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#Community: Café Culture and the Relevance of a Traditional Third Place in the Social Media Era

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#COMMUNITY: CAFÉ CULTURE AND THE RELEVANCE

OF A TRADITIONAL THIRD PLACE IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

by

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Under the Direction of Stephanie Dawn Haynie

ABSTRACT

The *third place* of the corner café has historically served as a community living room, providing an essential setting for social interaction and *flânerie* within the built environment. With modern technology and communication methods, however, interaction that once required physical proximity can now occur virtually. So where does this leave the corner café in today's society? Have our *third places* moved online into *fourth places* such as Facebook and Twitter? A gallery exhibition entitled *#Community* is discussed as a visual representation of this written thesis. Methods and frequency of interaction – with others in the physical space as well with those not present – are discussed, providing information which may inform design and provide insight into the relevancy of the built environment in the face of evolving technology.

#COMMUNITY: CAFÉ CULTURE AND THE RELEVANCE

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Seth and son Noah. They selflessly supported me, provided me freedom and encouraged me to follow my dreams. I am eternally grateful to them.

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First and foremost, I give thanks to my thesis committee (Dawn Haynie, Ryan Crooks and Dr. Emanuela Guano) for all of their help and advice. They have provided insightful feedback and meaningful critique, which proved invaluable in the development of my work and of my written thesis. I also express gratitude to my other professors in the Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design at Georgia State University (especially Jeff Boortz, Dr. Maria Gindhart and Michael White) for the many great discussions which helped inspire me to formulate these ideas.

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"It was a pleasant café, warm and clean and friendly, and I hung up my old waterproof on the coat rack to dry and put my worn and weathered felt hat on the rack above the bench and ordered a café au lait. The waiter brought it and I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and a pencil and started to write."

-Ernest Hemingway[1]

In many cultures, the corner café has served as a community living room, providing an essential setting for social interaction and participation in the art of *flânerie*.[2] These *third places* have been integral in facilitating communication while their significance has increased during specific historic periods, providing a petri dish for social action, cultural shifts and political change. Café culture has even helped to form generational identities, tied to a specific time, place and social group.

In more recent years, neighborhoods and communities in the United States have become more homogenized as locally-owned and family businesses have given way to larger "big box" stores and chain restaurants. Simultaneously, urban flight and the development of the American suburb have caused a shift in the character of many communities. Our normative form of transportation has changed from walking to automobile, altering our relationship with the urban landscape. In addition to this, our communication methods have transformed with the introduction of the internet and social media. Interaction that once required physical proximity can now occur virtually, in *fourth places* such as texting, Facebook, Twitter and other forums.

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[1] Ernest Hemingway and Séan A. Hemingway, *A moveable feast: the restored edition* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 17.

[2] The *flâneur* figure has evolved over time, beginning as primarily a gentleman of leisure, strolling through a city, "wasting time." My usage in this paper is more akin to Charles Baudelaire's later description in "The Painter of Modern Life" (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964), which describes the *flâneur* as a "passionate spectator" who immerses himself in the observation and celebration of urban life, at home everywhere in the city.

Where does this leave the corner café? How have these community living rooms been affected by our constant access to the internet and/or wireless communication? Activities like talking with others (face-to-face) and people-watching have long been mainstays of café culture, documented in fine art and literature over the span of centuries. But is this how café visitors interact in today's world? Is the built environment of a *third place* still relevant?

#Community (my thesis exhibition in the Ernest G. Welch Gallery at Georgia State University) is a visual representation of this written thesis within an art gallery context. The multi-media interactive exhibits are designed to encourage contemplation of these issues as well as promote traditional face-to-face communication during the course of the exhibition and the surrounding events. Methods of interaction and visitor reactions are discussed, providing information which may inform design as well as insight into the relevancy of the built environment in the face of evolving technology.

1.1   My Perspective

After I finished my undergraduate studies in 1991, I relocated to New York City to work for a design firm. I loved the bustle of the city and appreciated the pedestrian-friendly scale of my new neighborhood near Horatio Street on the west side of Greenwich Village. In many ways, this was "old New York," very different from today's version of the city. Independent retailers were the norm and Starbucks did not exist. Mobile technology such as smartphones, MP3 players and cellular phones were nowhere to be found. While walking, I surveyed other pedestrians and buildings, losing myself in thought and in the rhythm of the city since the distracting screen of a mobile device did not exist. I walked everywhere, only taking the subway the twenty-eight blocks to work when it was raining or I was running late. Everything I needed was within easy reach, only a short stroll away, which enhanced the sense of community. The

neighborhood was filled with *familiar strangers*[3] as I tended to see the same people frequently, their predictable presence adding to the sense of stability and comfort I felt living among them. Nearly every day, I stopped by a small café on Seventh Avenue near my apartment. I preferred to enjoy an inexpensive quick breakfast and coffee in the company of others (technically "strangers") rather than dining alone in my small abode. Visiting the café provided a sense of routine as well as both mental and visual stimulation. The café allowed me to be in a comforting "private bubble" of sorts (if desired) while physically occupying the public sphere. Each day was different – conversations with strangers, meeting up with friends, chatting briefly with neighbors and café workers or silently writing in my journal. Over time, I developed a sense of total comfort and belonging while visiting the small shop – it had evolved from "that place on Seventh Avenue" to "my place." The predictable presence of the regular cast of characters who frequented the café suggested that others probably had similar feelings about the place as well. Although I didn't realize it at the time, the café on Seventh Avenue met all the criteria of a *third place* as defined by Ray Oldenburg, an urban sociologist who has written extensively on the subject of such gathering places and their importance in society:[4]

- The *third place* is on neutral ground.
- The *third place* is a leveler.
- Conversation is the main activity.
- The *third place* is accessible and accommodating.
- The "regulars" give the *third place* its character.
- The *third place* is typically plain and has a "low profile."
- The mood is playful.
- The *third place* is a "home away from home."

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[3] Stanley Milgram, John Sabini, and Maury Silver, *The individual in a social world: essays and experiments*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 68-71.

[4] Ray Oldenburg, *The great good place: cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day* (New York: Paragon House, 1999), 20-48.

Fast forward to 2013 when I returned to school as a graduate student. I was now married, had a child and was living in Atlanta. My university was downtown and I found myself on a college campus for the first time in over twenty years. Returning to school prompted me to often reflect on differences between contemporary student life and my experiences as an undergraduate many years ago. The most striking change was the proliferation of smartphones and other portable technology in the urban university environment. Students walked around campus wearing headphones or earbuds, looking down at the screens of various hand-held devices as they navigated down the sidewalks and through buildings. In lobbies, dining halls, cafes and lounge areas, I noticed that students did not talk to each other much, preferring instead to engage with smartphones or laptops. Of course, this was not only a change in student behavior on college campuses – our entire society had experienced a paradigm shift in the concept of communication. The changes had crept in slowly, inconspicuously reshaping our idea of interaction. The long lapse between my two college experiences had been an era of rapid technology development. This lapse now served as a lens, bringing to focus the stark contrast in routine interaction between the two time periods. I began to wonder what implications this behavior might have on interpersonal connections, particularly since most of the students had come of age in the era of social media and portable technology. Were traditional *third places* (as a built environment) still relevant? Or was our *third place* now online, untethered by the physical world?

1.2   History of Cafes

A typical café (also called a *coffeehouse* or *coffee shop*), with links to the Ottoman

Empire,[5] is an establishment that typically sells coffee beverages and light fare while providing a

venue for relaxation and social interaction. Jürgen Habermas, in his influential book *Structural*

Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, describes

the coffeehouse as a more inclusive version of the previously-important aristocratic *salons* where

art and literature were discussed.[6] Unlike the *salons* of the aristocracy, the coffeehouse became a

venue for political and economic discussions as well, topics not typically explored within the

salon context. In this way, the coffeehouse holds historical significance in the development of

our contemporary idea of democracy.

