

**How Great and How Good?:**

**Third Places, Neighbor Interaction, and Cohesion in the Neighborhood Context**

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**Abstract.** Though Ray Oldenburg’s (1989) notion of “third places”, or places conducive to sociality outside of the realms of home and work, has received both scholarly and popular attention over the past several decades, many of the author’s central claims remain empirically untested. The present study considers the association between neighborhood third places, cohesion and neighbor interaction. Drawing on various literatures regarding interaction in public space and neighborhood use-value, we consider how the role of third places might vary according to neighborhood socioeconomic context. Using data from Wave I of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Study (LAFANS) and data on third places from the point-based business data of ReferenceUSA, we test the effect of third places on cohesion and neighbor interaction across neighborhood poverty strata. We find support for the hypothesis that third places are associated with greater cohesion and neighbor interaction, and that neighbor interaction mediates the relationship between third places and cohesion in poor neighborhoods.

## **How Great and How Good?:**

### **Third Places, Neighbor interaction, and Cohesion in the Neighborhood Context**

Since Oldenburg (1989) first articulated the notion of third places, or places conducive to social interaction and community outside of home and work, the idea has captured the imagination of scholars and the public more broadly. Third places are thought to be at the very heart of public life, as they foster sociability and provide the normative context for interaction between strangers (Lofland 1998). Oldenburg (1989) makes substantial claims about the role of third places in the public domain, arguing that they are crucial to the well-being of individuals and communities, and essential to civic engagement, informal social control, grassroots democracy, and the development of cohesion and a sense of community. Elsewhere third places are argued to unify neighborhoods through increased interaction, serve as “ports of entry” which help socialize newcomers, sort individuals according to particular interests and culture, bring adults and children together, and support “public characters” who serve as “eyes on the street” (Oldenburg 1997).

Scholars often reference the supposed role of third places in order to make sense of their findings. For example, criminologists interested in the crime and place nexus have argued that places like cafes and recreation centers have a crime-reducing effect due, in part, to their role as third places (Peterson, Krivo and Harris 2000; Papachristos et al. 2011; Wo 2016), though data limitations have precluded these scholars from testing the mechanisms by which such places have a suppressant effect on crime. Despite the popularity of the concept, empirical assessments of the role of third places in communities are quite limited. While Oldenburg’s perspective is fundamentally sociological, his work relies on personal experience and arguments drawn from anecdotal observation. The bulk of the empirical work that does exist has been done by urban

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planning scholars in large scale surveys where place is decontextualized (e.g. Jeffres 2009), or in qualitative work that cannot generalize the findings (e.g. Hickman 2013). A seemingly greater volume of studies has taken the claims surrounding third places as a given, and has turned to examine the role of *virtual* third places (e.g. Ducheneaut, Moore and Nickel 2004; Ducheneaut Moore and Nickel 2007; Heeger 2006; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Wadley, Gibbs, Hew and Graham 2006).

These literatures suggest that although Oldenburg himself did not offer a systematic empirical assessment of his central claims, scholars across social science fields have often taken them as given. Further, the empirical work that does exist poses more granular questions centered on the built environment and as such, the most basic propositions regarding the social function of third places remain unexamined. Drawing on previous sociological work on public interaction (e.g. Lofland 1998; Goffman 1963; 1971; Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1980; 1988), we conceptualize third places as physical locales and normative contexts conducive to (or explicitly designed for) social interaction and sociality. Put differently, the presence of third places provides the sociospatial opportunity structure for neighbor interaction and the development of cohesion over time.

Drawing on Oldenburg's (1989) original work, as well as perspectives on cohesion and neighbor interaction from environmental psychology and sociology, and using data from Wave I of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Study and point-based business data from Reference USA, the present study offers an empirical assessment of the role of third places in the social ecology of neighbor interaction and cohesion. In addition to assessing this central question of the relationship between third places, neighbor interaction and cohesion, we formulate

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hypotheses regarding the distinct effect of third places according to neighborhood socioeconomic status.

Moving beyond the use of individual attributes and neighborhood composition as explanations for levels of interaction and cohesion, the present study also contributes to the burgeoning literature on the significance of neighborhood places for residents and communities, situated in the broader ecological perspective (Browning et al 2017a; Browning et al 2017b; Soller et al 2018; Corocan et al 2017; Silver and Clark 2016). Such a perspective also informs larger debates on the role of place and locality in modern society in the context of globalization. Finally, our findings are also relevant to urban planning perspectives such as New Urbanism and Traditional Neighborhood Design which are in part premised on the notion that walkable streets and mixed-used development are conducive to interaction and sense of community (e.g. Leccese and McCormick 2000), drawing on the writing on Jane Jacobs (1961) who argued that such development allowed for the emergence of a sidewalk life, public safety, and proper socialization. We first review the basic tenets of the third places perspective and the empirical evidence surrounding it before presenting our analyses and discussing the wider implications of our findings.

## BACKGROUND

Oldenburg (1989) argues that third places are those that “...host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.” Though Oldenburg (1989) has clear ideas of what he considers third places, with regular mentions of taverns/pubs, cafes, coffee shops, and teahouses, it is more useful to consider the underlying attributes which qualify them as third places. Recognizing that venues like cafes are not randomly or evenly distributed across the urban landscape, it is necessary to consider first

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how third places might possess these attributes yet vary in form according to the neighborhood context.

