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#14 Connected and Sociable: Third Places in the Post-Digital City

ALEXANDRA KVIAT

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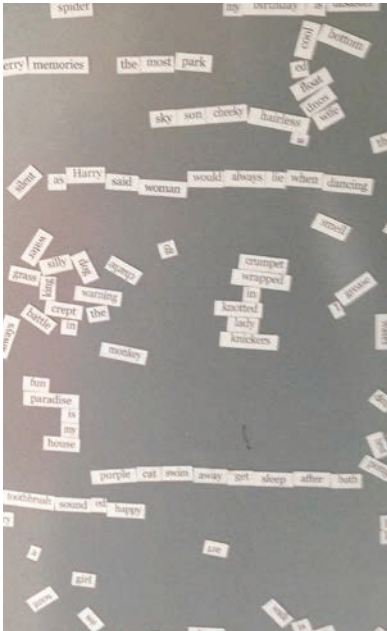
Connected and Sociable: Third Places in the Post-Digital City

Alexandra Kviat

The social and economic life of the 'post-digital city' is the focus of this latest CAMEo Cut. Alexandra Kviat examines the ways in which 'third places' – such as cafes, bars and bookstores – provide an intermediate, loosely defined space between work and leisure, where urban connections can take place, in both a digital and more 'analogue' social context. Yet, in challenging any strict separation between digital and analogue worlds, and by using the example of Ziferblat, the world's first 'pay-per-minute cafe', she shows how urban life and third place sociability is becoming both more hybrid and integrated, suggesting new ways of being and living in the post-digital city that move us beyond traditional conceptual binaries. Finally, in the ongoing wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, she also explores some of the implications for the kinds of urban culture and embedded sociability characteristic of pay-per-minute cafes and other, similarly shared, urban spaces.

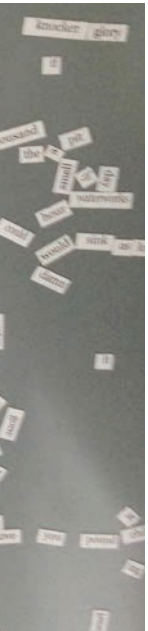


Connected and Sociable:

ALEXANDRA KVIAT

About the author

Alexandra Kviat is a postdoctoral research fellow at the CAMEo Research Institute. She holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Warwick. Her current project, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, brings together urban sociology, consumer culture research and media studies to further explore the concept of the 'post-digital city', introduced in her doctoral thesis as an emerging approach to urban planning, placemaking and creative entrepreneurship that strives to balance the advances of digital technology with the value of face-to-face social interaction. Her wider research interests include third places, cafe culture, the board game industry, collaborative work and living spaces, the sharing economy and social entrepreneurship. Before joining CAMEo, Alexandra was an early career fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick (2018–2019) and a Fulbright visiting fellow at the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2013–2014).



Connected and Sociable: Third Places in the Post-Digital City

The social role of so-called 'third places' – cafes, pubs, bars, bookstores, hair salons, gyms and other venues where we meet and socialise outside of home and work (Oldenburg, 1989) – has never been more evident than now, when many countries have had to shut them down to fight the spread of COVID-19. By bringing strangers together in a relaxed, informal and cosy environment, third places provide the social glue for our cities and communities, thus contributing to a fully functioning and sustainable society (Low, 2020). As I am writing this in May 2020, from a small UK town known for its vibrant hospitality scene, it is still unclear when and how our local third places and similar businesses across the country will be able to re-open their doors. Along with bringing new challenges and uncertainties, the global pandemic is shedding new light on the already existing debate about the future of third places in an increasingly digitised world and, more generally, the balance between the digital and the face-to-face in our lives.

The past few years have been marked by the growth of anti-digital sentiment in popular culture and media discourse. The examples are countless: from popular science books, think pieces and documentaries to artistic projects and internet memes,[1] digital technologies have been blamed for disengaging us from each other and reality, and contrasted with idealised images of pre-digital and offline sociality. Following on this trend, an increasing number of third places around the world have been implementing a low-tech/anti-screen policy, cutting off the wifi and limiting

or banning the use of gadgets on their premises.[2] However, the 'No Wifi, Talk to Each Other' sign does not always mean that the business owner is truly yearning to 'bring back the art of conviviality' – in fact, it may also disguise the intention to prevent customers from loitering to increase sales (Herd, 2018). Moreover, existing research has not revealed a deterministic relation between the use of mobile and digital technologies and the number of face-to-face interactions in a public place (Hampton and Gupta, 2008). And finally, the reliance of such initiatives on 'the off switch fantasy' (Vacca, 2016) begs the question of whether they will prove sustainable in the face of the global crisis we are facing today, being forced to move all our social activities online.