The corner café gained popularity during the Industrial Revolution as a meaningful

neighborhood fixture. During this period, the concept of a *workplace* that was separate from

home developed as the economy shifted from farming to factory work as the normative urban

lifestyle. The typical urban dweller lived close to his workplace and would walk to his place of

employment (often a factory). The city was designed for and inhabited by pedestrians since

walking was the typical mode of transportation. Typical urban architecture was designed to

human scale and cities were walkable, ensuring connectivity between neighborhoods. Within

this context, the *third place* developed, a place like a café or a pub, separate from the *first place*

(home) and the *second place* (workplace). These *third places* were often physically located

between the workplace and home, providing easy access as individuals moved between the two

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[5] Julia Landweber, "This Marvelous Bean: Adopting Coffee into Old Regime French Culture and Diet," *French Historical Studies* 38, no. 2 (April 2015): 193-223.

[6] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 31-34.

destinations. *Third places* typically provided a comfortable environment, affordable food and

drink and a customarily accommodated long customer visits. They were the quintessential venue

for relaxation, joviality, conversation and connection with others in the community regardless of

profession, social background or economic standing. For these and a variety of other factors, the

café became a melting pot of people from various professions and social statuses mingling

together in these "community living rooms." This eclectic mixture of personalities contributed

to lively conversations and provided visual stimulation for the urban *flâneur* to observe both café

patrons inside and pedestrians outside, often from the vantage point of a window or sidewalk

seating.

In Europe (particularly in France and Italy), cafés were an important part of everyday life

for most residents. The Impressionist artists, with their rejection of the *Salon* and the *Académie*

Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, embraced the idea of depicting modern themes and ordinary

people rather than traditional biblical or mythological subject matter. They strove to separate

themselves from industrialism and return to a "more natural" human state, which was often

achieved by exploring themes of leisure in response to the transforming Parisian cityscape under

Baron Georges Haussmann and Emperor Napoleon III.[7] During this period, many

neighborhoods (often working-class), with their medieval-era labyrinth of crooked streets and

narrow lanes, were leveled to make way for a more modern series of grand boulevards.[8] The

city-wide changes were controversial and many residents (including the Impressionists) viewed

the finer things in life (such as leisure) in opposition to industrialism and modernity.[9] In this

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[7] Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism: art, leisure and Parisian society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 303-306.

[8] Colin B. Bailey, Robert McDonald Parker and Auguste Renoir, *Renoir landscapes, 1865-1883* (London: National Gallery, 2007), 33-49.

[9] Herbert, 305.

way, much of the Impressionist artwork serves as a historical snapshot of life during this period, café culture included. The depiction of the corner café as a fashionable destination to socialize is romanticized in Auguste Renoir's 1877 painting *Au Café* (Figure 1). In this piece, well-dressed patrons hobnob in the "see and be seen" atmosphere of the neighborhood café.
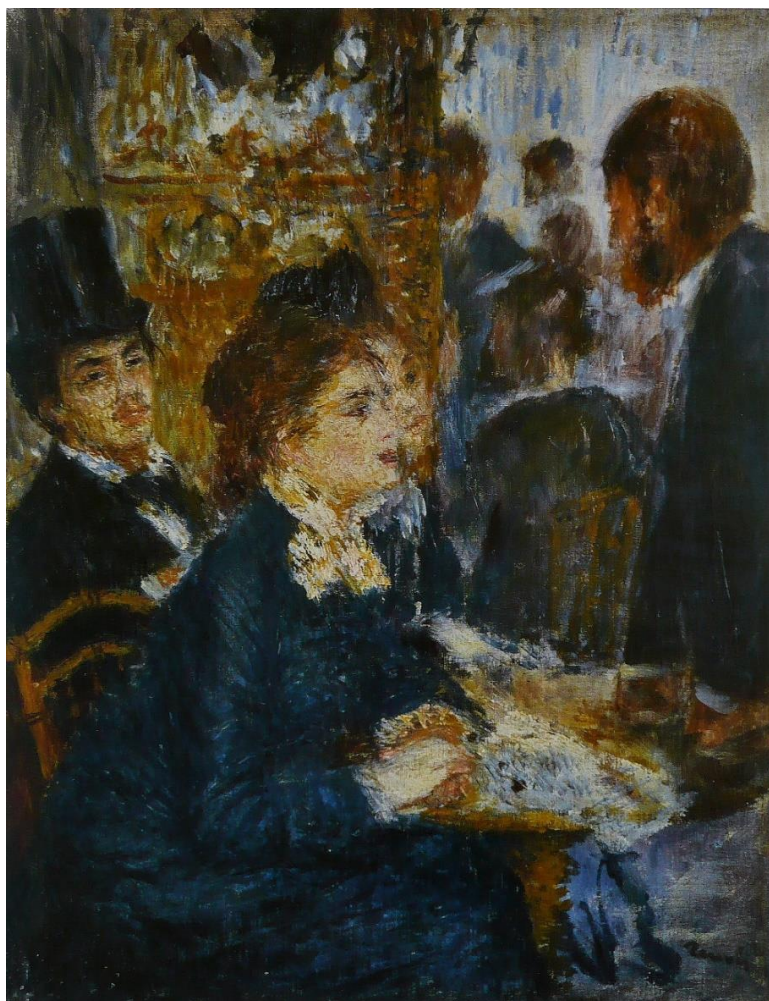
Figure 1: Auguste Renoir. *Au café (In the café).* **c. 1877**
Oil on canvas, 35.7 x 27.5 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

Renoir's brushstrokes capture the busy atmosphere and lively expression of satisfied customers engaging in conversation while moving comfortably and freely around the café. A stylish gentleman's direct and welcoming gaze pointedly invites the viewer to join the others in the space. Although the atmosphere is elegant, the arrangement of the figures in the composition

suggests an environment that is not restricted or exclusive, but accessible to anyone who wished to visit, regardless of social ranking. Renoir favored subject matter depicting everyday French life and everyday people, although his focus was often on the middle-class and upper-class members of society. Influenced by photography (a new technology at the time), many Impressionist painters created compositions and cropped figures in a manner which suggested the spontaneity and impromptu style of a photograph.[10] *Au Café* certainly implements these photography-influenced tactics, which helps reinforce the idea that the painting depicts an authentic slice of life captured in an instant.

Whereas Renoir's depictions of French life were arguably idealized, the work of Post-Impressionist artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec often featured people who were of low social status such as prostitutes or cabaret performers. Rejected by his aristocratic family and plagued with congenital deformities and health problems, Toulouse-Lautrec immersed himself in alcohol and the Parisian nightlife. In his bohemian Montmartre neighborhood, he frequented cafés and became intrigued with the "urban underclass" clientele, often featuring them in his artwork.[11] In the painting *At the Café La Mie* (Figure 2), Toulouse-Lautrec depicts a couple at a café table drinking wine while looking away despondently. The slumped posture of the man suggests that he feels the weight of the world on his shoulders while his tired eyes are fixed in a stare, the stresses of the day softened by alcohol and the distraction of the café atmosphere. The painting is based on a posed photograph featuring the artist's friend Maurice Guibert.[12] Again, the new technology of photography allowed for a spontaneous "moment in time" sensibility that

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[10] Marylynne Pitz, "Carnegie Museum of Art show explores link between Impressionism and photography," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA), July 11, 2012.

[11] Bernard Denvir, *Toulouse-Lautrec* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 7-19.

[12] Julia Bloch Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: a life* (New York: Viking, 1994), 285-289.

Toulouse-Lautrec embraced as inspiration for his work. The painting feels authentic and genuine, a glimpse into the life of everyday people. There is no pretense here, no posturing for the viewer. The couple are living their life (not idealized), complete with their full range of emotions, within their familiar *third place*. The painting narrates the blurred lines between public and private life unique to the café and specific to this particular time and place.