Drawing on Oldenburg's (1989) discussion, a set of criteria can aid in determining what counts as a third place across neighborhood contexts which vary according to their position in the stratification of place. To summarize these criteria, we propose that the central qualities of third places are: their activities tend to be unstructured and unscheduled, patrons do not act as formal hosts, they do not require a formal membership or significant monetary spending to occupy the space, they are designed to facilitate conversation above all else, and they are temporally and spatially accessible. Further, third places are argued to be social levelers, in the sense that the social distance which is so determinant of formal associations has less bearing on the casual association of individuals in such spaces. This argument is reflected in Goffman's (1971:63) notion of "ritual deference" or the interactional rituals one performs "...attesting to civility and good will on the performer's part and to the recipient's possession of a small patrimony of sacredness," in effect reducing the social distance between socially unequal actors. In these ways, third places offer themselves not only as venues for consumption but as stages for informal social interaction.

Other perspectives bolster Oldenburg's criteria. Drawing on the foundational work of Goffman (1971) and Whyte (1980; 1988), Lofland (1998) puts forth three conditions for generating socialibility. The first is *open persons*, or the presence of individuals more available for a stranger-to-stranger encounter than others due to their contextual status. Second, Goffman's (1971) *open regions* are places where all inhabitants are mutually accessible to one another. Third, *triangulation*, which Whyte (1980; 1988) defines as the "process by which some external stimulus provides a linkages between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other as

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though they were not.” So whereas stranger-to-stranger interaction is less likely to happen in certain quasi-public or commercial spaces such as retail boutiques, grocery stores, and so on, third places serve as open regions and attract open persons, and further serves as a context which not only allows for social interaction but provides a normative space where it is expected and welcomed.

We recognize that the level of interaction within third places likely varies across a continuum. At one pole, it may at the very least provide a space by which individuals come to recognize one another by sight. Further along the continuum is the opportunity for a “transitory sociability” as Wiseman (1979) observed in second-hand clothing stores. Such interactions may over time lead to the development of what Lofland (1998), drawing on the work of Gregory Stone, refers to as “quasi-primary relationships”, or those that are “created by relatively brief encounters (a few minutes to several hours) between strangers or between those who are categorically known to one another.” Simply frequenting the same third place may serve as an impetus for interaction or increase perceived cohesion as perceived commonalities between individuals (if only by sight/observation) contribute to group cohesion particularly when these commonalities are central to one’s identity (Turner and Oakes 1986). Subsequent interaction may confirm these perceived commonalities and contribute to feelings of “groupness” (e.g. McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001; Wohl 2015). At the very least, repeated social interactions increase public familiarity and are the mechanism by which strangers come to know each other at least by sight (Blokland 2003; Lofland 1973).

The hypothesized connection between third places and cohesion can also be extracted from Logan and Molotch’s discussion of use-value and sentiment (1987). The authors argue that “...the daily round that makes physical survival possible takes on emotional meanings through

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that very capacity to fulfill life's crucial goals. The material and psychic rewards thus combine to create a feeling of 'community'" (Logan and Molotch 1987:20). The notion of use-value, or the material and psychological uses of a place afforded to individuals through their residence in particular neighborhoods, is extended from the work of Karl Marx and David Harvey (1973, 1982). But in addition to the use-values associated with residence in a neighborhood, neighborhoods across the city possess use-values for extraneighborhood residents who benefit from their amenities. Such resources tied to place not only provide sustenance, but serve as a source of identity and differentiation from other neighborhoods (Logan and Molotch 1987:108). Thus, beyond their practical utility as normative contexts for social interaction, third places may serve a symbolic function which bears on resident assessments of cohesion.

The potential symbolic value of third places and its effect on assessments of cohesion finds conceptual support in other work where the symbolic meaning of neighborhoods, often communicated and constituted through built features, is underscored (Duncan 2004; Logan and Molotch 1987; Hunter 1974; McKenzie 1921; Rivlin 1982). The three components of place identified in Relph's (1976) work on place and placelessness include physical setting, activities and meanings. While Oldenburg (1989) certainly underscores the importance of the physical setting and activities of third places, less attention is given to their social meaning and what their presence in a community might symbolize. In line with this thought, Firey (1945) contends that elements of the environment convey both symbolic and material meaning which bears on locational processes such as retaining and attracting residents, and resistance to change. Duncan (2004:58) argues that individuals from similar social milieus and geographic areas develop common aesthetic preferences, and their shared tastes serve both to increase a sense of cohesion, group belonging, and place identity while also serving as a mark of distinction and exclusion.



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Thus, there are two potential pathways by which third places might contribute to greater levels of neighborhood cohesion. First, they provide the normative context for interaction between strangers and offer a means by which residents can assess the trustworthiness of other residents. Second, they contribute to neighborhood sentiment not only through their role in providing material and social resources, but as a symbol of place and of sociality in place.

### *Empirical Evidence on Third Places*

Though little research has explicitly examined the role of third places in the development of neighborhood cohesion, several studies speak to the hypothesized connection between the presence of third places and cohesion, as mediated by neighbor interaction. A study by Francis and colleagues (2012) finds that public open spaces, schools, shops, and community centers are the most common areas for social interaction within neighborhoods sampled. Van den Berg et al (2015) find that supermarkets, schools, and shops within 1km of residential areas were related to a higher likelihood of interaction between local ties. In a study of third places through 180 in-depth interviews in six disadvantaged neighborhoods in Great Britain, Hickman (2013) finds that shops, parks, and community centers are important third places in these contexts, especially among the retired, unemployed, those with poor health or those with children at home. This finding suggests that both neighborhood socioeconomic status and the population structure are important predictors of the sorts of places which assume the role of third places.

