



Third Spaces

**Exploring Oldenburg's Third place and Soja's
Third space work through integrated interior
third spaces in higher educational settings**

Written by Ella Smith

Contents

01-02

1.1 Abstract

03-04

2.1 Introduction

05-08

3.1 Soja and Oldenbourg exploring third place/space theory

09-14

4.1 Third space in a higher educational setting

15-26

5.1 Observing and participating in third spaces

16-18

5.2 Third space- The Library

20-22

5.3 Third space- The Coffee shop

23-26

5.4 Third space- The communal areas

27

6.1 The Conclusion

29-30

7.1 References

31

8.1 Bibliography

Abstract

Third spaces are weaved into our educational system as a home for collaborative and personal study to give students varying experiences of learning methods. Many Universities have several third spaces within one block of their campus meaning students can be caught up in one just by passing by. This is the idea of a successful third space as it is a comfortable learning space open to anyone enrolled. The dominant explanation for this is shown through immersing yourself in an education setting. I had first hand experience of this when spectating at a Hampshire University where I could witness students using the third spaces while also using one myself. Annotation and sketch enabled me to understand the impact the space was having on the students. Through analysing how the space is laid out and the way the user interacts with the surroundings shows how third spaces are comfortable, open and calm.

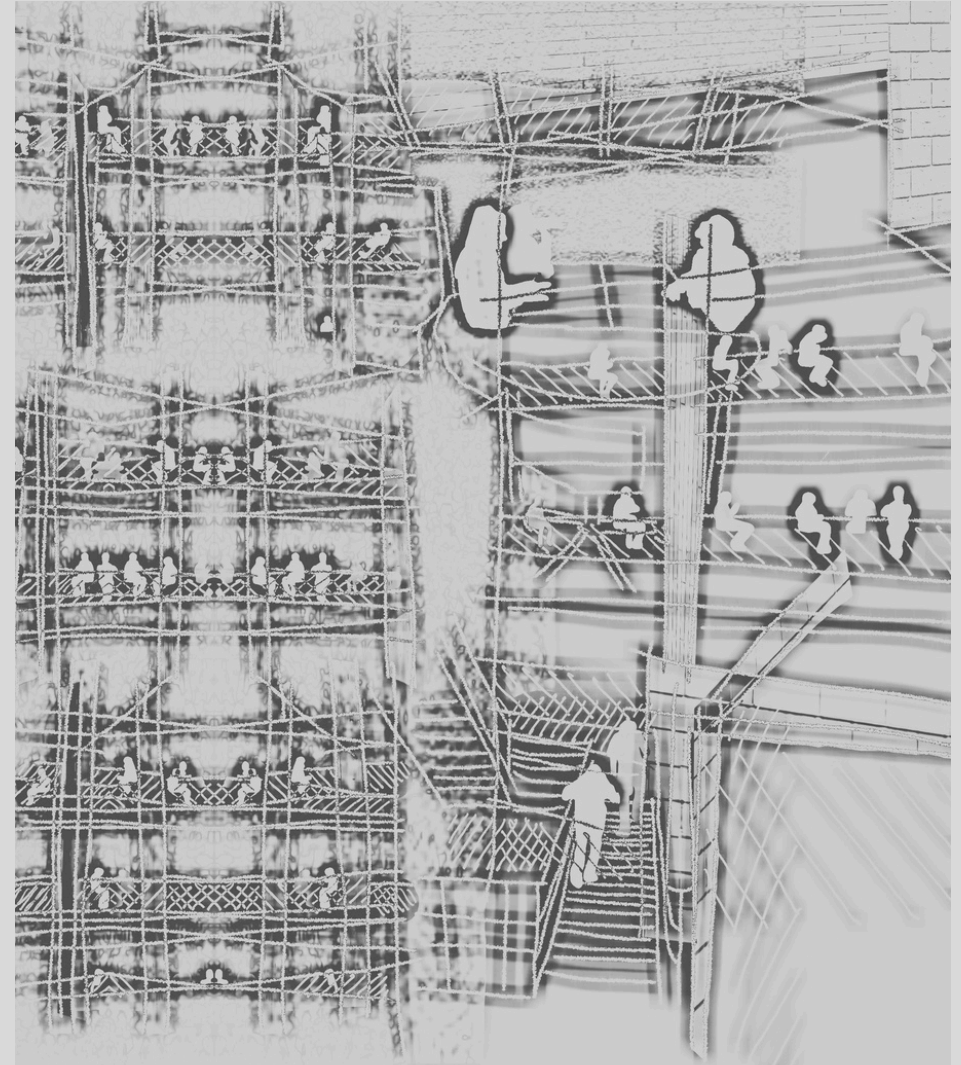


Figure 1- Initial sketch of third spaces

Introduction

This essay will focus on third spaces that are used within our higher educational systems in the 21st century by analysing how the spaces are used through the study of observation and what impact they have on young adult students, both physically and mentally.