Figure 2: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *At the Café La Mie.* **c. 1891**
Oil paint on millboard mounted on panel, 53 x 67.9 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Where both Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec focused on the occupants, Vincent Van Gogh used the architecture of the café as subject matter to further his signature Post-Impressionist style, exploring light and color in bold swaths of paint, creating the illusion of movement and activity in *The Café Terrace* (Figure 3). In this work, Van Gogh explores the tension between the built environment and the natural world, depicting an artificially-lit café terrace in contrast

with the night sky. Anonymous café diners and pedestrians are represented only by gestural

swatches of paint while the effect of the man-made lighting on the building's color and materials

is examined meticulously. Like many other painters of this era, Van Gogh apparently painted

this piece on-site, during the nighttime hours over a period of several days, according to a letter

he wrote to his sister describing the work.[13] Painting on location allowed Van Gogh to

thoroughly examine and interpret the quality of light rather than committing it to memory and

attempting to reproduce it later in the studio as was normally the process before this period.

Figure 3: Vincent van Gogh, *Terrace of a café at night (Place du Forum)***, 1888**
Oil on canvas, 80.7 x 65.3 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands

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[13] Charles A. Whitney, Charles A, "The Skies of Vincent Van Gogh," *Art History* 9, no. 3 (September 1986): 352-353.

The Industrial Revolution had opened the door to mass production, introducing new products to artists. Factory-made portable easels were now readily available, enabling artists to easily move around between locations, complementing the *plein air* technique favored by many Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters. A new technology was invented by which pre-mixed paints could now be packaged in metal tubes. Now the previously-laborious task of mixing paint was eliminated, freeing up more of the artists' time and contributing to the proliferation of paintings during this era. The new metal tubes also offered portability and allowed paint to be accessed quickly, enhancing the Impressionists' art production practices and spontaneity.[14]

With these new products, Van Gogh was able to thoroughly explore the atmosphere of the café terrace and the interaction between the environment and its occupants.   Movement, color and composition create a focal point of the café terrace itself, emphasizing the importance of the built structure. In this way, the café terrace becomes both the setting and the main character in this compelling performance of everyday French life.

Cafes remained an important part of the French lifestyle that was appealing to even those who visited or temporarily lived in Paris following World War I, including expatriate Americans of the Lost Generation, a term coined by Gertrude Stein and popularized by Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*.[15] Besides Stein and Hemingway, other influential figures included James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró. Writers, artists, performers and activists met in Paris during this period and interacted in environments such as cafes (Figure 4), encouraging the exchange of ideas which influenced a generation and, in turn, the world.

[14] Bailey, Parker and Renoir, 19.
[15] Jeffrey Meyers, *Hemingway, a biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 191.

Figure 4: Unknown photographer, *Ernest Hemingway at a café with friends***, 1926**
L-R (at table): Gerald Murphy, Sara Murphy, Pauline Pfeiffer, Ernest Hemingway and Elizabeth Hadley Richardson
Ernest Hemingway Collection. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

After influential members of the Lost Generation developed their worldview in the cafes

of Europe, the café environment continued to serve as a stage for social change, this time in the

United States. The cafes of North Beach (in San Francisco) and Greenwich Village (in

New York) served as meeting places and performance spaces for the Beat Generation.

Influenced by the modernist writers of the Lost Generation, the Beats continued to challenge the

status quo, now within the context of a post-WWII world. Figures such as Jack Kerouac,

William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg were prominent in this counterculture movement

based on the exchange of ideas and the desire to live in continual flux.[16] The rhythm of Beat

poetry, literature and music enhanced the atmosphere of cafes in North Beach and

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[16] Mel van Elteren, "The Subculture of the Beats: A Sociological Revisit," *Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 72.

Greenwich Village, frontiers for this movement whose ethos included "alienation and place-bound estrangement from mainstream society."[17]

Figure 5: Photo by Ettore Sottsass, San Francisco 1965
(L-R) Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan and Peter and Julian Orlofsky

The anti-conformist ideology of the Beat movement dovetailed with the American Folk Music Revival which had been transformed into an art form associated with leftist politics during the Red Scare of the 1950s.[18] With performances in larger venues cancelled, folk musicians were driven underground into the cafes of cities like New York and San Francisco, alongside the poetry, art and literature of the Beats. From this, these so-called subversives (Figure 5) developed an entire subculture associated with youth and protest which gained momentum and influence that continued through the 1970s. The generation's tradition of political discourse and

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[17] van Elteren, 72.
[18] "How Folk Music History Came to Be Blowin' in the Wind," *USA Today Magazine* 144, no. 2844 (September 2015): 54-59.

challenging of the status quo can be credited with the monumental cultural changes that developed during this period. And it all started within the *third place* of the corner café.

Today, café culture has been dominated by Starbucks, an international chain with over 22,519 locations (as of June 28, 2015).[19] The company describes its locations as *third places*, according to the corporate website.[20] However, do they meet Oldenburg's criteria of a *third place*, with conversation being the main activity, a playful mood and the "regulars" providing character? Starbucks, with its standardized interior design, menus and employee uniforms, strives for a distinctive corporate identity across all locations, seemingly counterintuitive to the concept of a *third place*. With over seventy million customers visiting Starbucks every week (as of December 2013),[21] streamlining operations and consumer experience increases productivity and corporate profits. But should these really be considerations within the context of an authentic *third place*?

One method of increasing revenue within the hospitality industry is to establish fast service and customer turnover. For Starbucks, this has meant expanding their drive-through business so that patrons can order and receive their beverage without ever leaving their vehicle or entering the café. In 2013, the company announced that sixty percent of the 1,500 new stateside locations planned to open over the next five years would have drive-through windows.[22] Additionally, Starbucks' recent development of a mobile app allows customers to place their order before entering the store, pay remotely and bypass the line upon arriving.[23] In utilizing the

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[19] "Starbucks Company Profile," *Starbucks Corporation,* accessed April 15, 2016, http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information/starbucks-company-profile

[20] "Our Heritage," *Starbucks Corporation,* accessed April 15, 2016, http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information

[21] Geoff Colvin, "Questions for Starbucks' Chief Bean Counter," *Fortune* 168, no. 9 (Dec. 9, 2013): 78.

[22] Rick Aristotle Munarriz, "Starbucks Changes Direction with Big Drive-Thru Plans," *Daily Finance* (January 30, 2013).

[23] "Skip the Starbucks queue with just a few taps," *Fast Company* no. 189 (October 2014): 110.

app, the consumer's time within the café is greatly reduced (they can now enter, pick up their pre-paid order and exit without even having to speak to an employee or anyone else, if desired). These innovations are clearly in the interest of corporate profitability and efficiency, but are they conducive to sustaining a legitimate *third place*?

1.3   Fourth Place

Our modern world feels smaller, with most people being connected via smartphones and social media. Is this virtual existence the contemporary *third place* rather than the traditional built environment of a café or pub? Rao has discussed the concept of Facebook as a *third place*[24] based on its use for socialization, but the idea was rejected by Stenros, Paavilainen and Kinnunen as a result of their study of Finnish Facebook users (in their twenties and thirties) during the spring of 2010.[25] They concluded that Facebook was not actually a separate *place*, primarily because it was visited while physically at home or work (Oldenburg's first and second places, respectively).[26] They asserted that Facebook, although part of everyday life, is simply a medium.

The Finnish study indicated that most participants preferred to access Facebook via a desktop computer rather than a mobile device.[27] However, since the study's publication, location services have been introduced and enhanced on Facebook as well as a number of other applications. Tinder (a location-based social media app), for example, merges an individual's online presence with their physical location. Rather than meeting strangers via traditional face-to-face interactions, Tinder tracks a user's physical location and provides profiles (including

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[24] V. Rao, "Facebook Applications and Playful Mood: The Construction of Facebook as a 'Third Place,'" MindTrek '08, *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Entertainment and Media in the Ubiquitous Era*, Tampere, Finland, October 7-9, 2008: 8-12.

[25] Jaako Stenros, Janne Paavilainen and Jani Kinnunen, "Giving Good 'Face:' Playful Performances of Self in Facebook," MindTrek '11, *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*, Tampere, Finland, September 28-30, 2011: 153-160.