A sizeable body of research in the planning literature finds that mixed land-use, commercial diversity, walkability, street connectivity, and commercial destinations which fit the criteria of Traditional Neighborhood Design are related to higher levels of cohesion and related constructs such as sense of community (Leyden 2003; Bjornstrom and Ralston 2014; Lund 2003; French et al 2014; Wood et al 2010). Though they have led to valuable insights regarding the

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influence of general patterns of design, zoning, and land use, the reliance on indices of commercial diversity or land use does little to explicate the social processes which underlie these connections, or to expose the types of places and spaces which explain the effect. Still, this research brings to light several important considerations which bear on our approach here.

For example, Bjornstrom and Ralson (2014) find that the effect of commercial diversity differs by both neighborhood SES and individual perceptions of neighborhood danger. In disadvantaged neighborhoods, commercial diversity increases levels of perceived cohesion among those who view their neighborhood as safe, and lower cohesion among those who perceive the neighborhood as dangerous, with the inverse found in affluent neighborhoods. This finding offers support for a central claim of the present study, the assertion that the form and function of third places will vary across neighborhood contexts. Additionally, Wood et al (2010) find that commercial destinations are associated with a *lower* sense of community unless their built characteristics conform to traditional neighborhood design principles. This study illustrates the utility of distinguishing between different types of commercial destinations when considering which may function as third places. Though it seems intuitive that the presence of a big-box home improvement store or a strip mall with parking to draw consumers from a broader catchment area should have little relation to the development of cohesion, these sorts of outlets are captured in common indices of commercial or retail diversity and mixed land-use.

The limited research on neighborhood places and cohesion seem to suggest that neighborhoods with a greater concentration of third places which allow for informal interaction are associated with increased cohesion. They also suggest that the form and function of these places differ across neighborhood contexts, specifically by neighborhood socioeconomic status. Extant research has not considered how third places might vary by neighborhood SES as a

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function of the use-value of the neighborhood and the flow of individuals from within and without the immediate neighborhood.

### *Third Places and the Sociospatial Context of Neighborhoods*

Neighborhoods satisfy a number of social and material needs and provide residents with a range of use-values (Logan and Molotch 1987). Attending to the sociospatial context of urban neighborhoods, we argue that the third places of more affluent neighborhoods with greater use-value serve as urban amenities which likely attract patrons from the broader city beyond the immediate neighborhood. This has implications for the effect of third places in such contexts. If third places draw in a number of people from outside the immediate neighborhood context, this should actually increase anonymity in public space, which may have negative effects on resident assessments of cohesion. Thus, while third places in more affluent neighborhoods may serve as a “sorting area” which brings together individuals of particular interests or cultures (e.g. amateur musicians, poets, artists etc.) in clusters of amenities which Silver and Clark (2016) term “scenes”, they are unlikely to serve only local neighborhood residents and as such, may be inconsequential or damaging to levels of neighborhood cohesion.

In contrast, third places in lower-income neighborhoods with lower use-value (to those outside the neighborhood) in this regard are likely frequented more by residents of the local neighborhood rather than drawing a patronage from across the city. Thus, through repeated interactions, or mere visual recognition, third places may facilitate cohesion in lower-income neighborhoods without the problem of increased anonymity. These propositions are founded in part by the observations and assertions of earlier researchers. As Fried and Gleicher (1961:312) argue in their work on residential satisfaction, for middle-class residents, “Distances are very readily transgressed; friends are dispersed in many directions; preferred places are frequently

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quite idiosyncratic...This orientation to the use of space is the very antithesis of that localism so widely found in the working class.” Thus, the places found in the immediate neighborhood context may be more salient for the poor and working class, for whom the wider city is not as readily accessible as it is for their middle-class counterparts.

### SUMMARY & HYPOTHESES

We argue that repeated social interactions in informal settings among neighborhood residents should increase social cohesion, and serve as a mechanism by which strangers come to personally know each other, at least by sight. In lower-income neighborhoods which lack the urban amenities of more affluent neighborhoods, it is likely that patrons of local third places are residents of the immediate and contiguous neighborhoods. Thus, third places facilitate social interaction among these residents which then informs assessments of cohesion. In more affluent areas with greater use-value to extraneighborhood residents, particularly in regards to consumption, third places and other social spaces may attract outsiders from across the city and actually increase anonymity. These expectations are formalized in a set of distinct hypotheses below:

*Hypothesis 1:* Third places will be associated with greater perceived cohesion.

*Hypothesis 2:* Third places will be associated with higher interaction between neighbors.

*Hypothesis 3:* The effect of third places on cohesion will be mediated, in part, by increased neighbor interaction.

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*Hypothesis 4:* The effect of third places will vary by neighborhood economic context, with the strongest effect in poorer neighborhoods.

## DATA AND METHODS

We use data from Wave I of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhoods Survey (2001-2002), a stratified random sample of individuals nested within 65 tracts in Los Angeles County, California (Sastry, Ghosh-Dastidar, Adams and Pebley 2006). This study is approved under UCI IRB HS#2008-6280. Tracts were randomly sampled from three poverty strata: very poor (top 10% of poverty distribution), poor (60<sup>th</sup>-89<sup>th</sup> percentiles) and non-poor (bottom 60%), and adults were then randomly sampled from each household. We define “neighborhood” as the respondents’ egohood, or a half-mile buffer around the respondent’s census block using street network distance (see Hipp and Boessen 2014). This operationalization better captures how respondents think of and use their neighborhoods, given that activity spaces are typically more spatially patterned rather than based on the somewhat arbitrary boundaries of officially defined units such as census tracts, and therefore are particularly relevant to the present research question. A half-mile buffer corresponds to about a 15-minute walk (Duany, Speck and Lydon 2004). Further, it reflects a key aspect of third places regularly noted throughout Oldenburg’s work – that they are within walking distance to the people they serve. We link the LAFANS respondent data to point-based business establishment data from Reference USA, classified using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). We control for neighborhood structural characteristics using data from the 2000 U.S. Census. Missing data is dealt with using multiple imputation, producing a total sample size of 2,589.

