

# **The Modern Decline in the Third Place and the Loneliness Epidemic**

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## Introduction

The Third Place Theory was introduced in 1989 in Ray Oldenburg's book, *The Great Good Place*. The Third Place is as such: it is a location where people gather and socialize outside of the home and workplace, it is a neutral ground free from obligation and societal status, it is readily accessible, there are a number of regulars, and therefore allows for a sense of belonging (Oldenburg, 1989). With the introduction of the Third Place, Oldenburg also posited that third places were on the decline due to zoning policies that disallow business and private properties to reside within the same area.

Thirty five years have passed since the concept of Third Place Theory has been introduced. In that time the concept has been disseminated throughout universities, urban planning realms, and businesses looking to market themselves around third places. Yet despite the growing popularity and knowledge of the term in both the public and private sectors, third places seem to continually be declining. Spaces popular in the last few decades such as malls are seeing mass shutdowns across the United States and third places become more difficult to access (Finlay et. al., 2019).

Urban sprawl and its close companion, auto-centric planning, have both seen rapid expansion within the United States with exponential growth in the last few decades. The lack of pedestrian infrastructure is a frequently-heard complaint amongst Americans who find themselves unable to walk a mile to a grocery store without having to cross a busy intersection, or otherwise find themselves unable to use forms of transportation safely and reliably outside of private automobiles.

Third places, by part of their definition, are partially determined by their accessibility. With the absence of accessibility, the third place ostensibly loses its title and, as a result, strong presence within the community.

Serious loneliness in America has also seen steady increase over the past years, with an unsurprising uptick following the COVID-19 epidemic. Serious loneliness is felt by 39% of the general American population and results in a slew of mental and physical health issues alongside a lack of a social safety net. (Weissbourd et. al., 2021). This results in devastating effects on welfare, seeing a drastic increase in premature death, risk of heart disease, and risk of stroke. The factors contributing to the loneliness epidemic are multitudinous, but one might posit that decreased ability to meet others within the local community may have significant effect. The third place is incredibly important to forming strong social relationships with a variety of people in order to form both healthy relationships and are integral to helping individuals through difficult financial, emotional, and other hardships.

This paper intends to delve into the decline in third places and determine if there is an acceleration in decline of third spaces due to auto-centric urban planning and increased zoning policies.

## **Background**

Auto-centric planning is defined as “urban planning that privileges the private automobile as a primary transportation mode, often to the exclusion of people who walk, bike or use public transit” (planopedia, n.d.). From the advent of the motorized vehicle onward in America, the country’s policies and urban planning focus has shifted from pedestrian needs to automobile needs. One of the first true symbols of car-centrism was the creation of the law against jaywalking in 1925, signifying the first steps of a deep change in American culture. The growing

dangers to pedestrians alone signify the new landscape, reaching a 40 year high in 2023 with a 77% increase from 2010 to 2021 (Newgeography, n.d.).

Urban sprawl, a close companion of auto-centric planning, is defined as “the rapid expansion of the geographic extent of cities and towns, often characterized by low-density residential housing, single-use zoning, and increased reliance on the private automobile for transportation” (Rafferty, 2024). From 2001 to 2019, there has been 14,000 square miles of new development off of existing urban centers (Levitt, 2021). Moreover, in 1920 the United States saw itself reach the 50% urbanization threshold, and by 2000 the number had increased to 81% urban area (Newgeography, n.d.). As a result of the growth of urban sprawl, auto-centric urban planning has cemented itself as a ubiquitous part of the American experience.