[26] Oldenburg, 20-48.

[27] Rao, 8-12.

photos) of other nearby users for review. Once the profile photos appear, the user can swipe

their finger across their smartphone screen (right for potential interest, left to skip to the next

profile). If both parties indicate mutual interest, the app will allow the users to "meet" online

and potentially in person. In recent years, the use of location-based social media has grown

exponentially. As of 2014, Tinder was registering more than one billion "swipes" per day.[28] A

number of other apps (including Grindr and OkCupid) use location services to merge a user's

online presence with their physical environment, bypassing "unnecessary" face-to-face

interactions in the interest of efficiency in meeting a new friend, love interest or sexual

encounter. Even in other daily online activities such as shopping or searching for a nearby

restaurant with good reviews, users have become accustomed to their mobile device utilizing

location services. The ease of use and frequency of visits to this virtual realm has arguably

resulted in another place altogether (a *fourth place*). This space exists independent of our body's

physical location but is able to interface with our physical world as desired. It is *ours* and *other*

simultaneously.

With contemporary society's focus on convenience, efficiency and speed, our visits to

fourth places have become part of everyday life. Often, they are the preferred method of

communication in our current era favoring increased automation and immediate gratification.

Facebook, the most widely-used social media application, reported over 1 billion users logging

in on a single day in August of 2015 (1 in 7 humans on earth).[29] During this period, there were

over 1.5 billion users who logged in at least once per month and the tech industry predicted that

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[28] Nick Bilton, "Tinder, the Fast-Growing Dating App, Taps an Age-Old Truth," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 30, 2004.

[29] David Lee, "Facebook has a billion users in a single day, says Mark Zuckerberg," *BBC News,* August 28, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34082393.

users would continue to increase as Facebook focused on expansions in Asia, South America and Africa.[30]

Like the neighborhood cafes used by previous generations as meeting places to organize political action and cultivate revolutionary ideology, modern social media has served as a space for people to assemble in pursuit of similar objectives. In January and February 2011, pro-democracy protesters in Cairo staged a revolution and overthrew the Egyptian regime in a mere eighteen days by using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to organize protesters and disseminate information to Western media outlets.[31] Rather than depending on the physical environment (such as a traditional *third place*), the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was arguably a "digital revolution," organized online by young tech-savvy activists more familiar with social media than the older generation of despots. The revolution served as a demonstration of the power of social media and mobile technology, the *fourth place* playing a major role in the description of events reported in the international press. By many accounts, a narrative developed in which technology itself was a revolutionary figure, representing freedom and power in the hands of its users (the political protestors). But was technology responsible for the Egyptian Revolution? Or were the users (the revolutionaries) really the ones who should be credited? By many accounts, most of the political activists were young and previously apolitical, such as 29-year-old Google marketing executive Wael Ghonim.[32] Ghonim, in his biographical account of the revolution, describes himself as a "real-life introvert yet an internet extrovert" who began a Facebook page that was credited with organizing the revolutionary movement by giving young Arabs a voice in

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[30] David Lee, "Facebook has a billion users in a single day, says Mark Zuckerberg," *BBC News,* August 28, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34082393.

[31] Sam Gustin, "Social Media Sparked, Accelerated Egypt's Revolutionary Fire," *Wired*, Feb. 11, 2011, http://www.wired.com/2011/02/egypts-revolutionary-fire/

[32] Jose Antonio Vargas, "Spring Awakening," *The New York Times,* Feb. 17, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/books/review/how-an-egyptian-revolution-began-on-facebook.html?_r=0

their homeland.[33] The political unrest that began online spilled out onto the street, ultimately leading to an overthrow of the existing regime. Subsequently arrested and tortured, Ghonim (albeit reluctantly) became a real-life political figure of martyrdom and revolution. As a tech-industry executive, Ghonim has often been viewed as a physical representation of the power of the internet and social media within the context of the Arab Spring. For many, *social* and *social media* are difficult to separate, blurring the lines between technology, people and the *places* they occupy. But should they be viewed as separate? What are the implications of this perceived overlap?

In 2010, the Kaiser Family Foundation published a study about media usage among tweens and teens aged 8-18 in the United States.[34] The study reported a number of social trends among these "digital natives" who had, for the most part, come of age in the era of the internet, mobile technology and social media. Some disturbing implications surfaced surrounding the habits, attitudes and perceptions of young people regarding their use of media. The study reported that the average teen 11-14 years old experienced nearly 12 total hours of media exposure each day, accounting for a larger block of their time than any other activity.[35] "Heavy users" of media described themselves as often bored, sad or unhappy and reported "getting into trouble a lot" more frequently than "moderate" or "light users" of media.[36] Related studies by the American Academy of Pediatrics reveal that media and technology usage increase the risk of childhood obesity and that nearly a third of American children are overweight or obese.[37]

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[33] Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: the power of the people is greater than the people in power: a memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

[34] V. Rideout, U. Foehr and D. Roberts, "GENERATION M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds," *The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation* (January 2010).

[35] Rideout, 5.

[36] Rideout, 4.

[37] V.C. Strasburger, "Policy Statement: Children, Adolescents, Obesity, and the Media," The American Academy of Pediatrics, *Pediatrics*, volume 128, no. 1 (July 2011).

Because this national health epidemic will undoubtedly have a negative effect on the overall

health and life expectancy of future generations, the American Academy of Pediatrics

recommends limiting media exposure to no more than two hours per day.[38]

Besides the documented detrimental effects on public health, technology's interface with

the physical environment can have negative safety implications as well. According to the

National Traffic Highway Safety Administration, there were 3,154 people killed and an

estimated additional 424,000 injured in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers in

2013.[39] For teenagers (digital natives), the statistics are even more alarming. Ten percent of all

drivers 15 to 19 years old involved in fatal crashes were reported as distracted at the time of the

collisions.[40] This age group has the largest proportion of drivers who were distracted at the time

of automotive crashes.[41] Is the interface between the physical environment and a virtual *fourth*

place so commonplace, so habitual that the lines between the two are blurred, even to the point

of danger?

Today's teenagers, perched precariously between childhood and adulthood, are

particularly vulnerable as their psychological and social development remains very much a

"work in progress." Since this age group uses mobile technology and social media more than

any other,[42] the effects are troubling. A large, nationally representative sample of high school

students in the United States revealed that cyberbullying (online bullying) is quite common, with

more than 27% of participating teens reporting being victims.[43] The effects of bullying within a

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[38] Strasburger, 204.

[39] U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *Distracted Driving 2013*, DOT HS 812 132 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis, April 2015): 1.

[40] Ibid., 1.

[41] Ibid., 1.

[42] Rideout, 5.

[43] Erick Messias, Kristi Kindrick and Juan Castro, "School bullying, cyberbullying, or both: correlates of teen suicidality in the 2011 CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey," *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 55, no. 5 (2014): 1063.

fourth place are alarming, with increased risk for depression, suicidal ideation, suicide planning and suicidal attempts over in-person (traditional) bullying alone.[44]

So are virtual communities somehow more powerful, more intense and filled with potential than traditional physical spaces? For digital native millennials raised in an era of increased homogenization of the American city and its suburbs, *fourth places* are arguably more frequented and commonplace than the built environment of *third places*. However, the publicized dangers of *fourth places* (especially when they interface with our physical environment, such as in cases of texting while driving) don't seem to deter usage as media consumption by teens continues to increase each year.[45] Will this generation's perception of community continue to evolve, resulting in a completely free-form *fourth place* environment, untethered by specific time or place? Does this model benefit society? Or does culture still need *third places* rooted in the physical world of the built environment?

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[44] Ibid., 1063.
[45] Rideout, 2.

2   EXHIBITION

My thesis exhibition, *#Community,* focuses on *fourth place* and how our built environment promotes, controls or inhibits access to this space. I explore the paradigm shift that has occurred with the introduction of virtual environments and communication methods into the traditional physical markers of communities. The exhibition is a visual representation of my thesis research within a gallery context.