## MEASURES

*Dependent variable.* Our outcome variable of *cohesion* is a summated scale of the following five items, where possible responses range from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” on a Likert scale: “This is a close-knit neighborhood”; “People around here are willing to help their neighbors”; “People in this neighborhood generally don’t get along with each other” (reverse-coded); “People in this neighborhood do not share the same values” (reverse-coded); and “People in this neighborhood can be trusted” (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997; Rhineberger-Dunn and Carlson 2009). Our second outcome of interest, *neighbor interaction*, is measured with the question, “In the past 30 days...how many of your neighbors have you talked with for 10 minutes or more?” with responses ranging from “none” to “6 or more.”

*Independent variables.* We construct a measure of *third places* by aggregating the point-based establishment data from Reference USA (2000) to the half-mile ego-hood of each respondent. In defining which businesses qualify as third places, we refer to the criteria put forth by Oldenburg (1989), further validated in a quality of life study by Jeffres et al (2009) where individuals were asked to identify such places in their own neighborhoods. Thus, the third places analyzed in the present study include: *cafes* (cafes, coffee shops, and tea houses), *parks* (public parks and playgrounds), *cultural places* (art museums, art galleries/centers, bookstores, and record stores), *recreational places* (pool halls, bingo halls, arcades, recreation centers), *lodges* (e.g. Elks Lodge, American Legion)<sup>1</sup>, *barber shops*, and *bars*. To parse out the effect of third places from other businesses we control for the count of retail places overall.

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<sup>1</sup> While lodges are mostly member-based, they serve neighborhoods with a variety of regular events and services which fit the third places model.

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We control for individual demographics with measures of age, race-ethnicity, presence of children in the household, marital status, and family income (in dollars). Controls for the structural characteristics of neighborhoods are derived from 2000 census block measures and include population, average income, residential stability (share of residents in same home for past five years), and proportion black, Latino, Asian, and other races (with proportion white as the reference category). Note that in the models to follow, family income, egohood average income, and population are rescaled (divided by 10,000) to aid in interpretation. To attend to the hypothesized class<sup>2</sup> effects, we stratify our models by the poverty strata (Sastry et al 2006) of the sampled tracts. These include *very poor* (top 10% of poverty distribution), *poor* (60<sup>th</sup>-89<sup>th</sup> percentiles) and *non-poor* (bottom 60%). This yields an overall sample size of 2,596, with 774 respondents in *very poor* neighborhoods, 809 in *poor* neighborhoods, and 1,013 in *non-poor* neighborhoods.

## ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Analyses were done using Stata 14. As our sample includes respondents nested within egohoods, we fit multilevel regression models with neighborhood random effects stratified by the three poverty strata. Thus, for each strata we are estimating the following level one equation:

$$(2) \quad y_{ik} = \eta_k + X_{ik}\Gamma + \varepsilon_{ik}$$

where  $y_{ik}$  is the outcome variable (for example, cohesion) reported by the  $i$ -th respondent of  $I$  respondents in the  $k$ -th tract,  $\eta_k$  is the latent variable of common perception of cohesion in the

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<sup>2</sup> We measure “class” as neighborhood poverty strata. While we recognize that class is a complex concept and that income represents only one facet of it, we use the term class for ease of reading and because neighborhood poverty is likely highly correlated with other dimensions, such as education and occupation.

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egohood,  $X_{ik}$  is a matrix of exogenous predictors with values for each individual  $i$  in egohood  $k$ ,  $\Gamma$  is a vector of the effects of these predictors on the subjective assessment, and  $\varepsilon_{ik}$  is a disturbance term. Note that here the outcome measure is *each individual's assessment of cohesion*.

The level two equation incorporates the egohood characteristics described above, and is represented as:

$$(3) \quad \eta_k = Z_k\beta + \varepsilon_k$$

where  $\eta_k$  represents the overall cohesion in neighborhood  $k$ ,  $Z$  represents a matrix of variables measured at the level of egohood  $k$ ,  $\beta$  is a vector of the effects of these measures on overall cohesion, and  $\varepsilon_k$  is a disturbance for egohood  $k$ .

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for individuals and neighborhoods in the analytic sample. We note some key differences across individuals and neighborhoods by strata. First, neighborhood in the *very poor* and *poor* strata are predominantly Latino with relatively low shares of white residents, while the *non-poor* strata is predominantly white, though the average share of non-white residents is about 50%, reflecting the racial-ethnic diversity of the region. Since we define neighborhood as the half-mile egohood surrounding the respondents' home census block, the average population can be interpreted as an average density. Here we note that neighborhoods in the *very poor* strata are much denser, with an average of about 8,272 residents per half mile buffer compared to 6,161 in *poor* and 2,446 in *non-poor* neighborhoods. Notable too, is the average count of third places in neighborhoods across each strata – the average in *very*



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*poor* neighborhoods is 4 ( $\sigma_{\bar{x}} = 4.12$ ) compared to 2.24 ( $\sigma_{\bar{x}} = 2.71$ ) in *poor* and 1.03 ( $\sigma_{\bar{x}} = 2.07$ ) in *non-poor* neighborhoods. Though of a different magnitude, the counts of average retail places across strata mirror these findings.

