

CREATING THIRD PLACE SPACES AT CHURCH



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Community—forging deep meaningful relationships—is more important today than ever before. Even though we’re living in a time when we’re more “connected” than ever—nearly every American adult owns a smartphone and the Internet pumps more data through our brains than was ever possible even three years before—we still are missing the deep connections we need. Myriad obstacles—long work days, two-career families, transient families—prevent us from forming the very relationships that enrich our lives and bring great joy.

At church, relationships are the primary way we deepen our faith and grow as Christ-followers. The process of becoming disciples happens most effectively in community—in the spaces where we can talk and share our journey with others. If relationships are central to disciplinemaking, how can the church help cultivate these connections?

One way is by providing physical space that fosters relationship. In this resource, we’ll look at ways to create an environment within your church for people to connect with each other and deepen their relationships with God and each other.





THIRD PLACE BASICS

When people speak of connection, they often reference the “Third Place,” a term credited to sociologist Ray Oldenberg to describe a non-domestic, non-productive space in which a third realm of experience occurs. Think Starbucks and Panera, two businesses that have mastered the concept of cultivating community by providing inviting physical spaces for people to sit and stay, away from work or home.

Third Places help foster social connections that bring us into a world beyond the borders of our home and office.

Third Places offer us space to nurture old friendships or create new ones. They provide a place from which we can step outside of our home and work lives and see these realms more clearly. Think of the famous bar Cheers!, the Old World town center, or the barber shops of yesterday. Each of these became a spot for people to meet and socialize.



Typically, Third Places serve something. It could be alcohol, caffeine, bowling, a haircut, but they are primarily set up as a place for the public to share an experience and spark a conversation.

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CHURCH AS A THIRD PLACE

Churches are uniquely suited to serve as a Third Place. Worship on Sunday mornings is an excellent vehicle for gathering people and providing a venue for learning and conversations after Sunday services. To become an effective Third Place, however, there are some key principles to understand and adhere to.

On a practical level, Third Places feature areas to sit and are generally designed for interaction. They're created with people in mind. They're designed to facilitate social interaction, not people movement. (Think coffee shop, not airport).