You might not even realise they are there or that you use them regularly, but Third spaces are used throughout our daily lives, from cafes and corner shops to libraries and universities. Third spaces are not to be confused with the term ‘Third places’ as third places are physical spaces in which communities are built and shared, whereas the theory of a third space holds a much more mental and metaphorical aspect. They are spaces that serve as links from our first spaces (our homes) and our second spaces which is usually our place of work, providing a space to decompress and relax. They hold an important role in our modern society due to the act of holding informal meetings in which people can socialise, interact, and connect with a sense of community. Third spaces within our educational system are visible from collaborative workspaces to personal study pods. Overall, they have a positive impact on a student’s educational experience and outcome through their ability to provide areas open to all students in a comfortable environment.



Figure 2- Third space in Hampshire historical landmarks

Soja and Oldenbourg

exploring third place/space theory

In Soja's view, a third space is something fluid; a triple dialect, other spaces, or significantly different spaces. On the other hand, Oldenbourg holds the idea of a much more fixed structure that a space must follow to hold the title of a third space. I think this shows the extent how interchangeable the theory of third space is due to its flexibility depending on the user/scholar. This is evident when Soja says (*Soja 2011, pg.114*), "Only in two broad ways, either as material forms (...) or as imagined representations of material spaces (...)". This puts forward the idea that previous scholars had a minimal view of the third space theory, especially when it considered anything other than the physical state. I think this to be true when looking into the effects that third spaces have on an individual, both physically to their body as well as to their mind, and this is the point at which I decided to base my primary research on. Soja goes on to explain how third spaces are intertwined into our social lives and not just geographically or spatially- "... in Third spaces are perspectives", (*Soja 2011, pg.114*). This means that third spaces are subject to the user, and one third space might be well suited to one person due to their interests or commitments, but that specific third space may not benefit another's needs or wants.



Figure 3- Third space in Hampshire cafe in use by local University students

An example of this might be a library (see figure 4), which would be of great interest to a young student who requires a space to study, but would not be a desirable space for a full-time working adult; a coffee shop, instead, would be more intriguing. This more fixed idea relates closely to the work of Oldenburg and the characteristics that he expects from a third space: a neutral space, allows for engaging conversation, allows users to feel comfortable, hold a sense of equality, a sense of home away from home, non-pretentious spaces and have tone for welcoming new users (*Ashraf 2024*). By creating this list of requirements, Oldenburg hasn't limited the possible spectrum of third spaces, but quite the opposite, as it increased the possible users for every third space due to the fact that "they should have an aspect of a neutral space, so it can apply to a large demographic." (*Oldenburg 1989*).

This idea suggests that third spaces are very open to all types of users and encourage new users, which is in high contrast to Soja's view that they serve a purpose relating to your interests/requirements. However, it has been discovered and proven that the third space can act as a mental space in which you enter when in need of relaxation or calming. This can act as a mental barrier that disregards work or home life and allows a focus on oneself. After exploring Oldenburg's strict structure of a third space and Soja's more fluid approach allowing third spaces to change and adapt, I feel both points of view are essential in understanding third space theory. Continuing this discussion I am going to use the term third space and third place as interchangeable terms to reflect this fluid nature.