The rapid growth of urban sprawl and car-centric areas in the United States has resulted in pervading issues throughout the sustainability, economic, and social sectors. This paper intends to specifically focus on such urban planning’s effects on social welfare, with specific interest in third places and the aid they provide. There is an increasing sense of extreme loneliness in America experienced by 36% of the general population, a number which skyrockets to 61% of people ages 18-25 and 51% of mothers with young children (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). Such numbers indicate a severe absence of social connection and community. Extreme loneliness amongst younger Americans experience both episodic and chronic periods. However, extreme loneliness to the point of social isolation in 24% of community-dwelling Americans over the age of 50 are more likely to be chronic and result in physical effects alongside mental (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). The difference in physical effect is so stark that a 300,000 person case study indicated that individuals with strong social connections saw a 50% greater chance of survival, noting that

loneliness increased the risk for all causes of mortality by 22% (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020, p. 43).

Third Place Theory, pioneered by Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place*, defines the Third Place as “a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg, 1989). They are considered a foundational building block for communities, used by people from varying backgrounds. *The Impact of Third Places on Community Life* indicates that the existence of third places improves quality of life by offering a sense of community beyond that of the home and workplace (Jeffres et. al., 2009). While the shape of the third place may change depending on the location, be it rural, suburban, or city, there is an inherent social quality to third places that surveys have indicated improved the quality of life of the residents. Formation of community, in turn, helps alleviate the cost of living, provides support groups for those with children, and improves mental health. Oldenburg observed that such places are most effective when local and within walking distance.

Following WWII, third places have been on the decline in America (Oldenburg, 1989). There are a variety of reasons for this decline, including but not limited to modern zoning codes which prohibit businesses from establishing locations nearby residences.

The inability to easily reach locations through modes of alternate transportation has been sorely felt by many Americans. The barriers presented in transportation have contributed to what some theorize is a “loneliness epidemic,” where an increasing number of Americans feel isolated from their communities and as if they do not have a social network. A core part of any community is a local gathering place and, as Oldenburg posited, such places have been in decline (Oldenburg, 1989).

The decline in third places has resulted in an overall decline in the social welfare of Americans, felt more severely in the often-invisible older demographic. To determine the extent of the disappearance in third places, this paper intends to determine if the disappearance has accelerated since the term was coined due to auto-centric urban planning practices.

### **Methodology**

This paper delves into the realm of urban planning from the perspective of the third place, documenting its many forms and its decline in locations. As a result, this paper will explore the forms of public and private third places which may exist within a given community, ranging from public parks to hobby stores to religious establishments. Third places are foremostly defined by their accessibility, and within auto-centric urban planning pedestrian ease of accessibility is given little consideration. Research will focus heavily on ease of accessibility to locations which might be received as third places and how that impacts the construction of such places alongside how well it might be viewed as a third place.

Certain forms of third places, such as the American cultural focal point of the mall, have seen a well-documented decline within the last decade (Terschan, 2024). With this starting point, the paper will review the decline of the most famous American third places and note when the acceleration began alongside potential causes.

Much of this paper will focus upon a comparative historical and literature review of third places and the environment surrounding them from 1990-2020. In using a historical review, one may best see in stark numbers how accessibility and third places have disappeared with accelerating speed.

Historic maps of urban planning and continued urban sprawl alongside miles of urban streets will also be reviewed with similar divisions in time span, noting the potential acceleration

of urban sprawl and the perceived change in ease of pedestrian transportation, alongside the effectiveness of the movement of urban planners towards allowing for accessible transport such as sidewalks or public transportation. Construction of new locations which qualify as third places will also be noted. This will relate to case studies done within suburbs, where residents of the foremost example of urban sprawl may relay a sense or lack thereof of third places and community.

Legal reviews of municipal, district, state, and federal zoning policies and other such legislation that impact urban planning will be reviewed and their impact on the modern urban planning industry noted to determine if they have resulted in significant change in accessibility and thus existence of third places, both private and public.

As all these components are pieced together, a cumulative review of the environment which influences urban planning and accessibility within urban planning will be reviewed, alongside resultant urban planning effects on accessibility and thus third locations.