In this essay I outline a more balanced, post-digital approach to placemaking that sees technological connectivity and unmediated social interaction as equally important, intertwined and mutually supportive parts of our everyday lives, rather than two separate and conflicting areas, one of which needs to be protected from the other. Drawing on two theoretical insights – one from urban media studies and another from digital humanities – and my own research on a new form of third place called 'pay-per-minute cafes', I show how a creative integration of digital technology and the traditional, physical infrastructure of urban sociability can produce new, post-digital environments that are more than just a sum of both parts of the digital versus pre-digital dichotomy.

The Post-Digital City

The first concerns over the impact of information and communications technology on urban social life were raised long before the appearance of smartphones and ubiquitous internet access. Laying the groundwork for the now-burgeoning interdisciplinary field of urban media studies,[3] sociologists and media scholars of the 1950s-1970s linked the decline of social interaction in urban public space and the rise of privatism and social atomisation to the development of telecommunications (Meier, 1953; Deutsch, 1961; Sennett, 1977). The expansion of personal computers and home internet in the late 1980s – early 2000s further intensified this debate and focused it on the perceived gap between the real/physical city and its virtual/cyber/digital counterpart, luring people away from the traditional spaces of socialisation and leisure – streets, parks, squares and third places – into the 'city of bits' (Mitchell, 1995), typically portrayed as an abstract matrix of disrupted space and time (Boyer, 1992) and a threat to community and social cohesion (Putnam, 2000; Wellman, 2001). However, the proliferation of portable devices and wireless technologies in the mid-2000s has led media theorists to challenge this binary approach and reconceptualise the city as a hybrid of the physical/offline and digital/online – two realms that can only be understood in relation to each other (De Souza e Silva, 2006; Ridell and Zeller, 2013).

With this theoretical shift came new normative models of urban planning and placemaking, one of which seems particularly interesting in light of the current COVID-19 crisis, yet again recalibrating the balance between technology and human contact.
In 2005, communication scholars Gary Gumpert and Susan Drucker proposed the idea of the 'tertium quid' city (from a Latin term meaning 'something third', an unknown thing related in some way to two known things but distinct from both), defined as 'the city of new expectations, a place composed of its physical and electronic parts but distinctive and greater than the simple sum of its parts' (Gumpert and Drucker, 2005: 21). Instead of simply superimposing new technology on existing urban infrastructure or, conversely, trying to 'un-discover' digital media in pursuit of authenticity, the tertium quid city recognises the transformative potential of technological innovation but at the same time preserves the old social environments. The goal, therefore, is to create 'complementary landscapes in which the physical balances the media environment, and in which global contact supplements local relationships' (ibid.: 23).

Whether because the term 'tertium quid' was not catchy enough to grab the attention of urban practitioners, or because actual projects and initiatives based on the model outlined by Gumpert and Drucker were yet to emerge, this concept did not receive the attention it deserved. In the meantime, the neighbouring field of digital humanities has developed the concept of the post-digital, describing 'the messy and paradoxical condition of art and media after digital technology revolutions [that] neither recognises the distinction between "old" and "new" media, nor ideological affirmation of the one or the other. It merges "old" and "new", often applying network cultural experimentation to analog technologies which it reinvestigates and re-uses' (Andersen et al., 2014: 5). Widely applied in the theory and practice of design, film, music and publishing,[4] the term 'post-digital' can be extended to urbanism and used as an updated, more convenient and multivalent signifier for the idea articulated by Gumpert and Drucker.
To further flesh out the concept of the post-digital city, I offer the case study of Ziferblat, the world's first pay-per-minute cafe, and conclude with some preliminary reflections on the ongoing and future impact of COVID-19 on this and other third places around the world.

IMAGE 1

'A Social Media in Real Life'

In their theoretical sketch of the 'city of new expectations', Gumpert and Drucker (op. cit.: 23) briefly mentioned that future decision-makers, people 'of a new media generation', are different from their elders and ancestors in that they have 'a digital consciousness'. But how exactly does being a digital native affect one's way of thinking and making the city?

