasonable expectation to make.

Future research should also focus on non-male groupings within High Wycombe to minimise variables, but should later extend beyond this spatial domain. Such research would also be beneficial to meta-analyses of third places in the future, and expand on understandings of collapsed place theory as a distinct theoretical approach to third place research. Questions for future research, beyond applying this methodology more broadly, might include:

1. How do young people interact with ‘fourth places’ and is this categorisation a valid counterpart to collapsed place theory?
2. How can private third places be made more accommodating to those who cannot afford them?
3. How does the collapsed place theory formed in prisons differ to that formed outside of prisons?

Equitable Placemaking and Third Place Planning

Placemaking is a complicated process in the UK. The following guide is intended as an adjustment to current third place planning processes for Buckinghamshire County Council specifically, and for local authority planning in the UK in general.

1. Competence identification, legal consulting

A major challenge to third place provision is overlapping competences. This refers both to a designation of responsibility, but also the legal responsibility of a diversity of bureaucratic functions. In Buckinghamshire alone, there is the County Council (since 2020), certain organs of the prior District Councils, a new section of



Council Divisions, Town Councils, Parishes, and Borough Councils. Each jurisdiction has a separate designated responsibility, but overlapping boundaries. Therefore, identifying the process for small-scale planning projects and financial support would simplify the process while also diminishing bureaucracy costs.

2. Outlining studies

This thesis acts only as a case study into one school, in one town. Therefore, further studies are required to identify the transferability of these results and to see what else must be done to build better third places. Consultancies in different towns should be opened; discussions with citizens should be conducted. Not only does this ensure that the public are overall in support of projects, but it directs necessary resources to actual, rather than perceived problems. An additional positive is that this increases trust in governance. Only following clear direction, described by studies, can further steps be undertaken. These studies should consider different third places nearby to build resilience through diversity- no one place can be perfect, so together several places can cover for each deficiency.

3. Job hirings

Historically, public authorities maintained at least some low-paid staff to simply observe public places- streets, parks, civic buildings, etc. While these were a cost, it was minor when considering their role as a preventative measure to damage, as well as being able to act immediately to stop accumulating damage spiralling out of control. These positions should be refilled and paid well- these individuals become local experts, in charge of maintaining the site, and should reflect the preferred functions of the third place. For a park, a younger and fitter person is required. For a youth club, older and less mobile public attendants can be employed. These roles should be further empowered, too, to make low-level planning decisions on-the-ground, particularly for non-permanent spatial interventions. These employees become the

friendly faces of third places; trustworthy, friendly public officials who take pride in their domain.

4. Guidance modification and implementation

The most major intervention here can be conducted following consultancy both with public and with public attendant- rewriting planning guidelines. These guidelines must take into account the desired characteristics for intended users, and should be flexible enough to accommodate diversity of function. Mandates on democratic decision-making for projects must be included to improve transparency and trust in these processes. For an example guideline, we can consider the rejuvenation of a third place intended for young people:

- i. First, a timeline must be created. This should include an estimated lifetime for the project, as well as consultation periods during its construction.
- ii. Next, design characteristics must be implemented. Young people in this thesis described wanting third places with public transit connections and alternatives, accessible paths, reliable lighting, movable and flexible seating, and plenty of bins. With a friendly public attendant, these places can be considered safe and without the need for active policing.
- iii. Finally, the document with its design characteristics must be scrutinised, and with particular attention to responsibilities. This can then be implemented as a flexible design guideline for planning projects.

5. Reflections

All planning is iterative. This stage reflects this. All planning projects are completed with lifespans, and continuous monitoring periods. The same stands for planning documents- every 20-30 years, at maximum, places constructed under these plans must be reflected on and re-examined in line with the principles of iterative and gradual design. Recommendations for non-public places should also include some reflective measures.

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Appendix

A. Consent form for focus group partakers.

Consent form for Jacob Leman's Master research project 'How do young people in High Wycombe experience local third places?'