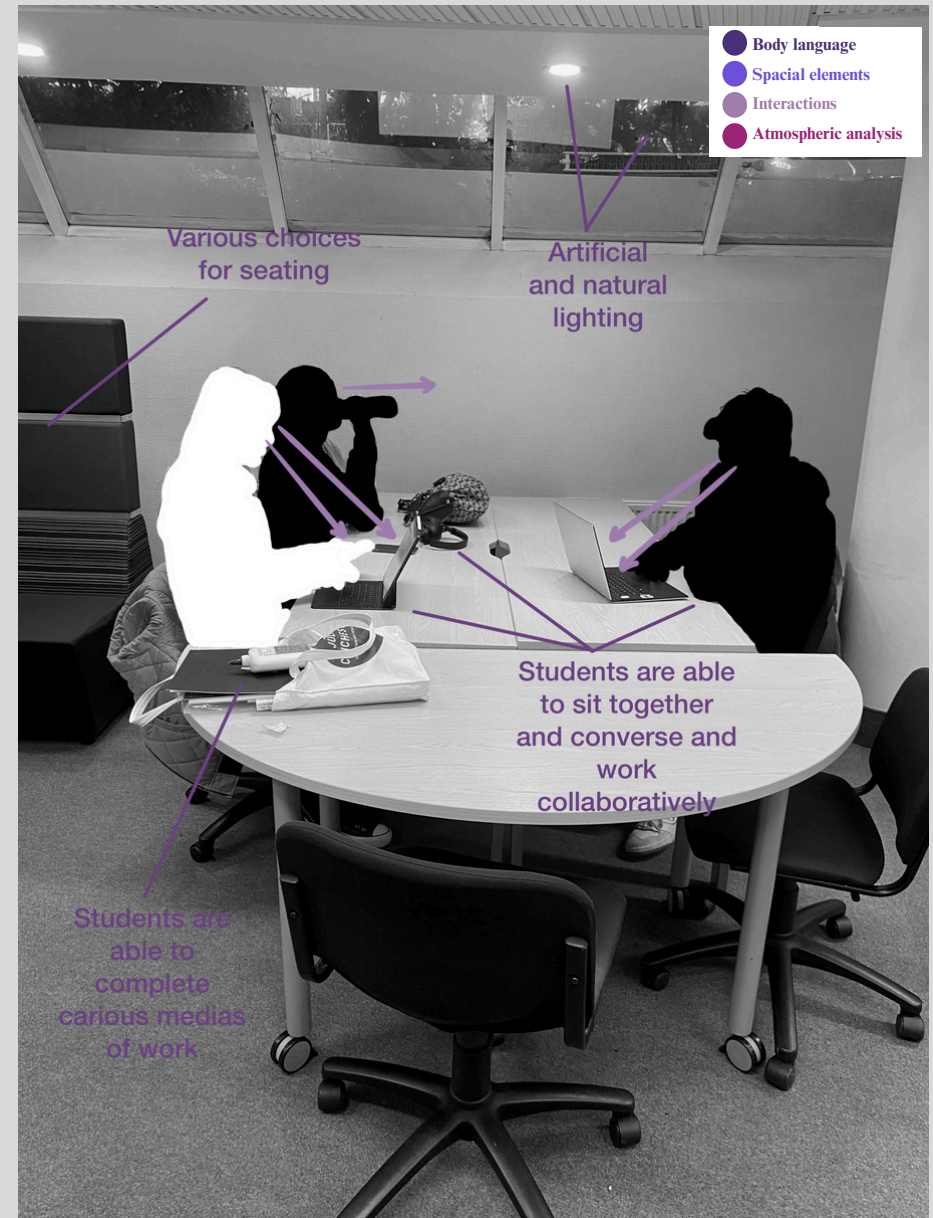


Figure 4- Students completing work both separately and collaboratively in the university library

Third space in a higher educational setting

“Learning in third spaces- community art studio as storefront university classroom” by Janis Timm-Bottos and Rosemary C. Reilly. This article was written with the aim of witnessing the effects the students' third space, the art studio, had on their fellow peers within an educational setting. Reilly and Timm-Bottos begin the article by establishing their thoughts on third spaces with an interesting take on the third space being an ever-evolving space, changing to suit the user's needs due to our developing world around us. When applied to an educational setting for young adults, this adaptability is clear through the development of communal work spaces in which they explain to be “a kind of effectively enacted utopia” (*Timm-Bottos & Reilly 2015, pg.103*). I think this is a very strong way to describe a third space, but also a fitting term due to the openness and community created and working in harmony when within the third space.

The idea of having such a utopic space in a high-pressure environment, such as a university, gives a sense of relief and comfort for students (see figure 5). This ideology provides students with not just a comfortable learning environment but also open areas allowing for collaboration across different studies- “Allow people to put aside their personal concerns and simply enjoy the company and conversation around them” (*Timm-Bottos & Reilly 2015 ,pg.103*).