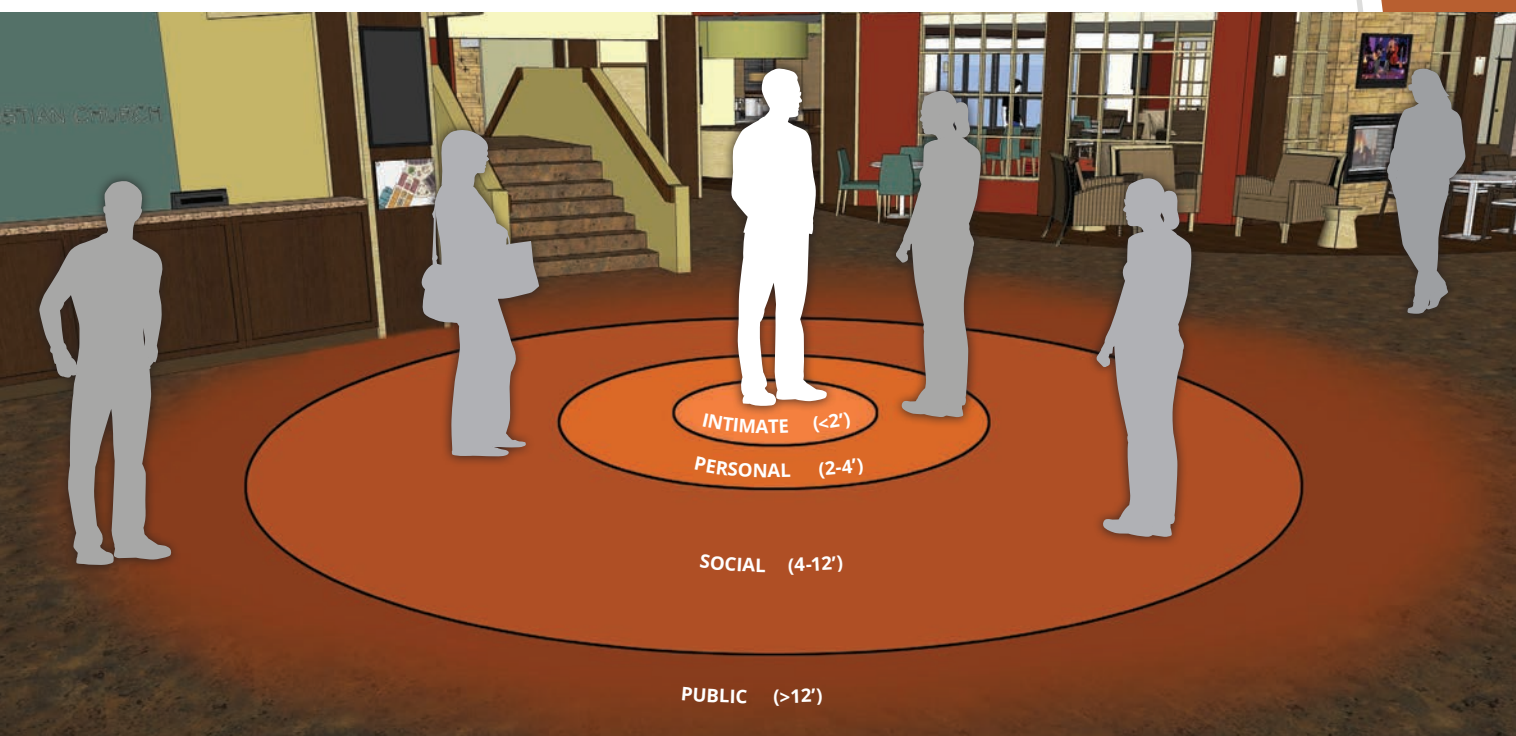


Unfortunately, most spaces are designed to facilitate the quickest route from point A to point B. Recall church lobbies you've been in. How many of them were designed to move people quickly through, instead of slowing people down and inviting them to stay for a while? Third Places invite us to sit and linger with others.

FOUR ZONES FOR CONNECTION

In 1963, Edward T. Hall coined the term “proxemics” to describe the perception of the physical space around us. When social scientists examine this perception of connecting space, they generally speak of four zones: Intimate (<2'), Personal (2-4'), Social (4-12'), and Public (>12'). We need to design for connection across all four zones to foster healthy, dynamic social lives.

Let's take a look at each of these zones. Sometimes people seek out an intimate space to connect with another—space that's perfect for a one-on-one conversation. Other times we crave to be part of a larger group. In a church setting, providing various types of connecting spaces helps foster discipleship and deeper relationships.



▲ Four zones of connection

Intimate space

Intimate distances are those reserved for close, trusting relationships. People hugging, standing side by side, or engaging in close conversation are examples of being in your intimate space. We only let the closest people touch us. Intimate space becomes uncomfortable when people we don't know move into this zone. Think about being in an elevator or packed in a lobby. Having our intimate zone invaded drives us away from the space, instead of inviting us to stay.

Personal space

Personal space is that two- to four-foot bubble most people intuitively sense. We may let family and close friends into our personal space, but we feel uncomfortable when a stranger invades this space. When we are seated in a crowded airplane, for instance, the tight quarters are uncomfortable for us and the people next to us, yet close friends would be welcomed into this close proximity. This is why we feel uneasy if others come too close or not close enough. Personal space involves not only the invisible bubble around the body, but many of our senses as well. People may feel shaken when they experience an unwelcome smell or even someone leering in their direction.

Social space

Most of our connections occur in the social space zone. Social space allows for a little extra distance between us and others. Casual conversations, business, discussions, or polite social interactions happen in this space.

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Public space

Public space provides the greatest distance between people. This is a safe space for choosing how close or how far we want to be from people. Our neighborhoods, the mall, an outdoor amphitheater are examples of public spaces. In a church, the sanctuary and the lobby are typical examples of public spaces.

Public space provides a way to share an experience with many people. Humans crave to share life with others. It satisfies a basic need for belonging and community.



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Leveraging the power of proxemics

Examples of proxemics are all around us: The armrest that separates us from the person sitting next to us in an airplane; park benches that face the same direction and let us sit like birds on a wire;

coffee shops with furniture arranged in intimate settings; the list goes on.

Many businesses are aware of proxemics and the science of space, and they use this knowledge to create spaces that sell product. Similarly, by understanding how people perceive physical space and the way it makes them feel, churches can intentionally create spaces that address these various needs for intimacy, personal connection, socializing, and gathering.



NOOKS, EDGES, HOT SPOTS, AND PERCHES

Now that we have a basic understanding of proxemics, in this section, we'll look at the components that go into creating Third Place spaces and offer some specific ideas for how to transform a typical hangout spot into a truly connecting space.

Nooks

Every place of fellowship, especially those designed for large group gatherings, needs nooks and clusters to help foster a sense of intimate connection, even in the midst of a crowd. They help provide a place to socialize and connect away from the main flow of traffic.

Nooks and clusters serve many important purposes in the design of a church. They contribute to the overall aesthetic of a space by bringing warmth and a feeling of intimacy to otherwise large expanses of space.

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CLUSTERS

Clusters—seating arrangements that help break up large, open spaces, are most commonly found in public spaces. They are often non-descript and miss the level of design detail needed to foster deep connections. Nooks, on the other hand, provide intimate spaces on the fringe of a public space. Often, it's in these outliers of space where the magic happens, not within clusters, which are merely dropped into the public space. Nooks allow an independent experience from whatever's happening in the main space. These atmospheres allow people to go deeper in conversation.



TRY THIS:

1. Remove a classroom, adjacent to a hallway or lobby.
2. Carve that into a nook within your existing lobby.
3. Change the flooring, the ceiling height, or the color palette in the nook.
4. Add some soft seating. Boom, it's a nook!