<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

Table 2 reports the results from multilevel models regressing the frequency of neighbor interaction on third places and other covariates. Model 1 shows the results for the *full sample*, where we observe that each unit increase in third places is associated with a .025 unit increase in neighbor interaction, a significant association at the  $p < .05$  level. That is, a one standard deviation increase in third places is associated with an 8.1% increase in interaction between neighbors ( $b * \sigma_{\bar{x}}$ ). Additionally, we observe that being married is positively associated with higher reports of neighbor interaction ( $b = .118$ ;  $p < .01$ ), while Asian respondents report less neighbor interaction compared to whites ( $b = -.182$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

Models 2 through 4 stratify this model by the neighborhood poverty strata. Model 2 indicates that among those in the *very poor* strata, a one standard deviation in third places is associated with a 24.3% increase in neighbor interaction, significant at the .01 threshold ( $b = .059$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Models 3 and 4 indicate no statistically significant association between third places and neighbor interaction among those in *poor* and *non-poor* neighborhoods, suggesting that the association observed in the overall sample is driven by the association among those in the *very poor* strata. Additionally, the count of overall retail places has a negative association with neighbor interaction in the *very poor* strata, such that each additional retail outlet is associated with a -.005 decrease in neighbor interaction, an association significant at the  $p < .05$  level. Notably, while there are no significant predictors for the *poor* strata, individual-level variables figure prominently in the models for the *non-poor* strata. Being female ( $b = .113$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and

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married ( $b = .183$ ;  $p < .01$ ) are associated with higher levels of interaction. Additionally, being Latino/a ( $b = -.211$ ;  $p < .05$ ) or Asian ( $b = -.252$ ;  $p < .01$ ) is associated with lower neighbor interaction compared to being white in such contexts.

<TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>

Table 3 reports the results from multilevel models regressing perceived cohesion on third places, net of individual and neighborhood controls. Model 1 shows the results for the full sample. The effect of third places on neighborhood cohesion is not significant for the full sample. Regarding the neighborhood-level control variables, greater residential stability is associated with higher levels of cohesion, such that a one unit increase in stability is associated with a .006 unit increase in cohesion ( $p < .001$ ). The proportion black ( $b = -.608$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and Latino ( $b = -.579$ ;  $p < .001$ ) are both significantly associated with lower levels of perceived cohesion. At the individual level, older age and married status are associated with higher perceived cohesion.

Model 2 regresses perceived cohesion on the count of third places and individual and neighborhood controls for those in *very poor* neighborhoods. Each additional third place is associated with a .032 unit increase in perceived cohesion, an effect that is significant at the  $p < .05$  threshold. Put differently, a one standard deviation increase in third places is associated with a 13.2% increase in perceived cohesion in *very poor* neighborhoods. Again, the effect of the count of retail outlets is negative such that each additional outlet is associated with a -.006 decrease in perceived cohesion, significant at the  $p < .01$  threshold. At the individual-level, each year in age is associated with an increase in perceived cohesion ( $b = .010$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

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Models 3 and 4 show the results for *poor* and *non-poor* neighborhoods, indicating no significant association between third places and cohesion in these contexts. Blacks in the *poor* strata show perceived cohesion levels that are .299 units higher compared to whites ( $p < .05$ ). In *non-poor* neighborhoods, the coefficients for proportion black and proportion Latino are once again negative and statistically significant. Compared to other relationship statuses, being married in the *non-poor* strata is associated with a .139 unit increase in perceived cohesion ( $p < .01$ ).

<TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE>

Table 4 reports the results for the mediation models where we test the hypothesis that at least a portion of the association between third places and cohesion is explained by increased neighbor interaction. The association between neighbor interaction and perceived cohesion is highly significant across strata ( $p < .001$ ) with a .161 unit increase in cohesion in the full-sample, a .155 unit increase in the *very poor* strata, a .106 unit increase in the *poor* strata and a .214 increase in the *non-poor* strata. In the *very poor* strata, the coefficient for third places is reduced to non-significance upon the inclusion of the neighbor interaction variable, suggesting that the association between third places and perceived cohesion in this context is indeed mediated by increased neighbor interaction.

<TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE>

In summary, these models indicate the association between neighborhood third places and neighbor interaction and perceptions of cohesion, offering support for hypothesis 4, and hypotheses 1-3 for neighborhoods in the *very poor* strata. The finding that the poorest neighborhoods show an association between third places and interaction/cohesion is mirrored in

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past qualitative work (e.g. Hickman 2013). Drawing on the notion of use-value (Logan and Molotch 1987), we proposed and found support for the idea that third places would have a unique association with neighbor interaction and cohesion in lower-income neighborhoods where use-value is potentially low for the broader urban population, and thus more likely to be patronized by local residents. Additionally, we find support for the argument that the association between neighborhood third places and cohesion is mediated by increasing neighbor interaction.

We also note the varying effect of control variables across strata. At the neighborhood-level, residential instability emerges as a consistent positive predictor of our outcomes in the full sample, while retail outlets are a consistent negative predictor in the *very poor* strata. Interestingly, neighborhood racial composition only seems to matter in *non-poor* neighborhoods, where increasing proportions of black and Latino populations are associated with lower neighbor interaction and cohesion. The effect of individual-level variables also vary across strata. Marital status and race (black and Latino/a) are salient across models in the *non-poor* strata, while age matters for levels of neighbor interaction and cohesion in *very poor* neighborhoods.

## CONCLUSION

Whereas many scholars have taken Oldenburg's (1989) claims regarding third places as a given, we offer an empirical test of the basic assertion that third places facilitate neighbor interaction and the development of cohesion as applied to the neighborhood context. We find that third places do indeed have this association with neighbor interaction and cohesion, but only for a subset of neighborhoods – those in the *very poor* strata of the overall poverty distribution. This is consistent with our assertion that third places in low-income neighborhoods do not draw patrons from the broader city, thus the opportunity for interaction between neighbors is more probable. This may also reflect differences in how individuals relate to space – whether through

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immobility and localism in low-income contexts, or through increased mobility and cosmopolitanism in more affluent ones (e.g. Castells 1996; Bauman 1998). To this point we emphasize the general importance of examining how neighborhood processes vary across contexts, though future research should test the specific mechanisms which produce these differences.

