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15. Trendy coffee shops and urban sociability

Jan Rath and Wietze Gelmers

The number of coffee shops in Amsterdam is growing explosively. Does this mean that Amsterdammers have suddenly come to love coffee more? The fact is that the rapid spread of what are known as *specialty coffee bars* is by no means restricted to Amsterdam. In many cities around the world, such coffee shops are springing up like mushrooms, whether it be Vancouver, Istanbul, Moscow or Kunming. This is partly the result of the emergence of creative economies, the corresponding concentration of highly educated individuals with a lifestyle focused on consumption, and the development of new forms of modern urbanity. But what exactly goes on in these coffee shops?

A plain cup of coffee

The older ones among us know the typical 'brown coffee shops' of Amsterdam where it was allegedly always convivial and where the coffee was in a hot container waiting patiently to be consumed avidly. 'Due to its great success, coffee is being served again today,' quipped a mischievous owner of a popular canteen. There was even a separate category of 'coffee houses' back in this period, most of which were simply furnished establishments, where alcohol was taboo but coffee, tea or milk were served, and where the hungry client could also order a fried egg on toast or a salted meat sandwich. For those who ordered a cup of coffee, it was natural that they would sit at a table to enjoy their shot of caffeine. The assortment was limited: there was black coffee and there was coffee with milk, both with or without sugar. For such an order, very little expertise was needed.

Café gourmet

How different it is today. It is almost impossible to find percolated coffee anymore because the coffee is freshly brewed practically everywhere you go – sometimes with a modern, designer machine made of chrome; at other times with a cheaper machine, but always made to individual order. The introduction of this newfangled machinery has been accompanied by a genuine improvement of quality, or at least the pretention thereof, and an unprecedented fragmentation of tastes and preferences. Those who order the 'brown gold' begin an extended conversation with numerous implicit and explicit choices, usually conducted using Italian- or American-sounding idioms. Is the coffee *for here* or *to go*? Because coffee is no longer something you can only drink while sitting at a table. And how much coffee would you like? Should it be a *tall, grande* or *venti* – or a *small, medium* or *large* – with or without an extra shot? Would you like milk with it? And if so, whole milk, semi-skim milk, skim milk or perhaps soy milk? Would you like primarily milk or just the froth or a bit of both? A nice accessory is that the waiter – excuse us, the *barista* – feels the unsolicited urge to unleash his/her creativity in the form of *cappuccino art* or *latte art*. Ordering a plain cup of coffee has thus become an exciting artistic exercise. Those with a sweet tooth can dilute their coffee with a vanilla, hazelnut or orange-flavoured syrup. The real coffee lovers would, of course, turn their noses up at such flavours and deliberately choose an exquisite *doppio* based on the distinctive beans of the Zambia Peaberry Terranova Estate, Organic Ethiopia Sidamo or the Blue Mountain Triage. The coffee corner thus provides us not only with a view of a hitherto unknown world but also a podium to showcase one's in-depth knowledge and refined and developed taste.

Many coffee shops and coffee houses now provide *customised coffee*, but often this results in an indifferently served weak brew with washed out foam. Much more interesting – and tastier – are the numerous specialty coffee bars that are appearing

everywhere in the city. Some are a bit hidden, for example in a shop with designer clothing or in the back of a barbershop.

On the one hand, there are the coffee bars that are part of larger national or international chains such as Starbucks, Coffee Company, Bagels & Beans and so on. They each represent their own brand and exude a high degree of exclusivity but ultimately provide just a pricey cup of confection coffee. On the other hand, there are the *one-off operations*, the independent coffee bars often owned by hipster entrepreneurs with beards and tattoos, usually with very modern furnishings such as walls where the stucco work has been carefully chipped; tables made of raw scaffolding wood; shelves filled with difficult books and funky glossies; and, of course, on the counter an array of muffins, gluten-free brownies and organic soy milk. These are relatively approachable places for certain types of people: students, urban professionals and trendy, creative types that are constantly online via Wi-Fi, communicating with the rest of the world.

Aloofness or sociability

But how do people behave in public spaces such as these specialty coffee bars? In his 1963 book *Behavior in Public Places*, the famous sociologist Erving Goffman emphasised the importance of structural circumstances such as anonymity and frenzy. Most people, he argues, would like to freely abide in a public space without others noticing them or interfering with them. Everyone is, of course, aware of the presence of others but chooses to give them their space. No eye contact is sought – certainly no staring – conversations are avoided, and so on. Goffman (1972) introduced the concept of *civil inattention* to explain this polite, civilised and superficial but very recognisable behaviour. If Goffman is right, in coffee bars we would tend to see individuals enjoying their coffee alongside each other but independent of one another.

