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Useful Community Development... quick notes

Inside: Environmental Justice, Feature Story on "Third Places," and Accessory Dwelling Units

Visit us and explore at <https://www.useful-community-development.org>.

40 Environmental Justice Policies You Might Adapt for Your Community

The Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School has just published a new scan of ways that American communities are trying to address environmental justice issues. As we explain on [our own page](#) on the topic, environmental justice deals with an equal distribution of environmental good stuff and bad stuff throughout wealthy, middle, and poor neighborhoods.

[Check out](#) the Tishman Center and Natural Resources Defense Council report to see if there is a land use policy that your own city should consider. Ideas range from bans on specific polluting industries, to public health codes, to "proactive planning" (we just call it "planning") to assure that future development does not aggravate environmental injustices of the past.

Feature Story: Ideas for Community Meeting Spaces



Every neighborhood or community needs one or more "third places" where people can hang out, meet new people, hold informal meetings and conversations, and be exposed to the full range of colors, flavors, and sounds of the community. "Third places" has entered the jargon of community development now, but it just means somewhere away from home and work that is a community meeting space. It might be a for-profit business or a non-profit setting.

Why do we say your community "needs" this? Because these are the places where civic work gets done, where new ideas are hatched and incubated, where informal business meetings and introductions occur, where we counteract the loneliness of work-at-home mode, and where "social capital" is built. (Social capital is another piece of jargon, referring to networks of networks, which again are useful for civic and business life.)

In many cultures, it is ridiculous to think about having to create a third place, since plazas, bars, evening promenades, and courtyards serve the function quite well. Most European cities boast ample spaces and traditions that would make inventing such a place quite a silly exercise. But as Piazza San Marco in Venice (above) reminds us, these may or may not function very well for residents, as compared to tourists.

Village cultures around the world encourage or compel cooperation from multiple families to achieve everyday tasks, and they too mostly do not need to encourage a deliberate strategy.

But many American neighborhoods, and suburban neighborhoods elsewhere, will need to be conscious in working on attracting or building out a third place.

More affluent neighborhoods in a capitalist system also don't have to worry about nudging third places into existence for very long, because the market will fill the void with a coffee shop or popular lunch or tapas hangout. These become community meeting places if--and only if--residents are willing to spend the time to be present to possibilities instead of being rushed.

If your neighborhood is below average in income level, or well above average in income but at the expense of having a population that doesn't have a minute to "waste," you will tend not to have that linger-awhile coffee shop. This means that any synergy and serendipity that could be generated through face-to-face conversations will benefit other parts of the region or even the nation.

So we want you to have lively third places. As a bonus they tend to keep young adults energized and loyal to your community. (To read about interesting research on this, see our website page on [community attachment](#).)

If you need a third place and don't have one, here are some ideas about the type of business you need to attract, or the existing place that you need to convince to share part of their premises for informal community gathering.



1. A few businesses are well-suited to this role. Note that if you cannot attract these businesses through direct appeal to those who are already operating them nearby, you could set one up on a non-profit community basis or start a community cooperative.

These businesses tend to be independent book stores, coffee houses, sandwich shops, or ice cream, gelato, or frozen yogurt places. Some franchise sandwich and frozen yogurt places do not qualify as third places, if their seating is limited and uncomfortable. Locally owned sandwich or gelato shops might function very well though.

Co-working spaces and businesses incubators, accelerators, or innovation centers may be willing to open their doors more explicitly to the community.



2. You could work with an existing community center, arts center, recreation center, or church to convince the management that they should share part of their space simply for community hanging out together. Potential problems with hours, security, rent, and organizational responsibility are sure to crop up in the initial discussion, but with patience, sufficient guarantees for everyone can and should be worked out. You might even be brave and ask your city hall for such a space.

3. Parks can become ideal community meeting spaces if they are well situated geographically, and if they are structured explicitly to encourage adults to gather and engage with one another. This works well year-round in temperate climates, but places where weather is uncomfortable part of the year will need to have alternatives.

4. If you have the space for a new outdoor plaza, perhaps because of an awkward lot in a business district, one or more city vacant lots, or an odd shape next to a

greenway or park, consider fund-raising to build a beautiful new outdoor meeting space. You can "furnish" it with benches that look more like sofas, "rugs" that are tiled or painted into the sidewalk, and "end tables" made from wrought iron. Add in a few small trees for shade, or a canvas shade structure until the trees grow larger, and you have the makings of an attractive space. A small bubbler fountain can provide white noise and a refreshing mist for those sitting nearby.

But if you take this approach, you have to make sure that it is somewhere remote enough from traffic, harsh weather, noise, and obnoxious pests that people will actually sit there to talk. Built-in chess or checkers tables will help.

5. A harder sell will be renting a vacant space from a shopping center for a reasonable price and with reasonable terms. This might work in an upper middle-class suburb that is highly community-oriented but temporarily overbuilt, but then again, entrepreneurs or franchisees will pick up on this market quickly. Paradoxically, in lower-income neighborhoods, shopping center and strip mall owners often are tough to work with, as they feel they must command a market-rate price for space to compensate them for the risk they are taking.

Now let's address spaces that are too small or too confined. Yes, every little bit of possible accidental meeting space helps, including benches on the bump-outs in your sidewalks in a commercial area.

But we are saying don't rely on too-tiny spaces to create the feeling of safety and permission to linger that a real third space requires. We have seen communities tell us that their third space is a 10 foot by 10 foot pop-up tent that they put up every Wednesday evening, a shade structure beside a local trail, a large-scale bus shelter, and a very small and narrow storefront with space for about four people to sit if they know each other well. No, those don't count.

Some resource pages from our website if you want to pursue this idea include the following:

[Streetscape](#)

[Retail attraction](#)

[Public art](#)

[Temporary use permits](#)

[Parklet](#) (these are a temporary or permanent installation of a tiny park, usually in former parking spaces)

[Cleaning up your neighborhood park](#)

[Neighborhood character](#)

[Small town character](#)

[Community poverty](#)

[Suburban retrofit](#)

[Community cultural development](#)

New Resource Guide for Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)

We were happy to see the new AARP guide to ADUs available for free download online. (For our readers outside the U.S., AARP is the American Association of Retired Persons.)

Accessory dwelling units, which might take the form of alley houses, carriage houses, over-the-garage apartments, or other arrangements, are gaining in popularity. This is especially true in higher-rent cities where housing has become a scarce commodity. Loosening zoning to permit more ADUs, often helped along by state or local legislation, has enabled this trend.

Accessory dwelling units may be especially appropriate for seniors who want to downsize or even live on the same lot as adult children. Of course they can be popular with young adults who cannot yet afford their own single-family home also.

Here's the page for [this download](#). The Livable Communities section of their website contains information on other topics of interest to communities planning for their retirees also.

New on Our Website This month we answered a question about the impact on deed restrictions when there are [no current HOA board members](#).

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