To be clear, this is not to say that third places do not play a role in the lives of more affluent residents. Indeed, there may be third places in (and outside of) affluent neighborhoods that are important to residents. This point is underscored by Oldenburg's (1997) assertion that third places may sort people into niche communities based on shared interests, as well as Silver and Clark's (2016) notion of social "scenes" which emerge in urban amenities that serve as an expression of cultural consumption, taste, and lifestyle preferences. Data limitations in the present study (i.e. inability to measure use or how third places relate to individual activity spaces) may contribute to the lack of an observed effect in non-poor neighborhoods, an issue which future research should consider.

These findings have implications for urban planning perspectives which argue for mixed-use development based on its presumed effect on community life. While our analyses indicate an association between third places and cohesion in the poorest neighborhoods, there was no effect in other strata. Given that neighborhoods in the non-poor strata report the highest levels of cohesion, and that third places had no association with cohesion in these contexts suggests that other factors inform resident perceptions in these contexts. Though Talen (1999) had indicated a marked lack of evidence regarding the doctrinal view of New Urbanism that mixed-development and other design features beget a strong sense of community, our findings here cohere with more recent studies which find an association between mixed-use development, public space, and

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interaction and cohesion (Plas and Lewis 1996; Francis et al 2012; Simões Aelbrecht 2016; Leyden 2003; Bjornstrom and Ralston 2014; Lund 2003; French et al 2014; Wood et al 2010).

Beyond the implications for planning policy, we also note the theoretical import of the third places argument, and situate its contribution in the broader ecological perspective. Past research examining factors which predict neighborhood cohesion generally focuses on individual attributes or neighborhood demographic composition. The third places argument put forth here shifts the focus to the neighborhood ecology. Like recent work on residents' overlapping activity spaces or "ecological networks" (Browning et al 2017a; Browning et al 2017b; Soller et al 2018), the role of "social conduits" (Corcoran et al 2017), and the notion of "scenes" (Silver and Clark 2016), the third places perspective draws attention to the ecological opportunity structure for interaction which bears on perceptions or assessments of cohesion. We reiterate here that we find an association between third places and cohesion holding constant both individual attributes and neighborhood composition. The present study has examined the extent to which the form and function of third places vary across neighborhood contexts according to socioeconomic status using neighborhood poverty strata. Given that past work has found effects of neighborhood demographic characteristics in predicting cohesion and interaction, future work should theorize and examine how intersections of race, class, age structure, and gender composition relate to the role of third places in neighbor interaction and cohesion.

The present study and related ecological perspectives also offer an important contribution to the broader conversation regarding the role of place in society. Oldenburg (1997) himself bemoaned the "vanishing" of third places which he attributed to the "privatization of home life" associated with the rapid suburbanization of the post-war era. One prominent perspective is that the technological advancement in transportation and communication associated with

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globalization has rendered the relationship between people and place instable and social relations are thus disembedded from the local context (e.g. Meyrowitz 1985; Giddens 1991), or what Wellman (1979) refers to as the “community liberated” argument. Other perspectives see the local as intricately bound up in globalization, whereby globalization has actually contributed to a resurgence of ideas and movements concerning the local (e.g. Robertson and Khondker 1998). Though a single analysis cannot begin to settle these debates, we argue that the third place perspective and other ecological perspectives offer a promising facet to the debate on the role of place and locality in social life.

We acknowledge some limitations of our analysis. First, while we are able to make use of novel data and measure the share of third places in a respondent’s ego-hood, we lack data on the respondent’s use of such places. However, our analyses do suggest that such places are associated with increased neighbor interaction. Further, it may be the case that for some residents, the mere visual cue of third places may serve as a basis on which to infer cohesion in the neighborhood. Particularly for the more affluent, places may serve as more than just stages for social interaction but also as markers of social distinction, imbued with social and aesthetic meaning which confers some sense of status to the neighborhood in which they are situated (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Logan and Molotch 1987; Silver and Clark 2016). This possibility should be explored in future research. Second, our analyses are limited to the context of Los Angeles County and their generalizability is limited as such. While there remains considerable debate regarding whether or not Los Angeles is typical of all growing U.S. cities (Garreau 2011) or an exceptional case, future efforts should examine how third places operate in cities with different histories, cultures, and built environments.

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Additionally, the built environment of L.A. County is characterized by its auto-dependence and relatively low density. Considering that our argument regarding class considers the flow of individuals from outside the immediate neighborhood, the effect of third places in more dense contexts may be washed out, owing to a greater anonymity in such contexts. Further empirical work should assess the effects of third places in other cities and regions, as well as assess the degree to which neighborhood establishments attract patrons from within and without the neighborhood in which it operates. Given the age of the data used in the present study, there is some question as to the applicability of our findings in more recent times. While we would argue that the processes which link neighborhood third places to neighbor interaction and cohesion are time invariant, this question should be assessed empirically across historical periods. Finally, our data is cross-sectional, limiting our ability to make causal claims regarding the role of third places.

We also note that our analyses have relied on a somewhat strict definition of third places constrained by Oldenburg's (1989) guiding criteria. Thus, while our results offer valuable insights into the effect of third places on neighborhood residents, it is not likely that these are the only places which matter in this regard. Our quantitative approach is thus limited in the respect that we are not able to tease out how third places of some variety might be salient in some neighborhoods but quite meaningless in others due not to structural antecedents such as class, but due to the history and peculiarities of place. For example, it is unlikely that restaurants as a category serve as a very meaningful third place in most contexts. However, it is likely that in some contexts, certain restaurants serve as community anchors, sources of collective identity, and places in which strangers come to know one another to some degree. Thus, an important



question for future research is the way in which mundane consumer establishments are transformed into community assets, assuming the role of third places.