Data will be recorded and processed using machine learning software according to GDPR. Only the researcher will have access to recordings, which will be stored on a separate encrypted device. My rights under GDPR were explained to me before the interview was conducted. I received advice for where to receive support.

I fully understand the research project, following its explanation by the researcher (Jacob Leman). I was able to ask questions and any questions I had were clearly answered. I had enough time to decide to participate in the research.

My participation is completely voluntary. I can withdraw from the research at any time, without having to give a reason.

I give my permission for using the interview data for educational research purposes.

I agree to participate in this interview.

Signature	Name	Date
		25/04/23
		25/04/23
		25/04/23
		25/04/23

I declare that I have informed the research participant about the research. I will notify the participant about matters that could influence his/her participation in the research.

Signature (of researcher):

Name:

Date: 25/04/23

B. Contact cards for interviewees.

<p>Contact Card for MSc Thesis data collection Researcher: Jacob Leman j.b.leman@student.rug.nl Supervisor: Prof. Sander van Lanen s.van.lanen@rug.nl Please only contact Jacob Leman unless necessary!</p>	<p>Contact Card for MSc Thesis data collection Researcher: Jacob Leman j.b.leman@student.rug.nl Supervisor: Prof. Sander van Lanen s.van.lanen@rug.nl Please only contact Jacob Leman unless necessary!</p>
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C. Focus group interview guide.

Establishing questions:

How long does it take you to get to school in the morning?

Do you see High Wycombe as your main social space?

What does your time distribution between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd space look like?

What examples of 3rd places can you think of that you use? Would you use these places with those here?

Physical/ Social Characteristics:

Can you geolocate/ name these places?

How much impact does cost have on your choice of place?

Do you feel a particular attachment to one or a few places?

What makes this place unique to you? What attributes would you like to see elsewhere?

What is the atmosphere of this place?

Do you go out of your way to get there? How do you get there?

Is the place accessible to people with different abilities?

Other people:

Are the other people at this place similar to you? Accents, backgrounds, purchases, etc.?

Do you interact with strangers at these places? Have you found new contacts at these places?

Do you gatekeep?

Do you recognise strangers at these places? Did you make friends there, or bring friends along?

Activities:

Do you meet people online as a substitute?

What do you do at these places? How do these change over time?

Do you see diversity of activities at the same time?

What sorts of things do you do at different places? Do you need to prepare for these activities?

D. Taster lesson for respondents



1



2



3



4



5



6



WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?

- I need to do data collection
- You are beginning to learn about Space and Place
- Positive-sum game!

7

BUT FIRST: GDPR

- EU requirement for ethical data collection
- Highlighted parts (1, 2, 7) are most important
- Don't forget to sign the papers, and if you don't consent, please stay quiet during the focus group!

(Parliament of the European Union, 2018)

1. Right to be Informed	2. Right of Access	3. Right to Rectification	4. Right to Object to Processing
5. Right to Restrict Processing	6. Right to Data Portability	7. Right to be Forgotten	8. Rights in relation to Automated Decision-making and Profiling

8



ON THE ROAD TO THIRD PLACE

Jacob Lerman, BSc (Hons) HGP

9

SPACE OR PLACE?

(Greenway Europe, 2017)

Space

- Blind
- Impersonal
- Mathematical, legal
- Quantitative



Place

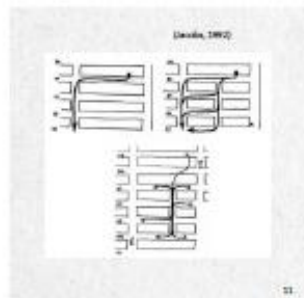
- Meaningful
- User 'contract', norms
- Social
- Qualitative



10

JANE JACOBS

- 1960s contest, in NYC
- 'Yes on the Street'
- An advocate for complexity
- A Journalist; no experience
- Placemaking is vital: without place, we have lost ourselves



11

JAN GEHL

- 1990s Denmark (but his firm has now gone global)
- Life between Buildings: also an advocate for complexity
- A trained architect: Highly technical.
- Placemaking can be beautiful but it must be done equitably.