In 2011, a 27-year-old Moscow writer and cultural activist Ivan Mitin, struggling to find an affordable and friendly place where he could work, organise events and socialise without the pressure to constantly consume food and drinks, opened his own venue called Ziferblat (the Russian for 'clock face'). Unlike traditional cafes, Ziferblat charges customers only for the time spent in the space,[5] providing them with wifi, tea and coffee supplies and access to kitchen facilities. Not only are customers expected to be their own baristas and dishwashers, they are also encouraged to organise and host social and cultural events, cook communal meals, play the public piano, donate

books and board games and otherwise participate in Ziferblat's life. Although media were quick to label Ziferblat as a 'pay-per-minute cafe', the founder has always insisted that it is neither a cafe, nor a coworking space, nor a cultural centre, but a 'loose space' – a multifunctional, versatile, customisable environment to be framed and used by each customer in their own way.

As a person who, by his own account, 'grew up with the internet', Mitin envisioned Ziferblat as an alternative to traditional third places, 'stuck up in the pre-internet era and unable to give people variability and freedom of choice',[6] and a physical embodiment of the open-endedness, interactivity and connectivity of Web 2.0 culture, augmented with the opportunity of unmediated communication:

"Social media are a huge part of our lives, they shape our minds and behaviour. What they can't give you, though, is true, authentic, live human contact. They taught me and my generation freedom, flexibility and openness, and now we want to bring this culture into the offline world. Ziferblat is a social media in real life.[7]"

The idea caught on quickly: in just a couple of years, Ziferblat grew into an international franchise and gave rise to thousands of look-alikes in Russia and abroad. Most of such venues are located in the former USSR region, but after Ziferblat hit the global headlines with its opening in London in 2014, pay-per-minute cafes also came to Austria, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Singapore, Spain, Turkey, the UK, the US, and Vietnam.[8] To explore

IMAGE 2

the reasons behind the emergence and rapid expansion of this new form of third place, in 2015–2017 I conducted a multi-site ethnographic case study that included 56 staff and customer interviews and over 160 hours of participant observation in four Ziferblat branches located in Moscow, London and Manchester, which was complemented by the analysis of various secondary sources on the emerging global pay-per-minute cafe scene. The research showed that the thing that struck a chord with so many people across the globe was Ziferblat's promise of face-to-face sociability and (rather than instead of) technological connectivity.

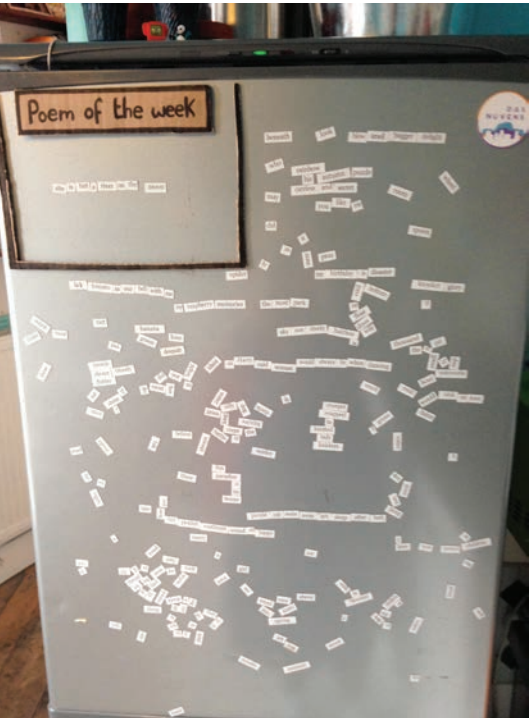


IMAGE 3

While a 'no internet, no gadgets' policy would probably have been a more obvious solution for someone seeking to build 'a social media in real life', Ziferblat was designed as a space accommodating all sorts of online activities. Thus, every branch is equipped with everything necessary for mediated work and leisure: high-speed wifi, power outlets and extension leads, printers and projectors. What is more, Ziferblat has its own mobile app where registered users can see who else is present in the space, 'friend' other customers and exchange messages with them. At the same time, Ziferblat provides an elaborate, multilayered offline architecture of sociability, enabling face-to-face interactions between customers through a mutually reinforcing combination of physical design, staff intermediation and cultural programming.