Edges

Aspen Group commissioned Barna Group to conduct a study of Millennials and architecture in 2013. As part of the research, we selected a group of 20somethings to tour several types of churches and public spaces in Chicago

and Atlanta. The Chicago focus group went to Millennium Park, a large tourist attraction in the heart of the city. As we sat on the grassy edge of the park under shade trees, the young adults had a full vantage point of everything the park had to offer. The periphery—the grassy edge—was a neutral zone from which they could decide if they wanted to go further into the park. Being able to experience the park on the outer margin felt comfortable to the group, especially since they weren't familiar with the space. Their response highlights the power of periphery.

Churches that provide this type of periphery space help introverted people find a comfortable way to enter into the church experience. Edges are easy to create. By changing flooring—and even the ceiling design—we create a periphery or neutral zone around the heart of the space.



TRY THIS:

1. When you sit or stand at the edges of the main space, can you see across to the major entry points of the building? Can you see the entry to the children's area, youth area, and worship space from multiple viewpoints? Are there places to sit outside of the main flow of people that allow for a full vantage point of everything that's happening in the open, public space?
2. Are these peripheral places highlighted by changes in design materials—different flooring, ceiling, or seating materials, for instance?



Hot spots

Purposeful, intentional spots where people can meet before moving on, or gather for a quick conversation are a must. Think of these as five-minute hot spots.

Examine how people move around your space. These quick-stop spots help slow people down. They provide an opportunity for people to enjoy staying at church longer. If there are unlimited options for traversing space, what are some ways you could create a hot spot to foster better interaction? Even a simple change to your floor plan can create a new flow that aids the potential for five-minute conversations to occur.

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CASE STUDY—WEST SIDE CHRISTIAN CHURCH LOBBY

West Side Christian Church in Springfield, IL, has always promoted the value of spiritual relationships at their church. For years, though, they didn't have the right space for people to gather and get to know each other. When Aspen Group renovated their lobby, they introduced hot spots in a new cafe and concourse concept. West Side transformed their existing "people moving" space into Third Place connecting space.

"People are now coming early and staying late on Sunday mornings," says Melissa Sandel, director of ministries at West Side. "West Siders have a place to engage in conversations and build friendships over a meal or a specialty drink. Others use the cafe to casually and comfortably introduce friends and family who are far from God to the church."

According to Sandel, organic ministry has risen up and occurred spontaneously as people enjoy this new Third Place at their church. "It's encouraging to see people conversing and growing with others in a way they never have before."

Learn more about West Side Christian Church's renovation at: <http://aspengroup.com/portfolio/west-side-christian-church-lobby>.



Perches

People like to have a favorite spot to sit and watch what's happening around them. Perches provide another type of seating that allows churchgoers a place to sit and read, or meet with friends in between services.

Perches can be high-top tables and tall stools clustered in a lobby or cafe, or soft-backed bench seating lining the walls of the lobby. Both options create Third Place space for churchgoers. The key is offering multiple vantage points so people can choose how close or far they want to be to the action.

Panera, Starbucks, and McDonalds all do a great job of providing seating arrangements that are fresh and varied. These businesses have invested millions of dollars into creating floor plans and seating designs, including perches, which invite people to linger longer in their restaurants. Fifty minutes is the typical length of time someone will hang out in a place where they can find a perch.

By incorporating perches, churches will be well on their way to creating Third Place space that invites congregants to sit, stay, and return week after week.



Perches provide churchgoers a comfortable, familiar place to sit and read, or meet with friends in between services.



TRY THIS:

1. Place at least three different styles of seating in three different areas of your lobby. A mixture of soft seating, stools, and even standing conversation tables can help people naturally assess your space for connection opportunity.
2. Check out your favorite coffee place, and notice the variety of seating they offer. What clues can you glean from the seating arrangements and floor plan that you could consider incorporating in your ministry space?

Patterns

Along with erecting walls, nooks, and other physical changes to facilitate better connecting spaces, patterns also help create an environment that is open, yet intimate. Patterns can be used to create a background. They can separate spaces effectively and help create the divisions needed in fellowship spaces. Materials like wood and glass help highlight patterns. For example, barriers with a strong pattern, such as a metal trellis or a windowless grid, can create human-level scale in a large space.



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Subdued lighting is another technique that can be used to help strangers get closer to each other comfortably. Bars use dim lighting to foster interaction. Spaces don't need to be dark, but changing light levels subtly can further divide spaces psychologically.

Sound, too, can play a role in creating a vibe in a space. In intimate settings, you may need to employ absorptive materials to stop the sound and create a quiet space. Other times, you can make a space come alive by allowing the sound to bounce around.

THE CRITICAL NEED FOR THIRD PLACE SPACE

Churches have a natural opportunity to serve as a Third Place. By not rushing people through the building, we invite them to stay and get to know the church and its people better. And the more comfortable people feel at church, the more likely they will be to continue on their spiritual journey.



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