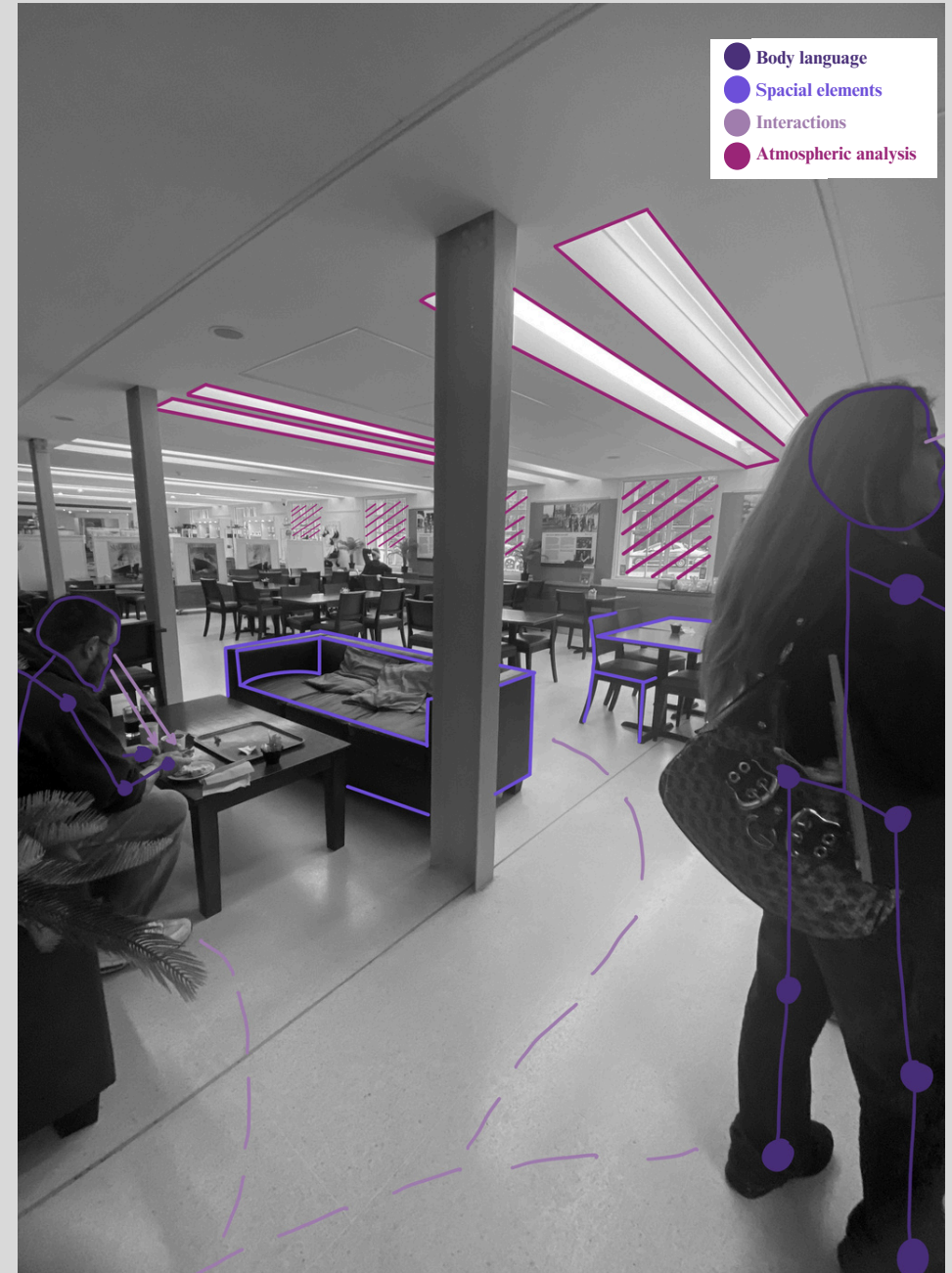


Figure 5- Students utilising local third space cafe

It seems to me that third spaces within this article are an apparent neutral ground, relating to Oldenburg's rules, that serves a wide demographic even within a specified area. This may mean that the art studio, as discussed in this article, could bring together other creative minds taking similar or related subjects, such as architectural or photography studies. Therefore, the positive impacts of third spaces are evident through bringing students together in one creative space, where the users are able to bounce ideas off each other and challenge each other to be or complete better. Furthermore, this establishes how challenging traditional learning environments might be of greater benefit to students. Instead of having a sole focus on a restricted instructor-based teaching program, third spaces open up the opportunity for peer-to-peer and self-directed exploration.

This concept acknowledges that learning can take many forms and is not just taught in a lecture theatre- it can happen through conversation, discussion, and reflection (see figure 6). The authors go on to discuss how the third space stimulates the mind, "cognitive, emotional, embodied and ethical" (Timm-Bottos & Reilly 2015, pg.105) therefore suggesting there is a deeper level to third spaces, not just in the physical form but also being able to stimulate the mind and somewhat transport that person from outside the third space to a different mental state when entered. Within universities, this holds a great advantage due to the fact that students are able to escape their lectures or responsibilities to prioritize their mental state, completed through entering a judgment-free and relaxed environment.