More specifically, Ziferblat's self-service model makes its spatial choreography similar to that of a shared apartment or a collaborative workspace, where people bump into each other while making drinks, fixing meals and washing dishes in the communal kitchen.[9] In some Ziferblats, kitchen zones were intentionally designed in a way that fosters interaction and cooperation between strangers. For instance, the very first Ziferblat in Moscow used its exceptionally labour-intensive, coffee shop-style espresso machine as an interface connecting newcomers with more experienced regulars, who would help them master

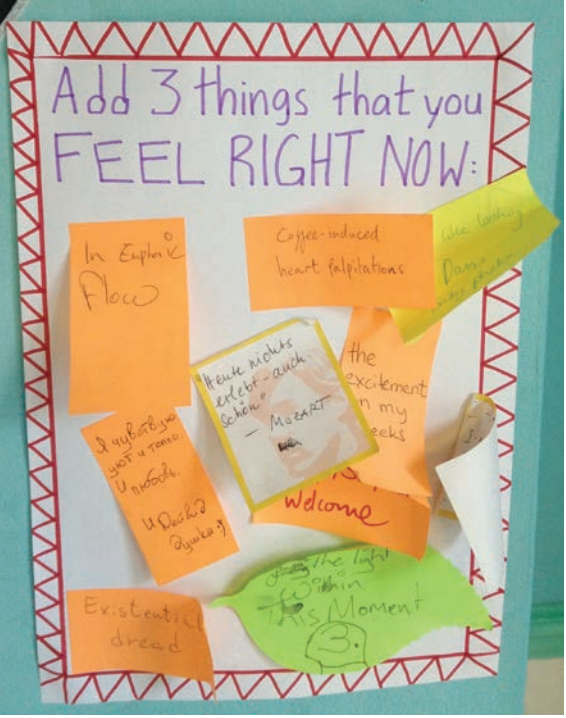


IMAGE 4

the new skill (Image 1). A double bowl sink, installed in the kitchen to make the dishwashing process more social, is another example (Image 2). In the London branch, customers waiting for the kettle or other appliances to heat up could make 'fridge poems' out of the random words printed on magnetic paper (Image 3) or answer a quick icebreaker question written on the sticker board (Image 4).

The main spaces in all Ziferblats offer a combination of individual and shared seating options. In Manchester, one of the older regular customers, who had just lost a spouse, asked the team to make a portable 'Happy to Chat Table' sign to assist those guests who would like company (Image 5). Even though this request has been fulfilled, the customers I observed and interviewed in that branch did not seem particularly keen on using the sign: some found it 'too much of a commitment', while others wondered if assigning a dedicated 'chatty' table implies that people at other tables 'are not happy to chat'. As one guest pointed out, 'the problem [with this sign] is that there is no basis for which to actually get everyone together'.

Indeed, small acts of cooperation between customers sitting in close proximity to each other are an easier and more efficient instrument of community building. Contrary to popular belief that the use of laptops, tablets and smartphones in public places prevents people from making new social contacts, a great deal of small talk exchanges and more meaningful conversations among Ziferblat customers start with helping a stranger to find the wifi password, Shazam a song, fix a software glitch or guard their devices during kitchen and bathroom breaks. However, pre-digital artefacts – books and board games, pianos, typewriters, vinyl players, vintage radios, TV sets and telephones, and even mailboxes,[10] generously incorporated into Ziferblat's interior and used not merely for decoration but, in some cases, for their intended purpose – play an equally important role in the space. Not only do they create

a culturally and sensorially diverse communication environment, but they also bridge generational gaps. A 70-year-old writer and translator I met in the London branch was just as excited to use Ziferblat's fully-functioning Olympia typewriter (Image 6), which she had not done for decades, as those younger customers who had never seen this device in real life.

To a great extent, customer interaction in Ziferblat is facilitated by the often invisible work of staff. The following excerpt from an interview with a London host demonstrates the subtlety of this process:

IMAGE 5

> "Sometimes you see that they maybe came for making new friends, but they just sit with their laptops and don't know what to do. So I tend to pick up on those people and introduce them... or I'll sit and start conversation with them, and then with another person who I know is new and solo, or I take people here and here, and then, when the three of them get going, I'll go off and do other things."

There was one tactic used by some Ziferblat hosts that I found especially interesting. Whenever someone asked them if they could spare a charger, they would always answer, 'Let's go around the room and see if anyone can help', even if they actually had one – as one of the hosts explained, it was a thought-out move to encourage cooperation between customers. Sometimes, hosts bring visibly exhausted coworkers offline by cheerful, supportive comments (e.g., 'Don't forget to drink your water!') or offering them snacks.

On top of that, each Ziferblat hosts a variety of events and meet-ups, some of which produce sociability as a byproduct of cultural production and consumption (live music sets, film screenings, performances and exhibitions, poetry readings) or education (lectures and workshops, language and arts and crafts classes), while others (communal brunches and dinners, board game nights) are specifically focused on socialising.

