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Patterns of Use and Movement in BMV Books: BMV Books as a “Third Place

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s (1989) created the concept of the “third place” to describe environments outside the home and workplace where people primarily gather for social interaction and connection. Oldenburg discusses benefits for the third place in building strong communities, pointing to their role in stress relief and even encouraging civic engagement and the free exchange of ideas. Environment often described as third places often include restaurants, cafes, pubs, gyms, libraries, community centres. While there is less literature available compared to other spaces, scholarship suggests that book stores can also fulfil the role of a third place, provided they actively facilitate social interaction amongst people, not strictly to encourage purchases (Laing & Royle, 2013). One of the proposed research questions for our study of BMV Books was looking how it differentiates itself as an independent bookstore to encourage people to patronise the store. We hypothesised that BMV’s appeal is in its function as a “third place”, therefore our cartography was designed to investigate the extent to which it adheres to Oldenburg’s criterion.

Oldenburg outlines eight key characteristics of the third place (1989). Third places should be a “neutral ground” where individuals are free to come and go as they please. They are levelling as one’s socioeconomic status is irrelevant to being part of the community. They should facilitate social interaction, be accessible with no barriers to entry, and host “regulars” who feel comfortable enough in space to establish themselves there. Finally, they should have a low profile devoid of pretension and elitism and possess a playful, wholesome mood where laughter and diversion is encouraged.

As Oldenburg’s criterion as to what constitutes a third place is comprehensive, each characteristic can equally be studied on its own. Therefore we limited the scope of our map to look for markers of social interaction and conversation at the store, perhaps the most prominent theme in third place literature (Jeffres et al., 2009). This decision was made to add to our overall understanding of what placemaking strategies differentiate BMV to encourage people to continue to patronise the store. Understanding the extent to which BMV facilitates social interaction indicates the ways in which it does and does not serve as a third place. A subquestion of this inquiry is “do certain parts of the store adhere more prominently to the third place characterization than others?” In the case of our map, this question investigates whether social interaction and conversation is more concentrated in certain areas of the store paying attention to patterns of movement of customers .

Our map is divided into four sections, each depicting an approximated yet stylized layout of BMV’s interior floor plan. The first level is the largest and contains

popular fiction, artwork, toys, games, the buyback table and the cash register. The second level immediately upstairs is split between the children's literature section and shelves devoted to books on specialty subjects such as humour, business, entertainment, etc. The third level contains comic books, graphic novels and a cash register. It is less visible to patrons as the staircase, the only point of entry, is nestled in the far corner of the children's section. Patrons unfamiliar with the store likely would miss the staircase and the third floor all together. Similarly, the fourth level or the basement is discrete as the stairs leading down are on the far side of the main level making it easily invisible to patrons. The basement contains records, magazines, CDs, DVDS, and another cash register.

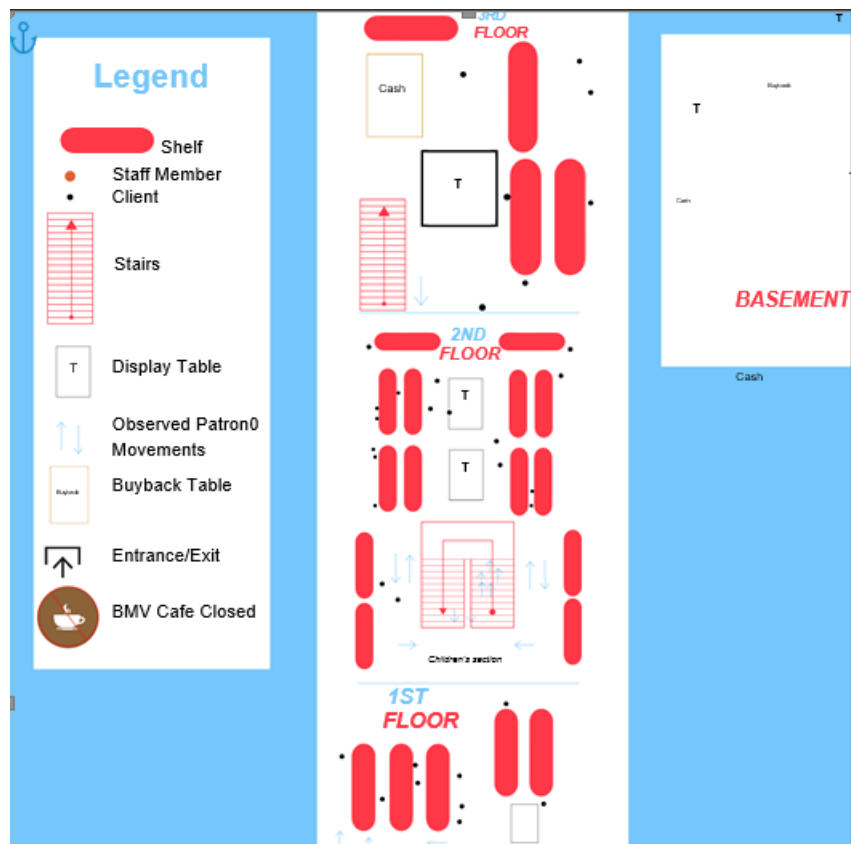
We collected data on patron movement and locations in the store from a site visit during the afternoon of Saturday, February 4th. Although our methodology does not capture the continual movement in the bookstore, the dots and arrows nonetheless allow us to draw conclusions from this "snapshot" of patrons' locations at the exact time of surveying. The majority of the dots are clustered on the first two floors and dispersed individually or in pairs. This indicates that BMV patrons are likely browsing by themselves or with a friend/familiar. The spacing of the shelves and lack of seating is not conducive to spontaneous interactions or conversations with people outside one's immediate social network. As social interaction is the most prominent characteristic of Oldenburg's theory, the lack of visible socialisation in BMV leads us to infer that BMV do not reflect a third place.

The blue arrows represent the pattern of movement in the store, with each arrow corresponding to a person who was in the process of moving. Oldenburg & Brissett (1982) discuss "flow" as an important element to the third place conceptualization as places that provide for a natural flow allow people to lose themselves in a leisurely activity. In a bookstore, this would be browsing without pressure to make purchases. The presence of flow in bookstores provides people with a relaxing, restorative experience, making the space desirable for patrons (Laing & Royle, 2013).

We also denote "BMV Cafe" with a black square and a coffee symbol directly beside the main store. There is a red circle with a diagonal line over the store to indicate that BMV Cafe is closed. It was designed to provide patrons of BMV, and the community at large with a space to socialise and enjoy their purchase over a beverage and snack. The cafe has been temporarily closed for unknown reasons since at least the beginning of the pandemic, eliminating an important distinguisher of a third place. The inclusion of cafes in bookstores help redefine the space as a third place and encourage patrons to see the location beyond simply being a retail environment (Laing & Royle, 2013).

While BMV is still well frequented, our observations do not indicate that it is a third place for patrons due to its observable lack of significant social interaction. These findings present an intriguing opportunity for further exploration in subsequent

assignments to help us uncover what makes BMV appealing for patrons, if socialisation is not a primary factor.



References

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