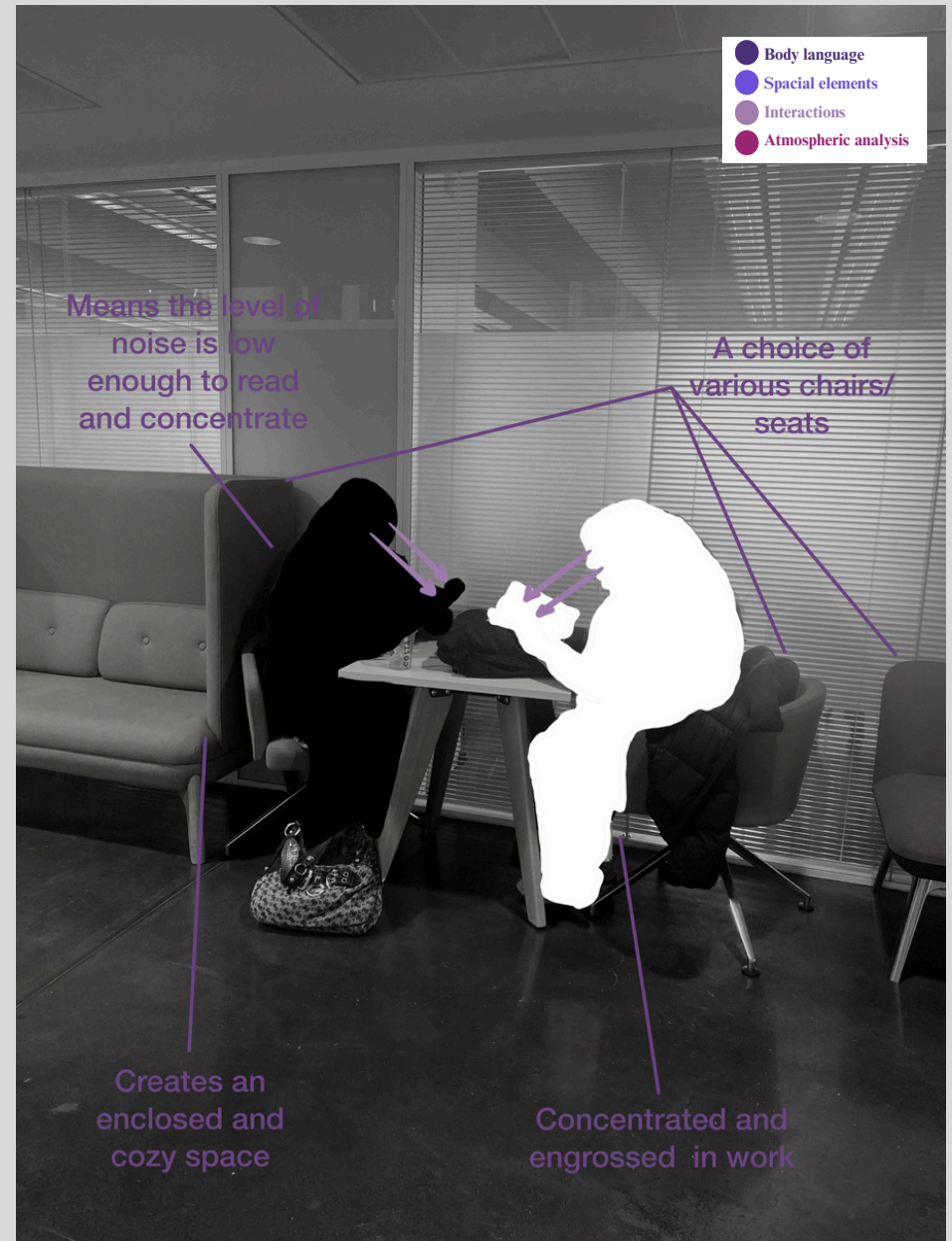


Figure 6- Students studying in communal area

In conclusion, I believe this shows the importance of designing a third space within an educational setting where a student-centred design is the highest priority, while students' needs may vary in age or background, they share a common goal: to find a space which supports their personal development as well as collaborative engagement. The significance of third spaces extends beyond perfect academic performance by playing a vital role in a student's mental health and well-being. Third spaces offer a psychological space to take a moment for themselves, reflecting on their emotions, performance, and decompressing away from academic performance. This is supported by the work of Soja in which it is explained how users can interpretate the space to suit their personal needs which can be seen first hand through students manipulating the space in various manners.



Figure 7- Students studying in communal area

Observing and participating in third spaces

To further my understanding and knowledge, I undertook my primary research, which was conducted at a Hampshire University. This primary research gave me the opportunity to observe firsthand and become a participant within a higher educational institution experiencing the physical and physiological impacts that third spaces have on young adult students trying to engage in studying or collaborative work around the university campus. To gather a variety of data, I embedded myself in various and contrasting third spaces that have been designed into this University, including the library offering a space to work on your own terms collaboratively or personally, a coffee shop which creates a ‘break’ space, and various communal areas acting as break out areas and links between spaces. While situated in these places, my observations focused on the students' body language and dialogue while also analysing the subtle dynamics of how students interact with the space around them, alongside how the atmosphere, layout, and accessibility of each of the spaces influenced the students' behaviour.