### **Policy Review and Analysis: 1990-2020**

The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) is a standard developed to classify business establishments developed in 1997, replacing the prior entity Standard Industrial Classification (SIC). Codes most relevant to the discussion of third places are categorized and further subcategorized into sites of arts, entertainment, and recreation (Sector 71); civic and social organizations (Subsector 8134); commercial banking (Subsector 522110); food and beverage stores (Subsector 445); eateries (Subsector 722); personal and laundry services (Subsector 812); religious organizations (Subsector 8131); and sporting goods, hobby, musical instrument, and book stores (subsector 451) (Finlay et. al., 2019). Finlay's analysis of the existence of third places across 2008-2015 indicated that an overall decline had occurred in

sector 71 and subsectors 445, 812, 8131, and 451, ranging from an 18%-27% decline. To add to this decline, mall vacancy has doubled since 2017 from 3.7% to 6.9% as of 2021, in part due to both the shift toward e-commerce and the effects of the recent pandemic (Terschan, 2024).

Wildland-urban interface (WUI) is defined as the point where unoccupied land blends with human-constructed environments. According to the Northern Research Station, the United States has seen an overall 47% increase (14 million) in homes bordering the WUI in the time between 1990 and 2020. This and other similar expansions have resulted in the addition of 179,000 square kilometers of human-constructed environment bordering wilderness, resulting in a total of 760 square kilometers of WUI environment (U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, 2023). This expansion of the suburban landscape is further supported by Li, who indicates through review of the USA national dataset of annual urban extent from 1985-2015 that the total urban landscape has expanded by 20% or roughly 31,000 square kilometers, with notable accelerated growth in Midwestern US in comparison to plateauing growth in coastal areas (Li et. al., 2020, p. 357-371). From 2000-2020, there has been a 386,338 mile increase in urban public road and street mileage (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2024).

Despite the overall increase in human-constructed and urban environments, walkability is not a dominating aspect of American urban environments. The Walk Score is a company and walkability index which determines the walkability of a city on a scale of 1-100 through analysis of walking routes to amenities, where “amenities within a 5 minute walk (0.25 miles) are given maximum points. A decay function is used to give points to more distant amenities, with no points given after a 30 minute walk” (Walk Score). Scores ranging from 60-100 are reasonably walkable to very walkable areas. Areas with a score ranging from 50-59 are considered areas where few errands can be done on foot. Areas with scores ranging from 0-49 are classified as car



dependent areas. Data from the largest cities in each state was recorded, resulting in a total scoring of 2173 cities. Of the cities recorded, 232 (10.67%) of cities had a recorded score equal to or greater than 60, with the majority of these cities being centered in California, New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts (Appendix A). The weighted average of total walkability scores in the USA was 36.02. Of the highest walkability scores by state, the national maximum was a walk score of 91 in California and the national low was a walk score of 32 in Alaska. However, a common criticism of the Walk Score is that it does not assess the existence of sidewalks, traffic, and types of amenities, indicating that the true “Walk Score” of the cities recorded may indeed be lower than indicated. As of a 2012 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration survey, respondents from across the US indicated that only 15% of the population had sidewalks on some streets, 32% indicated there were no sidewalks within their neighborhood, and 39% stated they lived within a quarter mile of a bike lane (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2012).

There is a paucity of national data collected on total bike lanes and sidewalks in the USA. Concerted efforts have been made and recorded by individual counties to increase pedestrian access. For instance, Arlington, Virginia, has moved to increase the number of residential streets with sidewalks from 73% in 1997 to 90% as of 2015. However, the increase in pedestrian death since 1990 indicates this is not a nation-wide pattern. The Governor’s Highway Safety Association indicates that as of 2021, U.S. Pedestrian fatalities are at an forty-year high with 7,485 people having been killed (Government Highway Safety Association, 2022). It was noted that the percent of pedestrian fatalities in areas without sidewalks made up an average of 62% of fatalities, with the number of fatalities rising to 67% in 2021. Comparatively, 6,482 pedestrians were struck and killed in 1990. There are a number of factors involved with the increase of