Future research should consider how other facets of third places figure into the neighborhood ecology. For example, the turn to neo-localism (e.g. Flack 1997) might suggest a stronger effect of local businesses on the development of cohesion as opposed to chain or corporate establishments. Further, future work on neighborhood cohesion should continue to interrogate class differences in its development across urban space. Clearly, third places are not randomly distributed across neighborhoods and land uses differ markedly across neighborhoods of varying socioeconomic status. Our descriptive statistics indicate that more affluent neighborhoods have fewer third places, and as such, a more restricted opportunity structure for informal neighbor interaction. For those with a disposable income providing access to amenities across the city, third places may provide a referent for assessing city-level rather than neighborhood-level cohesion, interaction, attachment and satisfaction. Finally, this study suggests the continued relevance of Oldenburg's work on third places, at least in certain contexts (i.e., very poor neighborhoods). While the present study has provided an empirical assessment of some of his core claims, there remains many aspects of his perspective amenable to further investigation.

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**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics by Poverty Strata

Variable	Very Poor Strata (N=774)		Poor Strata (N=809)		Non-Poor Strata (N=1,013)	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b><i>Egoood-Level</i></b>						
Third Places	4.00	4.12	2.24	2.71	1.03	2.07
# Retail Outlets	42.32	39.89	30.22	27.72	10.37	16.03
Population	8272	4939	6161	3392	2446	1885
Avg. Income	33922	9227	44782	24302	72089	44275
Res. Stability	46.16	9.51	46.26	10.62	49.62	13.03
Prop. Asian	0.06	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.17	0.15
Prop. Black	0.14	0.13	0.05	0.09	0.06	0.05
Prop. Latino	0.75	0.12	0.70	0.25	0.26	0.20
Prop. Other	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.02
Prop. White	0.04	0.05	0.14	0.17	0.48	0.24
<b><i>Individual-Level</i></b>						
Cohesion	3.10	0.67	3.28	0.64	3.67	0.63
Neighbor Interaction	2.34	0.93	2.37	0.94	2.49	0.91
Age	37.25	14.14	38.86	14.49	42.14	14.30
Female	0.60	0.49	0.57	0.49	0.59	0.49
HH w/Kids	0.77	0.42	0.79	0.40	0.73	0.44
Married	0.37	0.48	0.51	0.50	0.60	0.49
White	0.04	0.18	0.14	0.35	0.50	0.50
Black	0.16	0.36	0.06	0.23	0.05	0.22
Latino/a	0.77	0.42	0.71	0.45	0.26	0.44
Asian	0.04	0.18	0.08	0.27	0.17	0.38
Other Race	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.10	0.01	0.12
Family Income	21327	21749	37201	52807	77881	81786

**Table 2.** Multilevel Random Effects Regression Estimates for Effect of Model Covariates on Neighbor Interaction

	Full Sample (N = 2589)	Poverty Strata		
		Very Poor (N = 768)	Poor (N = 809)	Non-Poor (N = 1012)
<i>Egohood-Level</i>				
Third Places	0.025 *	0.059 **	-0.008	0.005
	(0.011)	(0.017)	(0.021)	(0.022)
# Retail Outlets	-0.001	-0.005 *	0.000	0.003
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Population	-0.128	-0.100	-0.124	-0.059
	(0.076)	(0.154)	(0.134)	(0.232)
Avg. Income	-0.002	0.078	-0.012	-0.002
	(0.009)	(0.047)	(0.030)	(0.011)
Res. Stability	0.002	-0.003	-0.005	0.004
	(0.002)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.003)
Prop. Asian	-0.033	0.853	-0.170	0.018
	(0.192)	(1.159)	(0.810)	(0.215)
Prop. Black	-0.352	0.726	-1.074	-0.409
	(0.270)	(1.011)	(0.731)	(0.630)
Prop. Latino	-0.327	0.310	-0.504	-0.312
	(0.169)	(1.060)	(0.657)	(0.226)
Prop. Other	0.081	-5.394	-2.253	5.010 *
	(1.382)	(8.550)	(3.527)	(2.293)
Poverty Strata	-0.055			
	(0.041)			
<i>Individual-Level</i>				
Age	-0.001	-0.002	0.002	-0.002
	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Female	0.003	-0.107	-0.018	0.113 *
	(0.037)	(0.069)	(0.068)	(0.058)
HH w/Kids	0.076	0.014	0.068	0.119
	(0.048)	(0.089)	(0.096)	(0.071)
Married	0.118 **	0.054	0.089	0.183 **
	(0.040)	(0.074)	(0.070)	(0.064)
Black	0.068	0.223	0.092	0.139
	(0.085)	(0.204)	(0.182)	(0.136)
Latino/a	-0.078	0.173	0.028	-0.211 *
	(0.063)	(0.187)	(0.127)	(0.082)
Asian	-0.182 *	0.312	-0.199	-0.252 **
	(0.073)	(0.258)	(0.157)	(0.086)
Other Race	-0.044	0.745	-0.146	-0.284
	(0.181)	(0.459)	(0.352)	(0.242)
Family Income	-0.003	0.004	0.000	-0.004
	(0.004)	(0.016)	(0.008)	(0.004)
Constant	2.668 ***	1.836	3.030 ***	2.150 ***
	(0.243)	(1.151)	(0.679)	(0.263)