Altogether, Ziferblat's physical design, the work of hosts and the programme of events create a convivial, serendipitous environment where, as both Russian and UK customers repeatedly emphasised in their interviews, talking to strangers is much easier than in other public places. This 'instant community' effect is especially important for people coping with loneliness and social isolation, whether temporary or long-term. Ultimately, Ziferblat's post-digital orientation, mixing mediated and unmediated forms of work and leisure in the same space, attracts customers of different ages and backgrounds, connecting them in a 'social media in real life'.

Conclusion and Afterthoughts

The case of Ziferblat shows how the post-digital imagination has created a new form of third place, inspired by digital technology and acknowledging its role in our everyday lives, but also determined to balance it with the timeless value of unmediated, face-to-face human contact. Instead of trying to 'un-invent' the internet, the founder of Ziferblat used Web 2.0 culture as a spatial metaphor and constructed a functionally, culturally and socially diverse and exceptionally convivial physical environment where technological connectivity met unmediated sociability. This is precisely what the post-digital city does – it does not simply favour the old over the new but merges their powers to achieve something bigger than their simple sum.

IMAGE 6

This integrative approach to urban planning and placemaking seems especially relevant in light of the current pandemic. As third places around the world are doing their best to survive and support their communities during the lockdown, 'the off switch fantasy' (Vacca, 2016) is falling apart. If anything, the unprecedented situation we face in 2020 has revealed the supportive, rather than disruptive, potential of digital technology in the third place industry. Pubs are now offering online quizzes,[11] bookshops are hosting online poetry open mics,[12] libraries are turning into 'virtual town squares',[13] and coffee shops are creating specialised background images for Zoom conference platform so that their customers can virtually meet at their usual hangout spot.[14] Ziferblat's online presence is particularly impressive: they regularly host classes, book and film club meetings, live music sets and game sessions on Zoom, Facebook and Instagram, and organise casual video conferences and text chats where customers can share their quarantine experiences. One of the Moscow teams also started an online radio station that plays music from Ziferblat's playlist along with short pre-recorded fragments of human buzz and coffee machine whirring.

That said, the longer-term effects of COVID-19 on the balance of the online and offline in third places are yet to be seen. On the one hand, the recently discovered 'Zoom fatigue'[15] may spike the demand for low tech/anti-screen spaces in the post-pandemic city. On the other hand, the appearance of plexiglass screens and booths separating cafe and restaurant customers from each other in the countries recovering from the outbreak[16] is likely to give rise to new location-based apps (or re-popularise the existing ones) to mitigate the impact of these new physical barriers. As Gumpert and Drucker (2005: 23) remind us, because communication technology is not reversible, the challenge is to create balanced, sustainable environments where the digital and the physical will complement and support each other, even – and especially – at a time of crisis.

Endnotes

[1] For some examples, see Bowles (2019), HayotFilms (2015), Televičiūtė (2016), Turkle (2011), VPRO (2019).

[2] Some examples of such initiatives are discussed in Clark (2016), Herd (2018), Metz (2017), Stabiner (2018), Williams (2016).

[3] A recent overview of this field can be found in Tosoni et al. (2019).

[4] Kulle et al., n.d. See also the website of the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University, UK: https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/areas-of-research/postdigital-cultures/.

[5] Ziferblat's current tariff ranges from 4 to 8 pence (GBP) per minute, depending on the branch location.

[6] Interview with Mitin in Gurova (2012).

[7] This statement is comprised of two similar quotes from Mitin's interviews in Gurova (2012) and Sanduliak (2013).

[8] While 'pay-per-minute cafe' remains the most popular designation for such places, they are also known by the terms 'anti-cafe' and 'time cafe'.

[9] See, for example, Fabrizio Montanari's (2019) observations on the role of 'collaborative architecture' in knowledge exchange and workflow facilitation in collaborative workspaces, published in CAMEo Cuts #10.

[10] The first Ziferblat in Moscow reused an old mailbox so that the customers could write notes and letters to each other and the staff team.

[11] See Brennan (2020).

[12] https://www.facebook.com/groups/503899843640143/permalink/533298194033641/.

[13] See Fallows (2020).

[14] https://www.facebook.com/skuratovcoffeeroasters/posts/224712792223966.

[15] See Jiang (2020).

[16] See Middleton (2020).

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CAMEo Cuts is an occasional series that showcases reflections on cultural and media economies, written by CAMEo researchers, collaborators and affiliates. Contributions aim to be short, accessible and engage a wide audience. If you would like to propose an article for inclusion in CAMEo Cuts please email **cameo@le.ac.uk**

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ERD37532_06/20