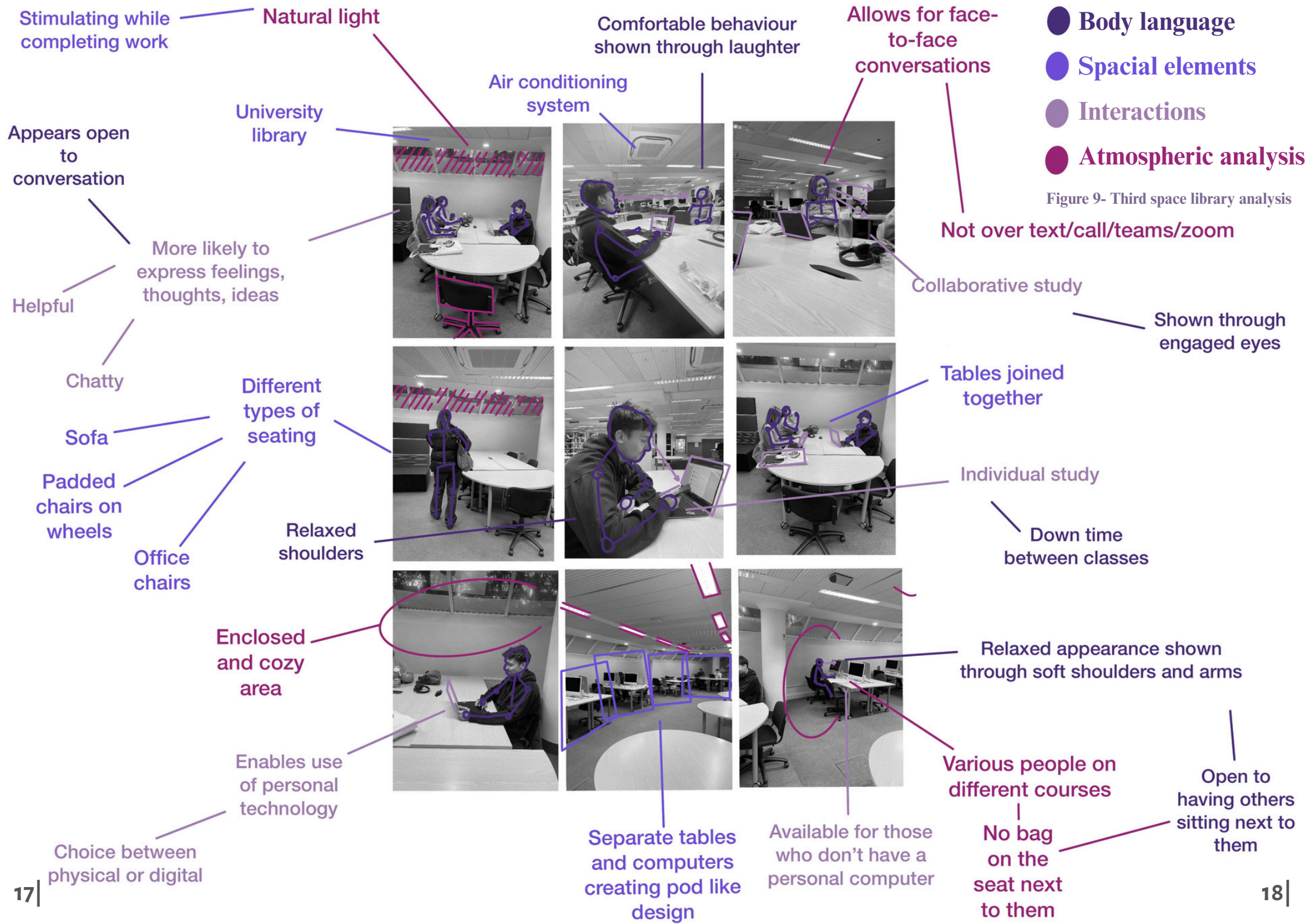
The library offered students a more structured environment with the offer of silence and many resources, which aligns closely with Oldenburg's characteristics of neutrality and openness to a large demographic.



Figure 8- Staircase connecting third spaces

Third space- The Library

This space played very well into creating a neutral zone with the inclusion of natural light, but also long strip lights, individual study space, but also larger tables for collaborative work, and various types of seating from comfy sofas to more upright working tables. While sitting in the library, I was able to read the students' body language, in which I was presented with many users with elongated legs underneath the table, relaxed shoulders, and concentrated faces (see figure 9). I think this presents a well-operating third space because students are showing a relaxed figure, but also one that is concentrating on the task at hand- studying.



Another positive aspect shown in the library was in the form of laughter and conversation, partially in the areas designated for group work. Although the library is traditionally seen as a private, silent, individual workspace, these moments of student interaction suggest that the space also serves as a hybrid third space capable of offering space for collaborative engagement and solo study time. This relates closely to the idea by Timm-Bottos and Reilly of an “effectively enacted utopia” (Timm-Bottos & Reilly 2015, pg.103), as the environment is easily adaptable to meet the needs of the user by encouraging social connection and productive work.

In contrast to this, the coffee shop located across campus offers a different take on a third space in the shape of an informal and fluid third space (see figure 10). Here was a socially rich atmosphere with students engaging in casual conversation, sipping drinks while working on laptops, and slouching into comfortable seats- students appeared to be physically more relaxed than within the library (see figure 11). It was clear to me that this space was used by students to escape the pressures of the academic setting and find refuge in a more relaxed environment while staying intellectually engaged. Relating to Soja’s theory (Soja 2011, pg.114), the Coffee shop can be seen as a “lived” space, meaning it isn’t formally designed as a learning space, yet it becomes a valuable addition learning environment due to the user-defined purpose. This reflects the fluidity Soja describes, where a space doesn’t just exist physically but also as a mentally and socially made experience.