pedestrian death, including but not limited to increased vehicular size. However, this may also be indicative of a lack of pedestrian infrastructure in place. Moreover, the 2010 Virginia Transportation Research Council indicated that while many roads have been built without sidewalks, there was a lack of existing policies or programs to construct and retrofit existing roads without sidewalks across most state's Departments of Transportation (Kastenhofer, 2010). Similarly noted in the 2010 report, "Although there is a large body of research on pedestrian issues, no literature specifically relating to the lack of sidewalks along existing roads was identified" (Kastenhofer, 2010). This is indicative of at minimum a lack of significant national change in sidewalk construction policy on existing roads from 1990-2010.

Since 1990, mixed-use development has become increasingly more desirable with initiatives in both large cities and towns. This can be seen stretching from New York City planning's Midtown South Mixed-Use plan in Manhattan to the New York town of Dewitt, who adopted a Mixed-Used Village Overlay Zoning Update as of 2017, both planning to update historic zoning laws to allow residential and commercial areas to intertwine. A series of case studies of 25 of the largest cities in the USA indicated that mixed-use policies have begun to be integrated into zoning practices, possibly moving toward a predominantly residential area with some leeway for business conducive to everyday lifestyles and moving away from monofunctional areas (Hirt, 2013, p. 204-230). These policies may go by different names, such as New York's "special purpose districts" or Dallas' "Walkable Urban Residential Mixed Use," but such zoning is increasingly being considered under zoning code and legislation (Hirt, 2013, p. 204-230).

## **Discussion/Results**

Literature indicates that there has been an overall decline in businesses which are traditionally considered locations for third places, with Finlay indicating the greatest 27.29% decline in sub sector 451, summarized as hobby stores, over the span from 2008-2015. Other sectors saw some increase— with the most uplifting being the 33.23% increase in civic and social organizations— but there has nonetheless been a noticeable decline in brick and mortar stores over the past few decades (Finlay et. al., 2016). This is further noted by the decline of malls across the US in recent years, a classic example of the traditional American third-place and leisure area for teenagers and adults alike. As e-commerce grows, there will likely continue to be a shift from physical stores to online, narrowing the possible pool of third places.

The decline of stores alone does not necessarily indicate the overall decline of third places— as long as existing establishments maintain their accessibility or become more accessible, the concept of third places as part of the community remains. Moderate mixed-use zoning has become more popular in recent years as a way to maintain the economic health and vibrancy of an area. As a result, cities are more open to the concept and some have begun construction (Hirt, 2013, p. 204-230). However, little information exists on the increase in pedestrian and biking pathways, with few initiatives taken state-wide or nationally by DOT organizations. As noted by Kastenhofer, few guidelines were in place for retrofitting American roads with sidewalks to increase the walkability of a neighborhood until the guidelines he wrote in 2010 (Kastenhofer, 2010). Urban expansion continues, as seen in the continued miles of additional roads and the increase in WUI, and yet less than a quarter of respondents to the NHTS survey indicated living in an area with regular sidewalks. Moreover the majority of the US has unwalkable cities, with a mere 24 out of the 50 states in America having even one walkable city. Independent or county-wide initiatives, as seen in Arlington, Virginia, exist, but even the

Arlington example is restricted to creating more walkable residential areas rather than overall cities.

The increase in pedestrian deaths, with the majority occurring in areas without pedestrian pathways, indicates a dire need for national interest in creating further pedestrian pathways, both in maintaining the health of easily accessible communal areas and the pedestrians who wish to convene in these areas or even walk around the areas in which they live. It becomes obvious when viewing the data that the United States has not made significant progress in the movement toward walkable cities. While walkability is not a defining law of third places, it allows an area defined as a third place to fully come into being.