(Gehl, 2002-2011)

Life

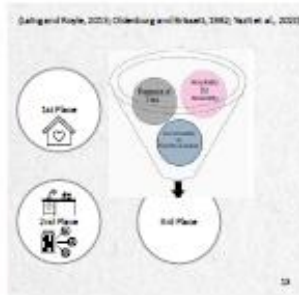
Space

Buildings

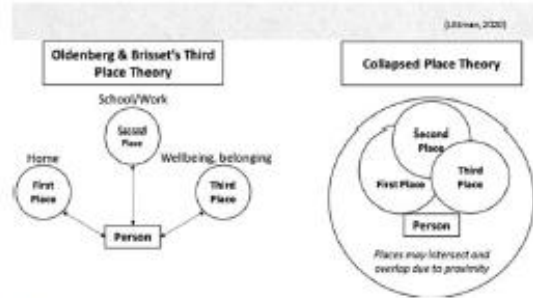
12

RAY OLDENBURG

- 1990s Minnesota, 2000s Florida
- "Urban sociologist"
- 1st, 2nd, 3rd Place designations
- Person-dependent/ clique-forming (links to place identity)
- Highly local conceptualization of place!



13



14



15



16

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17



18

E. TPOT (Third-Place Observational Tool)

Third place characteristics		
	<i>indicators</i>	<i>scoring criteria</i>
Physical Attributes	1. Presence of various areas in a setting - Areas	3=several 2=few 1=one or two 0= None
	2. Existence of larger tables/furniture that support multiple users	0= none 1 = few 2 = several in some parts of space 3 = several in many parts
	3. Places to sit without paying for goods and services	0= none 1 = few 2 = several in some parts of space 3 = several in many parts
	4. Design elements discouraging use of space	3 = none 2 = one or two 1 = few 0 = several
Activity	1. Provision of different products and services in different price ranges	3 = several 2 = few 1 = one or two 0 = none
		Total score part:
Physical Attributes	1. Presence of people of diverse ages	3 = several 2= few 1 = one or two 0 = none
	2. Presence of diverse genders	0 = very limited 1 = low 2 = medium 3 = high
	3. Presence of diverse socio-economical classes	0 = very limited 1 = low 2 = medium 3 = high
	4. Presence of people of diverse physical abilities	0 = very limited 1 = low 2 = medium 3 = high
Activity	1. Presence of different types of activities for socializing	0 = very limited 1 = low 2 = medium 3 = high
		Total score part:
Physical Attributes	1. Control of entrance to public space: presence of lockable doors, fences, etc	3 = none 2 = low 1 = medium 0 = high
	2. Perceived openness and accessibility	0 = not at all 1 = some parts/ some time 2 = mostly 3 = completely
	3. Visual and physical connection and openness to adjacent street/s or spaces	0 =almost none or very poor 1 = somewhat tentative

		2 = moderately well connected 3 = very well
	4. Existence of Public transportation near the space	0=none 1= far away 2= close but few 3= high
	5. Presence of other activities (shops, restaurants, market, residents etc.) near the space	0=none 1= far away 2= close but few 3= high
Activity	1. Ability to participate in activities and events in space	3= very much 2= moderately 1 = somewhat 0 = none
	2. Presence of sign tables to permit particular activities or behaviour	3= none 2= somewhat 1 = moderately 0 = very much
		Total score part:
Physical Attributes	1. Presence of comfortable furniture (Chairs, couches, tables etc.)	0=none 1= few 2= enough 3= several
	2. Design elements discouraging use of space	3= none 2= one or two 1= few 0= several
	3. Availability of lightning (windows for sunlight, artificial light etc)	0= none 1= one or two 2= few 3= several
Activity	1. Range of activities and behaviours	0 = very limited 1 = low 2 = medium 3 = high
	2. Space flexibility to suit user needs	0 = none 1 = somewhat flexible 2 = moderately flexible 3 = very flexible
	3. Suitability of space layout and design to activities and behaviour	0= not suitable 1= somewhat suitable 2= moderately suitable 3= very suitable
23 x 3 = max 69		