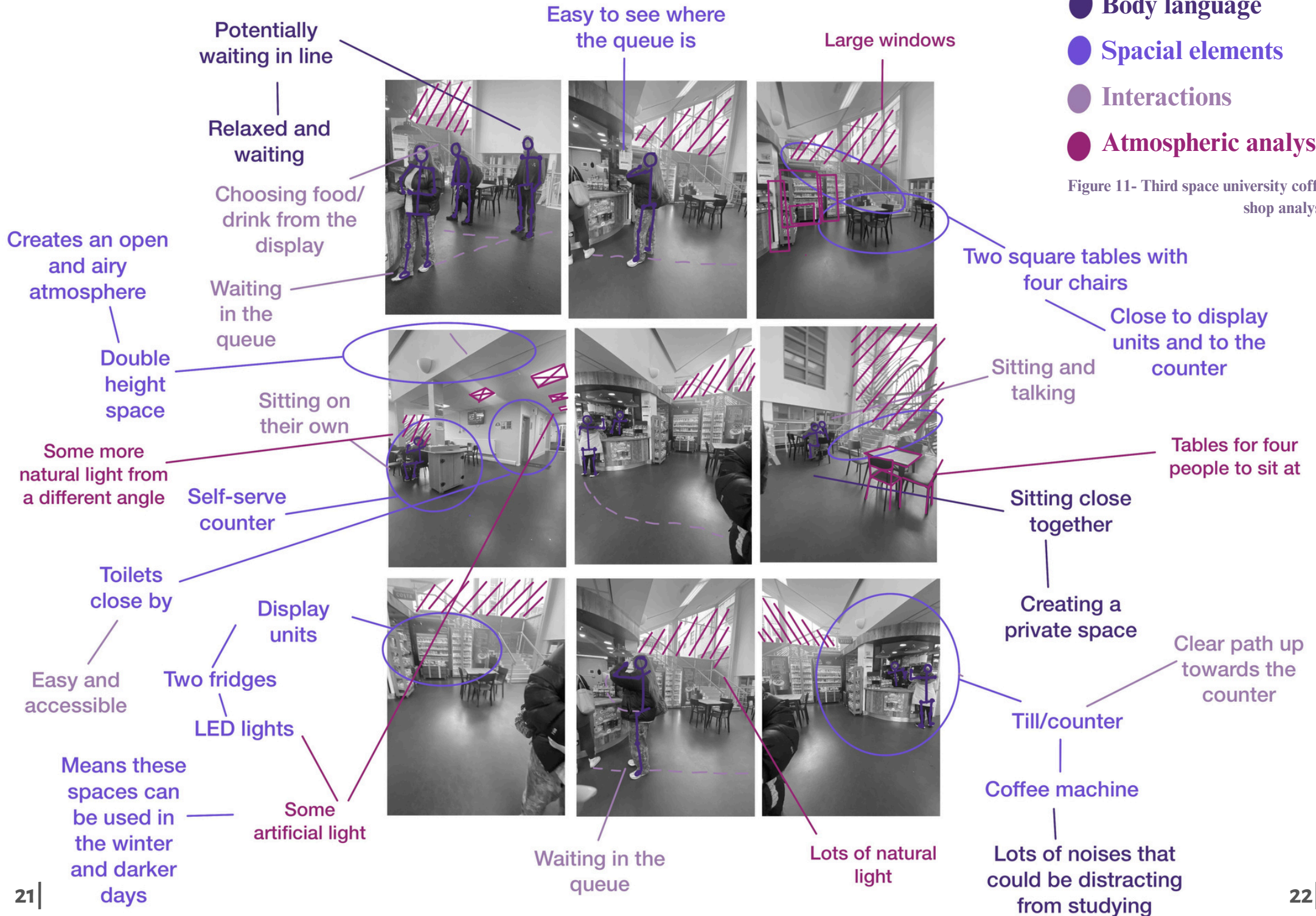
Third space- The Coffee shop



Figure 10- Students using university coffee shops

- Body language
- Spatial elements
- Interactions
- Atmospheric analysis

Figure 11- Third space university coffee shop analysis



Third space- The communal areas

Finally, the communal areas found in various forms, including seating pods, study zones, and casual meeting areas, demonstrated the most fluid and versatile qualities of third spaces. These spaces are filled with movement between solo work and group conversation sparked through study groups, spontaneous greetings, or chats between individual work. One of the particular study spaces was located at the far end of the building, away from any high traffic zones, creating a more easy-going environment, allowing for students to come and go as they please (see figure 12). This particular area had a very neutral design with plain white walls and minimal textures, therefore reinforcing the idea of a third space remaining “neutral” (Oldenburg 1989). This ties directly back to Oldenburge’s principles of third spaces as a neutral zone- with a lack of visual distractions, this space remains open to interpretation, making it easier for students of various backgrounds to feel comfortable and focus. As a result of this, an inclusive environment is formed through individuals feeling welcome without being confined to a specific role.