### **Conclusion**

When reviewing statistics such as these, the trending loss of third places does not appear to have significantly changed in the thirty years since *The Great Good Place* was first published. In an environment where able-bodied young people cannot reliably or safely walk, it is even more difficult for those in less mobile conditions to gather. As the US urban areas expand without significant expansion of walkability, every individual in the community is increasingly isolated, with those less able the most at risk for experiencing loneliness (Gómez-Zúñiga, Pousada, & Armayones, 2023).

The matter of walkable cities and the continued existence and growth of social spaces is an object of public health. While there have not been significant shifts in national walkability and accessibility, however, there is hope for movement toward more accessible third places in the future. As noted, cities have begun considering third places with greater interest. Urban planners have begun recognizing the importance of constructing community framework into the bones of the city (Goosen, Cilliers, 2020). For both walkability and safety reasons, independent initiatives

have begun to put more sidewalks in place in each state, and multiple DOT organizations have had long standing policies of implementing bike paths within newly constructed roads (Kastenhofer, 2010). Widespread knowledge of the term “third place” alone is a promising sign that the public is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of physically accessible congregation places and thus may have the means to let such needs be known to policy makers and public officials. While America has not made significant progress toward greater ease of access to third places yet, through the efforts of many people who recognize the importance of community, the urban areas of tomorrow may someday be easy to traverse for all.

## Appendix A.

<b>States</b>	<b>Total Cities</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Number of Cities that are Walkable</b>
<b>Alabama</b>	35	22	42	
<b>Alaska</b>	4	22	32	
<b>Arizona</b>	46	23	54	
<b>Arkansas</b>	25	25	36	
<b>California</b>	46	46	91	82
<b>Colorado</b>	41	34	61	2
<b>Connecticut</b>	32	40	68	3
<b>Delaware</b>	5	41	74	1
<b>Florida</b>	202	30	77	9
<b>Georgia</b>	57	26	60	1
<b>Hawaii</b>	14	34	66	1
<b>Idaho</b>	13	33	48	
<b>Illinois</b>	152	40	78	15
<b>Indiana</b>	51	34	56	
<b>Iowa</b>	24	37	45	
<b>Kansas</b>	24	34	45	

<b>Kentucky</b>	23	31	50	
<b>Louisiana</b>	28	37	65	1
<b>Maine</b>	9	39	62	1
<b>Maryland</b>	78	36	72	5
<b>Massachusetts</b>	72	50	90	23
<b>Michigan</b>	65	41	82	6
<b>Minnesota</b>	63	30	55	
<b>Mississippi</b>	24	23	34	
<b>Missouri</b>	48	30	66	1
<b>Montana</b>	7	43	49	
<b>Nebraska</b>	11	41	48	
<b>Nevada</b>	17	33	54	
<b>New Hampshire</b>	8	38	51	
<b>New Jersey</b>	61	97	97	33
<b>New Mexico</b>	12	31	43	
<b>New York</b>	111	48	88	33
<b>North Carolina</b>	52	26	49	

<b>North</b>				
<b>Dakota</b>	7	36	47	
<b>Ohio</b>	114	34	70	2
<b>Oklahoma</b>	30	29	47	
<b>Oregon</b>	37	41	67	1
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	37	41	67	1
<b>Rhode Island</b>	9	57	81	3
<b>South</b>				
<b>Carolina</b>	28	26	43	
<b>South Dakota</b>	5	36	39	
<b>Tennessee</b>	33	22	35	
<b>Texas</b>	158	31	61	1
<b>Utah</b>	44	32	59	
<b>Vermont</b>	2	44	59	
<b>Virginia</b>	67	35	71	3
<b>Washington</b>	79	33	74	1
<b>West</b>				
<b>Virginia</b>	10	41	59	
<b>Wisconsin</b>	47	37	62	3
<b>Wyoming</b>	6	31	36	



SUM	2173			232
MEDIAN		34	59	
AVERAGE		36.02		

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