But this is not entirely self-evident. For years, Starbucks has been advertising itself as a 'place for conversation and a sense of community. A *third place* between work and home'. The coffee multinational took the concept of third place from the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg who in his classic book *The Great Good Place* introduced the third place as a general term for an abundance of public spaces – not being home (*first place*) or the workplace (*second place*) – where individuals regularly, voluntarily, informally and happily get together. Such spaces are fundamentally open and exist without respect to visitors' social class, age, gender, etc. The main activity is conversing and experiencing camaraderie. If Oldenburg – and not Goffman – was right, Starbucks and all the other coffee houses would be bastions of sociability in an otherwise cold, anonymous urban world.

Participatory observation

To find out which sociologist was right, we visited dozens of coffee shops with our students and spent hundreds of hours observing. Contrary to what Starbucks claims in its optimistic and somewhat nostalgic marketing, Oldenburg's ideas about the third place were not entirely applicable. Numerous customers talked with each other, but such conversations were usually limited to friends, colleagues, fellow students and business partners who had explicitly chosen to visit the coffee bar together. The conversations that took place were among fixed groups of people who already knew each other. But even within these groups we noticed that they repeatedly withdrew from the social world to dive into another world: the digital world. Mobile telephones and tablets were always within easy reach and were used intensively. Indeed, fidgeting with electronic devices, checking email, writing text, sending tweets, tracking social media and keeping in touch with what is happening outside the world of the coffee bar appeared to be common practice. Whether or not it was because

all these devices took up so much of their time, customers did not interfere with strangers whatsoever, even if they were very much aware of each other's presence. In this sense, civil inattention was the order of the day.

Do we then need to throw away the concept of the third place into the dustbin of urban sociology? This seems to us a little premature, if only because some bars and coffee shops can certainly be distinguished as third places. But what is more interesting for us was to see that many customers were still in close contact with others, albeit not physically and not on site. To be able to describe and elucidate this specific and apparently non-place-related form of sociability, we actually need a new vocabulary. We could perhaps call this a *fourth place*, in reference to the sociability of social media.

Fourth place

To research our hypothesis of a possible fourth place, we conducted fieldwork in a number of coffee houses in Amsterdam and Vancouver. It turns out that today's specialty coffee bars are characterised by a complex duality of social interaction, one that alternates between the actual and virtual domains. There is a hypersensitive, continuously changing social atmosphere that is formed by interactions that take place in real life as well as online. Although it is often as quiet as a mouse in coffee houses, visitors are extremely busy exchanging information – first with a few other partners in conversation, then with larger groups, or sometimes even with anyone who wants to see or read the information. The use of laptops, tablets and smartphones enables people to function alternatively in the private, public and parochial domains. On their own, they practice civil inattention towards those who are around them in the coffee house, and at the same time they maintain intensive contact with acquaintances and strangers who are not present. This mix of various interactions with people who are present in different domains

means that the social atmosphere in public spaces such as coffee houses presents itself in a new and alternative form. To suggest that online interaction itself undermines the social atmosphere is an oversimplification: it would appear that it is more likely to result in a modification and possibly even an enrichment of the social atmosphere. An example is the conversation we overheard between two women in one of the coffee bars which was the result of a WhatsApp conversation held at that time with an acquaintance who was not present.

Conclusion

Now that online interaction has become an undeniable part of human behaviour in urban public spaces, our conceptualisation of ‘social interaction’ and ‘social atmosphere’ may need to be revised. Our research shows that an explanation of this kind of sociability in simple terms such as civil inattention or third place no longer covers the social reality. Rather, one could speak of a fourth place, even if that raises questions about the word ‘place’ when referring to interactions that occur in virtual, abstract domains. In any case, our research has shown that today’s coffee houses are clearly prodigious social spaces – even though the contrary appears to be the case – and thus have an important social function. And finally, we must not forget to mention that in many of these coffee houses they also serve delicious coffee. And that is perhaps just as important.

The authors

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Together they conduct research on modern urbanity and in particular contemporary amenities such as coffee houses.

Further reading

Goffman, Erving. 1972. *Relations in Public*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Oldenburg, Ray. 1999 [1989]. *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of A Community*. Philadelphia: Perseus Book Group.