One of my goals of the exhibition is to question how we exist and communicate within a space (both physical and virtual). From a curatorial standpoint, the design and arrangement of the exhibit is important as the sequencing of the pieces is meant to tell a story by introducing questions or issues in a particular order (Figure 6). To guide the gallery visitor, I designed and installed signage which was numbered utilizing the hashtag ("#") from the exhibition's *#Community* logo (Figures 7 and 8), referencing the dual meaning of the symbol.
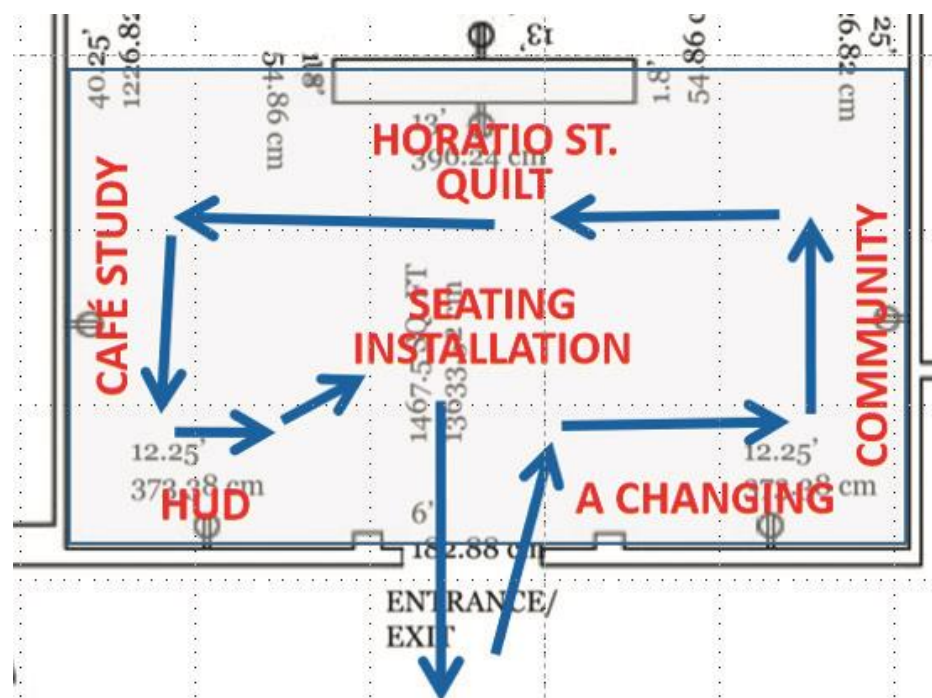
Figure 6: *#Community*, exhibition floorplan
Ernest G. Welch Gallery, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia
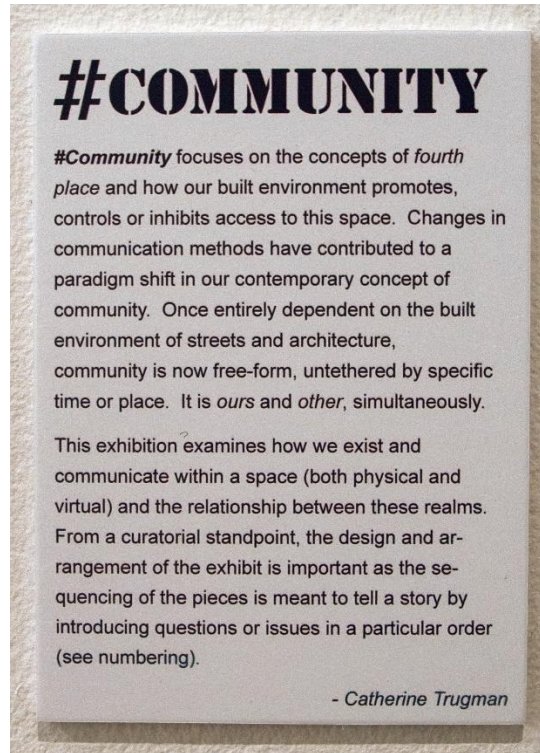
Figure 7: *#Community*, exhibition signage at gallery entrance
Ernest G. Welch Gallery, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia
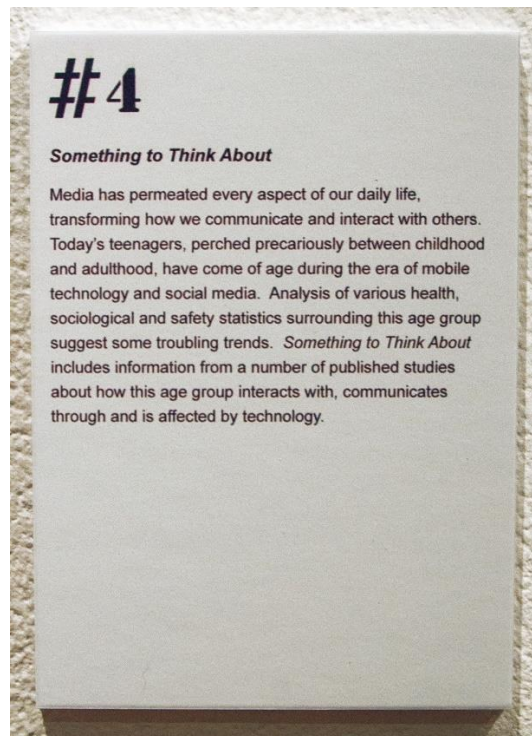
Figure 8: #*Community*, exhibition signage at individual works
Ernest G. Welch Gallery, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia

Upon entering the gallery, the exhibition begins at the right with a photography series about the disappearing landmarks of my current community in metro Atlanta (Figure 9). Once a small but self-sufficient town outside of the city, urban sprawl and expanding highway systems have swallowed up the area and its former identity. In the process, independent retailers and community landmarks have all but disappeared in favor of strip malls filled with big box stores and large parking lots. My photographs document these markers (like a barbershop, a produce stand, an old pharmacy and a picnic pavilion) in the midst of their transitional existence. Currently, some of these relics remain (although rarely used) while others stand abandoned. The photographs are meant to elicit discomfort as the viewer contemplates these once-meaningful community markers in their current blighted state. The documentary-style photos capture these landmarks mid-disappearance, freezing in time the choice between a community's unique identity and homogenization.

Figure 9: Installation of photo series about disappearing landmarks, 2016
#Community, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia

Bench (Figure 10), depicts an example of public seating sponsored by a civic association whose name is emblazoned across the back. Upon closer examination, one can see that the structure has quite a worn appearance and its foundation has settled over time, resulting in an "off-balance" effect as the bench leans slightly in one direction. Apparently painted and repaired many times, the bench now sits against a blank wall (its old mural having been painted over somewhat haphazardly), its legs and surrounding areas uninvitingly splattered with mud from recent rainstorms. The bench sits lonely now, rarely used, its once-vibrant location now all but deserted in a sea of shuttered small shops on the town's former main street.
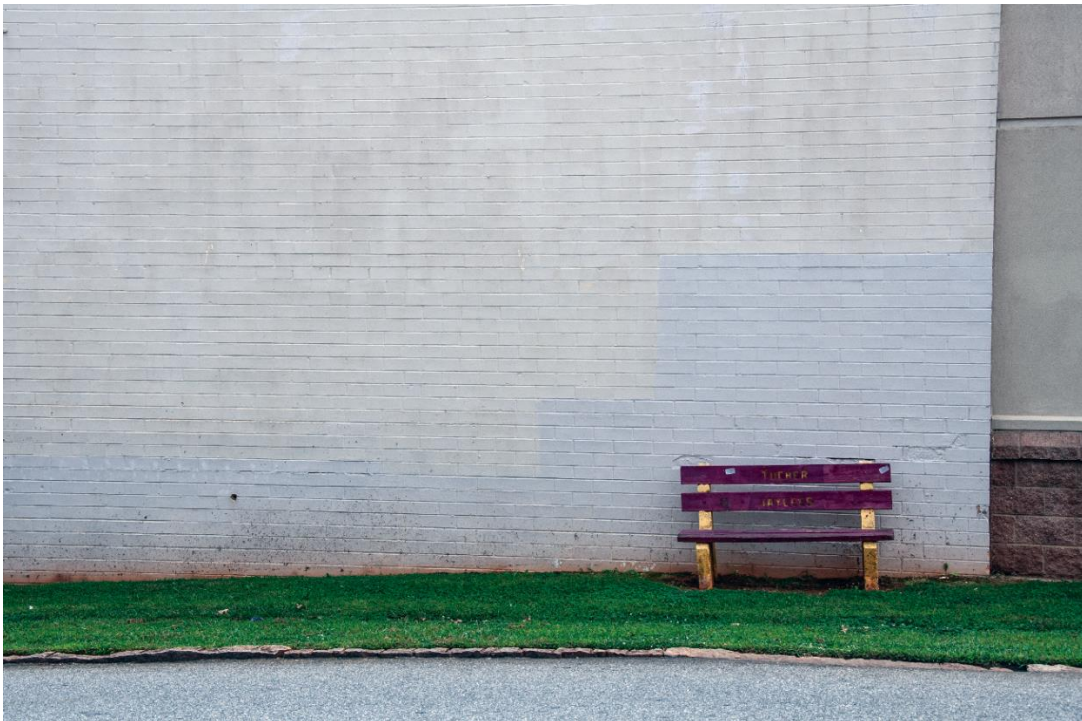
Figure 10: Catherine Trugman, *Bench*, 2015
Digital photograph, 10 in. x 14 in.

Similarly, *Forgotten Storefront* (Figure 11) documents an abandoned grocery store, its parking lot overgrown with weeds and littered with debris. In years past, the market served as an important community amenity, a place where one was guaranteed to run into neighbors as they

carried out their essential task of weekly shopping. After a big box retailer opened nearby, customers dwindled and the store was forced to close. The closure began a domino effect of decline in the area as nearby houses and apartments became undesirable due to the unsightly view of the abandoned store. Over time, the entire area fell into disrepair and became a magnet for crime and vagrancy. The storefront remains, its dated façade frozen in time. Since the area now holds no reason for a visit, the lingering effect is rarely seen by most community residents. *Forgotten Storefront* challenges us to consider the consequences of such closures on neighborhoods and on our society at large.

Figure 11: Catherine Trugman, *Forgotten Storefront*, 2015
Digital photograph, 10 in. x 14 in.

Continuing through the exhibition, *Horatio Street Quilt* is displayed on a large freestanding wall centered in the gallery (Figure 13). As with other quilts constructed for a commemorative purpose (a marriage, new baby, etc.), this piece commemorates my return visit to my former neighborhood in New York City's Greenwich Village area near Horatio Street where I lived as a young adult just out of college beginning in 1991. I chose to return to the neighborhood during December 2015 and re-explore the sights and sounds of the community. Besides the absence of the café on Seventh Avenue where I had spent so much time, most of the historic neighborhood's architecture and physical character remained. However, the occupants' behavior deviated drastically from the urban performance I remembered. I noticed that, even here, in a neighborhood often identified with an interactive culture of art, music and politics, many people frequently used technology as a barrier between themselves and the physical environment (Figure 12). *Horatio Street Quilt* documents the neighborhood and its people as it stands today, complete with the incorporation of mobile devices into the street landscape.

Figure 12: Catherine Trugman, individual square from *Horatio Street Quilt*, 2016
Digital photograph, 10 in. x 10 in.

Figure 13: Catherine Trugman, installation of *Horatio Street Quilt*, 2016
Digital photographs, tape, yellow adhesive paper, 130 in. x 100 in.

This large-scale piece is created by assembling printed digital photographs in a geometric

pattern, reminiscent of a simple quilt design with yellow accents (Figures 13 and 14).

Traditionally, quilts have been created by groups of women in a community known as a *quilting*

bee. Typical large quilt sizes often benefited from more than one set of hands to stitch patterns

into the sections of sewn-together fabric. These gatherings of women became an important part

of life in eras such as colonial America where women were not typically viewed as having an

identity or even a function outside the boundaries of home. These groups became invaluable

venues for much-needed social interaction and were culturally acceptable since their purpose was to create utilitarian objects for use in the home. However, rather than a *quilting bee*, my collaborator on *Horatio Street Quilt* was technology itself. Rather than gathering in a group of people to produce the squares and piece them together, I used a camera, a large scale printer and various software programs to capture, edit and print the components of the project. When determining how to attach the pieces to one another, I consulted with an internet search engine to research options and purchased the appropriate materials online for home delivery.

Figure 14: Catherine Trugman, detail of *Horatio Street Quilt*, 2016
Digital photographs, tape, yellow adhesive paper, 130 in. x 100 in.

Quilting and textile arts have conceptual ties to both the home and the human body, having traditionally been used for warmth and home décor. Rather than textiles, *Horatio Street Quilt* uses printed paper, which allows the composition to be visually identified as a quilt while lacking the comforting tactile quality typically associated with the textile arts. I chose to display the finished piece hanging freely from hooks installed at the top of the gallery wall, similar to methods utilized for traditional quilts on display during various quilt shows and state fairs (Figure 13). In this way, the stiff "non-textile" quality of the digital photo paper is featured, highlighting the contrast between traditional quilts and this digital one.

In most traditional quilt patterns, there is a prescribed system and order within the arrangement and composition of the design. *Horatio Street Quilt*'s system is that of identifying technology users in the individual photos by the addition of yellow adhesive paper within the affected blocks. The arrangement of the yellow accents forms a "ordered" appearance reminiscent of a city grid or pedestrian pathways and energizes areas of the composition by drawing attention to the activities documented within particular squares. The squares of the quilt feature documentary-style digital photos captured in a single afternoon during December 2015 as I became an urban *flâneur* on Horatio Street. Set against a backdrop of historic architecture and cobblestone streets, people utilize smartphones and other technology to transport themselves into a virtual community of sorts. Are these people really on Horatio Street or are they somewhere else? Or are they nowhere at all?

The next component of *#Community* is *The Café Project* (Figure 15), a film featuring modern-day café patrons and their activities within the context of a neighborhood café. *The Café Project* has a "security camera" quality as I utilized very few editing techniques, choosing to capture a modern-day candid slice of life in my neighborhood outpost of a popular

café chain. Filmed on a Sunday afternoon in February, I ordered my usual beverage, sat at my

usual chair, placed a small video camera on my table and pressed "record," letting technology

document the real-life activities as they occurred in my *third place*. The concept behind the film

is to create a contemporary version of Toulouse-Lautrec's *At the Café La Mie* (Figure 2),

complete with the interface of the *fourth place* into the built environment. As Toulouse-Lautrec

referenced the then-new technology of photography in his composition and cropping of figures, I

reference the recent technological innovations of portable "action cameras" (my choice to film

The Café Project) by allowing the camera to set the parameters of the shot, including the "fish-

eye effect" of the café table that it rests upon. Unlike Toulouse-Lautrec who trained and toiled

for years to refine his painting technique, I taught myself how to use this camera by reading

blogs and viewing YouTube videos in a single afternoon. As with Horatio Street Quilt, I used

technology as my collaborator, commenting on the mainstreaming of art production in our era of

instantaneous information and expectation of immediate gratification.

Figure 15: Catherine Trugman, screenshot of *The Café Project*, 2016
8-minute film with sound and music

In the film, most café visitors utilize smartphones, laptops and other mobile tech devices. For the most part, they do not communicate with others in the physical environment except for a few who interact at the service counter where patrons retrieve their drinks after ordering. One man using a laptop computer meets up with a friend, exchanges a few words and then quickly goes back to his laptop while his friend proceeds to take photos of himself and text using his smartphone. At another point in the film, a man and woman enter the café together, the man carrying a laptop computer and a set of headphones. They proceed to a now-unoccupied set of small tables side by side, while the woman can be overheard asking "so we're not going to sit together?" The woman, now apparently with no one to talk to (we assume the man has begun working on the laptop while wearing the headphones), stares ahead briefly before occupying herself on her smartphone while drinking her beverage.