\*\*\*p&lt;.001 \*\*p&lt;.01 \*p&lt;.05

Note: Standard errors shown in parentheses

**Table 3.** Multilevel Random Effects Regression Estimates for Effect of Model Covariates on Cohesion

	Poverty Strata			
	Full Sample (N = 2589)	Very Poor (N = 768)	Poor (N = 809)	Non-Poor (N = 1012)
<i>Egohood-Level</i>				
Third Places	0.012 (0.009)	0.032 * (0.015)	0.008 (0.015)	0.001 (0.018)
# Retail Outlets	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.006 ** (0.002)	0.000 (0.002)	0.001 (0.003)
Population	-0.063 (0.065)	0.051 (0.129)	-0.004 (0.101)	-0.312 (0.191)
Avg. Income	0.008 (0.007)	-0.013 (0.039)	0.027 (0.023)	0.006 (0.009)
Res. Stability	0.006 *** (0.002)	0.007 (0.005)	0.007 (0.003)	0.003 (0.002)
Prop. Asian	-0.124 (0.151)	0.848 (1.011)	-0.392 (0.599)	-0.066 (0.170)
Prop. Black	-0.608 ** (0.215)	-0.678 (0.867)	-0.235 (0.536)	-1.098 * (0.531)
Prop. Latino	-0.579 *** (0.133)	-0.791 (0.909)	-0.273 (0.485)	-0.586 ** (0.174)
Prop. Other	-2.123 (1.132)	-12.395 (7.013)	-0.617 (2.615)	-1.672 (1.736)
Poverty Strata	0.091 ** (0.034)			
<i>Individual-Level</i>				
Age	0.004 *** (0.001)	0.010 *** (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)
Female	-0.019 (0.025)	-0.088 (0.048)	-0.045 (0.044)	0.060 (0.038)
HH w/Kids	0.001 (0.032)	0.050 (0.061)	-0.085 (0.062)	-0.007 (0.046)
Married	0.070 ** (0.027)	-0.026 (0.051)	0.088 (0.046)	0.139 ** (0.042)
Black	0.024 (0.057)	-0.218 (0.141)	0.299 * (0.121)	0.007 (0.089)
Latino/a	0.025 (0.042)	-0.023 (0.127)	0.037 (0.083)	-0.017 (0.054)
Asian	-0.022 (0.049)	-0.315 (0.176)	0.036 (0.105)	-0.026 (0.057)
Other Race	-0.033 (0.122)	0.065 (0.311)	-0.316 (0.233)	-0.010 (0.157)
Family Income	0.001 (0.003)	-0.014 (0.011)	0.009 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.003)
Constant	3.165 *** (0.195)	3.438 *** (0.973)	2.970 *** (0.500)	3.734 *** (0.203)

\*\*\*p&lt;.001 \*\*p&lt;.01 \*p&lt;.05

Note: Standard errors shown in parentheses



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**Table 4.** Multilevel Random Effects Regression Estimates for Effect of Neighbor Interaction and Model Covariates on Cohesion

	Poverty Strata			
	Full Sample (N = 2589)	Very Poor (N = 768)	Poor (N = 809)	Non-Poor (N = 1012)
<i>Egohood-Level</i>				
Third Places	0.008 (0.008)	0.022 (0.014)	0.009 (0.015)	-0.002 (0.017)
# Retail Outlets	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.005 ** (0.002)	0.000 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)
Population	-0.040 (0.063)	0.075 (0.121)	0.009 (0.100)	-0.268 (0.181)
Avg. Income	0.008 (0.007)	-0.025 (0.036)	0.028 (0.022)	0.007 (0.008)
Res. Stability	0.005 *** (0.002)	0.008 (0.005)	0.007 * (0.003)	0.003 (0.002)
Prop. Asian	-0.106 (0.146)	0.611 (0.944)	-0.387 (0.591)	-0.052 (0.160)
Prop. Black	-0.548 ** (0.207)	-0.807 (0.810)	-0.138 (0.530)	-0.949 (0.500)
Prop. Latino	-0.510 *** (0.128)	-0.840 (0.849)	-0.231 (0.479)	-0.495 ** (0.164)
Prop. Other	-2.134 (1.089)	-10.706 (6.610)	-0.456 (2.583)	-2.751 (1.641)
Poverty Strata	0.104 ** (0.033)			
<i>Individual-Level</i>				
Neighbor Interaction	0.161 *** (0.013)	0.155 *** (0.025)	0.106 *** (0.023)	0.214 *** (0.019)
Age	0.004 *** (0.001)	0.010 *** (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)
Female	-0.020 (0.024)	-0.072 (0.047)	-0.042 (0.044)	0.032 (0.036)
HH w/Kids	-0.009 (0.031)	0.048 (0.060)	-0.091 (0.061)	-0.031 (0.044)
Married	0.053 * (0.026)	-0.031 (0.050)	0.079 (0.045)	0.103 ** (0.039)
Black	0.015 (0.055)	-0.250 (0.137)	0.289 * (0.120)	-0.020 (0.084)
Latino/a	0.036 (0.041)	-0.054 (0.124)	0.033 (0.082)	0.027 (0.052)
Asian	0.006 (0.048)	-0.368 * (0.172)	0.058 (0.104)	0.024 (0.054)
Other Race	-0.022 (0.118)	-0.065 (0.300)	-0.299 (0.230)	0.055 (0.149)
Family Income	0.001 (0.002)	-0.014 (0.011)	0.009 (0.005)	0.000 (0.003)
Constant	2.718 *** (0.192)	3.142 ** (0.912)	2.663 *** (0.499)	3.236 *** (0.197)

\*\*\*p<.001 \*\*p<.01 \*p<.05

Note: Standard errors shown in parentheses