Figure 12- Third space university communal areas

This space acts as the middle ground between the quiet library and the relaxed coffee shop by offering the availability for study focus alongside social interaction (see figure 13). After exploring several third spaces found within the University, it became clear that third spaces aren’t just a vital part of academic productivity but also essential to student well-being and social engagement. Each of the spaces I explored offered something different to student life, connected through their ability to create an environment for students to exist freely.

Hand/arm placement
Appears concentrated
Shown through eye contact

Columns creating pods
Creates a private and cozy atmosphere

Third space in between two sets of class rooms
Natural light but not too invasive or harsh

Relaxed position showing they feel comfortable

- Body language
- Spatial elements
- Interactions
- Atmospheric analysis

Figure 13- Third space university communal area analysis

Social gathering
Open to conversations
Peer input
Greater connection
No distractions
Non-invasive
Neutral colours and textures

More available chairs means greater collaborative space
Can be made into a communal space by pulling up more chairs

Personal study
Lots of natural light washing in

Located at the far end of the building to keep away from any "main traffic areas"

Creates a more private atmosphere
All facing one way and not facing each other
Can be used as a "hallway" through

Lots of soft overhead lighting
Not too harsh as to allow for a comfortable environment
Enough light to allow for a workable space

Views from above, down onto the rest of the university foyay and reception

More comfortable and relaxed seating
Sofas

Relaxed shoulders and legs
Slouched

Allows several people to sit opposite each other

The Conclusion

In conclusion, third spaces are integrated effortlessly into educational settings and have a positive impact on young adult students. They offer both academic support as well as a comfortable space for social interaction, whether that be in a structured library or a flexible communal seating area. Third spaces in universities provide students with the opportunity to work collaboratively and explore connections outside the traditional classroom environment, proving that learning is not just confined to the lecture theatre. These spaces embody both Oldenburg's fixed rules and Soja's fluid image of third spaces, meaning within the university, they are able to cater to a diverse demographic, adapting to meet the psychological and social demands of modern student life. The work of Timm-Bottos and Reilly further supports this through highlighting the ease of including third spaces within an educational setting, creating utopian areas for creativity and support. Ultimately, third spaces are a crucial part of student life, contributing positively to a student's mental health and academic engagement, and their inclusion within a university campus is essential in supporting young adult students through their learning journey.

References

- Figure 1- Pg.2- Initial kstech of third spaces by author, Smith. E (Created: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 2- Pg.4- Third space in Hampshire historical landmark by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 3- Pg.6- Third space in Hampshire cafe in use by local University students by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 4- Pg.8- Students completing work both separately and collaboratively in the university library by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 5- Pg.10- Students utilising local third space cafe by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 6- Pg.12- Students studying in communal are by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 7- Pg.14- Students studying in communal are by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 8- Pg.16- Staircase connecting third spaces by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 9- Pg.17- Third space library analysis by author, Smith.E (Created: 04 March 2025).

- Figure 10- Pg.20- Students using university coffee shop by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 11- Pg.22- Third space university coffee shop analysis by author, Smith.E (Created: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 12- Pg.24- Third space university communal areas by author, Smith.E (Taken: 04 March 2025).
- Figure 13- Pg.26- Third space university communal area analysis by author, Smith.E (Created: 04 March 2025).

Bibliography

- *BORCH .C(2002) Interview with Edward W. Soja: Thirdspace, Postmetropolis, and Social Theory, Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory, 3:1, 113-120, Available online at: DOI: 10.1080/1600910X.2002.9672816 pg.114 (Accessed 27/01/2025)*
- *BORCH .C(2002) Interview with Edward W. Soja: Thirdspace, Postmetropolis, and Social Theory, Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory, 3:1, 113-120, Available online at: DOI: 10.1080/1600910X.2002.9672816 pg.114 (Accessed 27/01/2025)*
- *OLDENBURG .R (1989). The Great Good Place : cafés, Coffee shops, bookstores, bars, Hair salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/lj.9561417> (Accessed 28/01/2025)*
- *TIMM-BOTTOS.J and REILLY.C.R (2014) Learning in Third spaces: Community Art studios as Storefront University Classroom, 55:102-114 Available online at: DOI 10.1007/s10464-014-9688-5 (Accessed 25/02/2025)*
- *ASHRAF. A. (no date) Third spaces in architecture: Ray Oldenburg - RTF | rethinking the future, Rethinking The Future. Available online at: <https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/architectural-community/a10480-third-spaces-in-architecture-ray-oldenburg/> (Accessed: 28/01/2025).*