The resulting performance is one of disconnectedness, with café patrons rarely making eye contact or speaking to each other. The exception is a young couple waiting by the café service counter, smiling and hugging each other. They seem almost out of place, their behavior so different from the others in the café, more akin to Renoir's portrayal of café patrons from the late nineteenth century in his painting *Au café* (Figure 1). Several minutes into the film, a man at a nearby table places ear buds in his ears, synchronizing with the start of Bob Dylan's song "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright."[46] The Dylan ballad, recorded in a folk revival style, is often associated with the cafés of New York's Greenwich Village in the 1960s where he often performed.[47] Only the song is dubbed in, with the other sounds of the film having occurred

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[46] Bob Dylan, "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," by Bob Dylan, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Warner Brothers, Inc., 1963.

[47] "How Folk Music History Came to Be Blowin' in the Wind," *USA Today Magazine* (September 2015): 54-59.

spontaneously during recording. The Dylan melody, reminiscent of a bygone era, stands in sharp

contrast to the contemporary café environment depicted in the film.

In my thesis exhibition, *The Café Project* is shown on a loop (repeating automatically) on

a flat-screen monitor atop a white pedestal with headphones hanging below (Figure 16). The

presentation layout is meant to evoke a sense that the film is an artifact, an archeological or

anthropological relic worthy of display on a museum-quality pedestal. In order to hear the sound

elements of the film, the visitor is forced to engage with the physical elements of the display by

picking up the headphones and placing them on their head. Whether they are rewarded with

hearing the film's music depends on how long they choose to participate and remain engaged

with the display.

Figure 16: Catherine Trugman, installation of *The Café Project*, 2016
Film shown on flat-screen monitor on pedestal with accompanying headphones

The next piece in the exhibition is *Something to Think About*, a graphic triptych which includes information from a number of published studies about how tweens and teens interact with, communicate through and are affected by technology (Figure 17). Analysis of various health, sociological and safety statistics surrounding this age group (primarily digital natives) suggest some troubling trends which are included in the piece. The font sizing and its contrast with the background color require the viewer to step back in order to read the text. At the top (where one would begin reading), the text is aligned from one panel to the next. Continuing down the panels, however, the text shifts slightly out of position, making the sentences more difficult to read as the viewer progresses through the graphic. The subtle effect is disconcerting, adding to the sense of unease evoked by the subject and content described in the text itself.
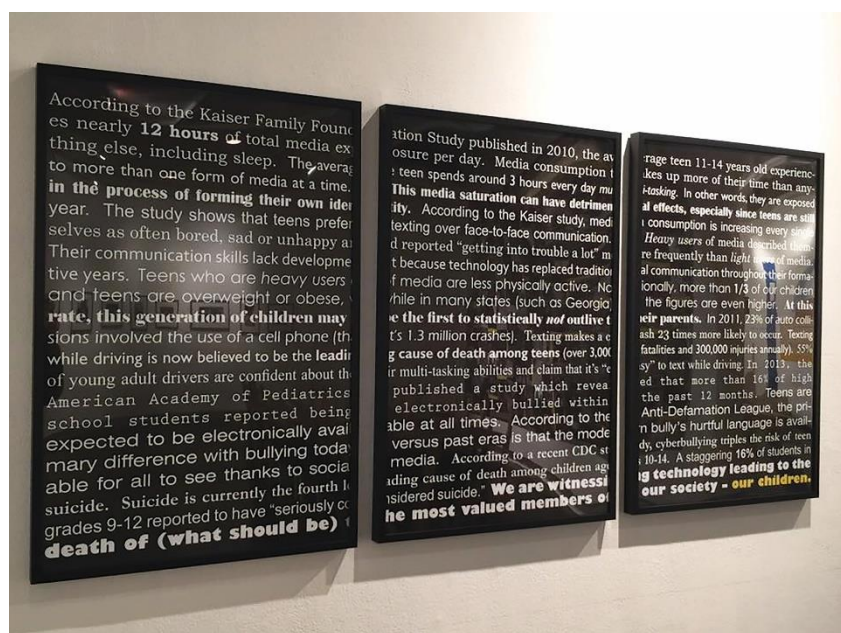
Figure 17: Catherine Trugman, installation of *Something to Think About*, 2016
Graphics printed on digital paper, framed in three panels

Having shown the presence of technology within our physical space and its effects on communication and interaction within the built environments of our communities, the next piece

addresses the outright danger associated with these realities. *Hang Up & Drive* is an installation

(Figures 18 and 19) which includes a prototypical system I designed (a "*HUD*") that prohibits

texting while driving. The layout includes a 3-D printed smartphone sleeve attached to a toy car

wired to a breadboard and other electronic equipment. Arduino coding used for the *HUD*

programming is included as a graphic backdrop for the assemblage (Figure 18).
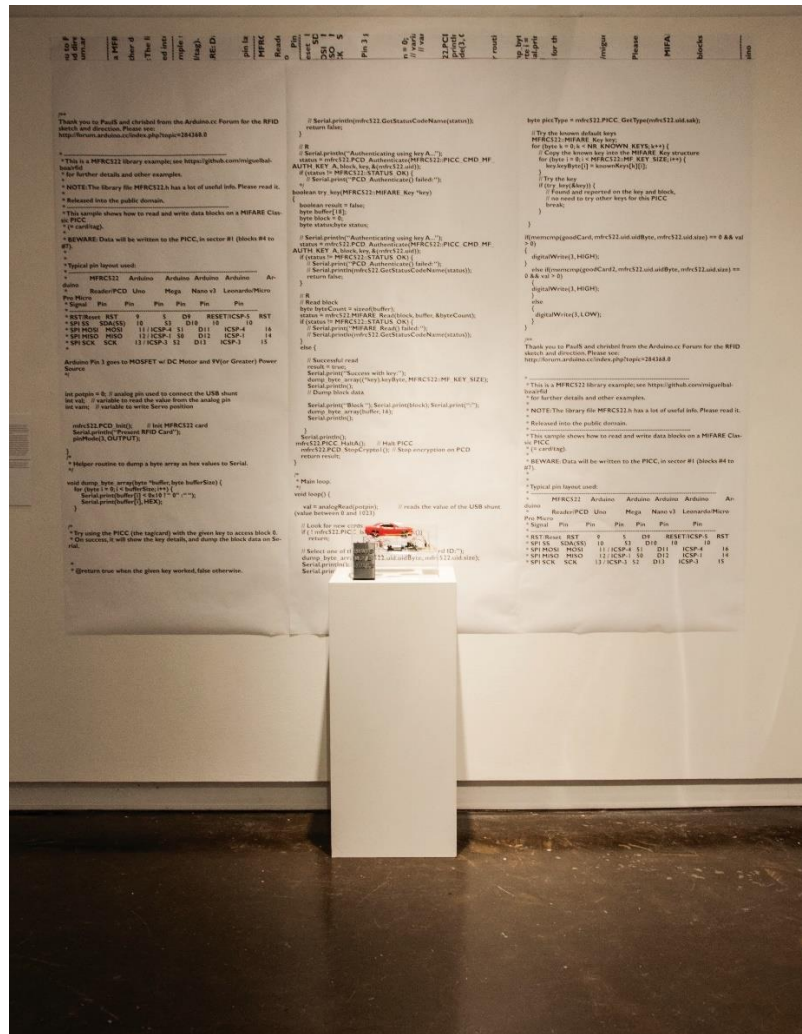
Figure 18: Catherine Trugman, installation of *Hang Up & Drive*, 2016
Assemblage with toy car, 3-D printed sleeve, motherboard, battery and various electrical components, 120 in. x 100 in.

Although the design is successful in this prototypical format, the installation narrates the

great effort to control habitual access to technology. Before smartphone technology existed,

humans arguably did not have an expectation of constant and unrestricted access. Now that this

technology is commonplace, many people have difficulty controlling their own access, even

when it's not safe to do so (such as while driving). This behavior borders on obsession or

addiction and, to combat it, the use of this complex prototype is proposed. Additionally,

Hang Up & Drive comments on the use of *additional* technology to lessen the danger of using

existing technology. In our capitalist society, designing yet another new product is often the

standard approach to correct or enhance an existing product. But is this really the best idea? In

the gallery display, the proliferation of technology components and computer coding language is

designed to confront (and even overwhelm), forcing contemplation of these important issues.

My hope is that the viewer considers their own driving behavior and attempts to make changes to

their technology access in order to improve safety.
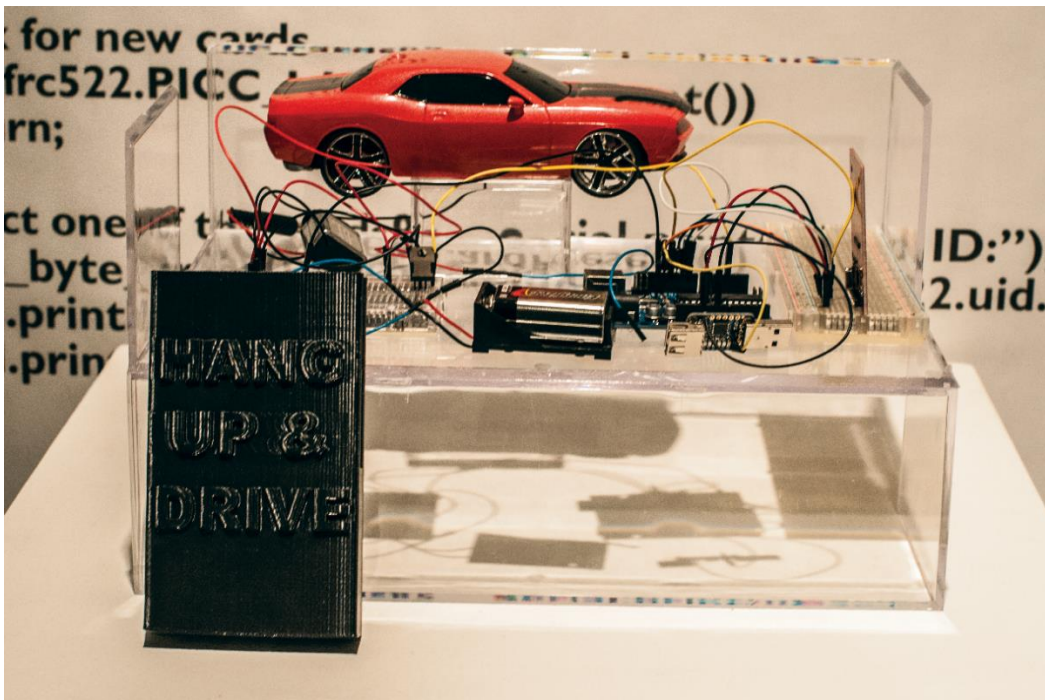
Figure 19: Catherine Trugman, detail of *Hang Up & Drive*, 2016
Assemblage with toy car, 3-D printed sleeve, motherboard, battery and various electrical components

The final stop in *#Community* is a series of three installations comprised of tables and chairs entitled *Look Up*, *Talk to Me* and *Connect*. A message appears on each tabletop (Figures 20 and 21) in stencil-type lettering reminiscent of the markings used for parking spaces or municipal signage, suggesting uniformity and authority. The bare wood of the stenciled letters suggests a more natural state of existence or perhaps a vintage idea. Much like a museum exhibit or historic home tour explaining a relic of a bygone era, the display suggests an alternate narrative in which the physical environment (and associated traditional face-to-face interactions) moves towards obsolescence.

Figure 20: Catherine Trugman, installation of *Look Up*, *Talk to Me* and *Connect*, 2016
Pine tables and chairs with pigmented stain and polyurethane

Figure 21: Catherine Trugman, installation of *Look Up*, *Talk to Me* and *Connect*, 2016
Pine tables and chairs with pigmented stain and polyurethane

On the other hand, the seating is meant to be used by visitors and is designed as a point of contemplation. The installation is created as an artistic experiment to explore how visitors interact with the art and with each other. Once viewers sit on and interact with the furniture, they become part of the exhibit. Will subsequent visitors follow the lead of others by inhabiting the installation and "making it their own?" And, if they do, will face-to-face (traditional) interaction and communication occur within the context of the exhibit? The installations of *Look Up*, *Talk to Me* and *Connect* create a *third place* within the gallery, which encourages examination and reflection about the disconnectedness of our everyday life in an age where we are constantly "connected" to everyone via modern technology.

Figure 22: Opening reception visitors interacting with furniture installations, 2016
#Community, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, Georgia State University

During the course of the *#Community* exhibition, gallery visitors intermittently used the installations as a place of social interaction, with the most activity occurring during the opening reception (Figures 22 and 23). There were several occasions where visitors asked either myself (if I happened to be in the gallery space) or the gallery's security officer if they were "really allowed" to sit at the tables. Since many galleries and museums have a "no touching" policy regarding interaction with artwork, some viewers were unsure about the protocol and regulations of the exhibit despite the gallery signage which gave permission for viewers to use the furniture. As possible future work, I would like to explore the possibility of installing these in other (non-gallery) locations and observing interactions within these other environments.

Figure 23: Opening reception visitors interacting with furniture installations, 2016
#Community, Ernest G. Welch Gallery, Georgia State University

#Community is important, particularly within a university setting where most attendees

and passersby are millennials who have, for the most part, come of age using portable

technology and social media. The exhibition gallery is located adjacent to the lobby of the

Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design at Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta,

Georgia. The building serves as a pedestrian cut-through to other neighboring buildings on the

urban campus, allowing for a larger audience who might discover the exhibition while

en route to another destination in a nearby building.

One of the goals of *#Community* is to bring attention to our behaviors regarding

interpersonal interaction and communication within our built environment. With so much

communication occurring within *fourth places*, we must examine the long-term effects on

dwindling traditional (face-to-face) communication. Will the need for physical proximity

become obsolete in the future? What are the anthropologic implications of these changes? My

hope is that reflection on these issues will lead to a conscious effort to integrate more

face-to-face purposeful communication into our daily routine. In doing so, perhaps relationships will be nurtured and meaningful new connections will be made.

3   CONCLUSION

Our environment is not simply the backdrop for our life's story, it's one of the main characters. My work explores the complex relationship between human beings and their environment. Through the ages, people have altered their surroundings in various ways to better suit their perceived needs. Through this process, we become focused on change and the evolution of our built environment, discarding outdated spaces now somehow seen as irrelevant. In the midst of this constant change, it's important to pause and consider the effects of these perpetual revisions and bring focus to the cultural issues that urge us to evolve our habitats.

So will the evolution of *fourth places* render the built environment obsolete? If so, what does this mean for the practice of designing those built environments? Obviously, this is the topic for much additional exploration and debate. However, as an interior designer and educator, I believe that we need to allow space for the development of these not-yet-known concepts and realms in our teaching of design. Interior design regulation in the United States has pushed the industry to establish parameters in order to define the profession within the context of government regulation, licensing and trade organizations. Although many agree that these developments have contributed to furthering the profession, we must use caution when incorporating them as strict interpretations of what the future holds for design. Today's increasingly transparent, "open-source" movement will likely continue, and even increase in the future. Interdisciplinary work, collaboration and improved communication methods will be indispensable and should be emphasized to students and emerging designers. We must

encourage exploration of these concepts and allow students to evolve ideas surrounding the

relationships between *places* and with each other. And perhaps this could all begin with the

design of a café.

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