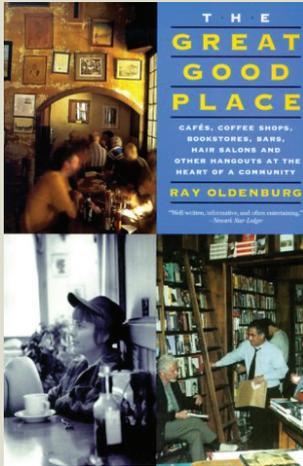


Two books

Matthew Sleeman has been reading two books which focus on the need for public places which foster community, acceptance and participation. Sounds familiar?



The Great Good Place

Ray Oldenburg
£9.89 (Amazon, paperback)
Perseus, 1997, 368pp

The Space Between

Eric O Jacobsen
£13.49 (Amazon, paperback)
Baker, 2012, 297pp

Although significant for their members, Britain's local churches are marginal in the minds of many others. Their buildings are either invisible or historical relics; their 'place' in society is increasingly questioned, or simply ignored. The long task of rendering churches as real in people's lives and imaginations lies before Oak Hill's graduates and all other ministers of the gospel.

Ray Oldenburg's book, *The Great Good Place*, provides a helpful resource in equipping ourselves with a grounded mindset for this task. In it, he outlines the importance of what he terms 'third places'. These are not places where we live or work, but are a third kind of place which lies between these two poles. Third places are, Oldenberg asserts, vital for the civic and social good of any society. And, he adds, they are in decline in the contemporary western world.

His examples of third places are varied, ranging from English pubs

and continental coffee shops to bookshops and Main Street in small town America. What commonalities link such places and help define the qualities of a third place? Oldenberg proposes eight such dynamics.

They are levelling places, established on neutral ground: that is, they are public, comfortable, freely-accessed

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places, fostering commonality and participation, and they are conducive to fraternity. As such, third places are open and accessible, and also exhibit a plain, homely and non-pretentious quality of accepting people. This shows itself through such places keeping long hours, being largely unplanned but nevertheless accommodating and meeting the occupants' needs.

In such places conversation, typically good, playful and lighthearted conversation, is the main but not necessarily only activity, and their playful mood engenders a 'let's do this again' desire about the place.

Finally, there is typically a reservoir of regulars who help generate a sense of a home away from home, who foster feelings of warmth, intimacy, possession and belonging. Such regulars keep the place alive, help set its tone, its mood and characteristics, and they attract, welcome and accommodate newcomers.

Although not a recent book, *The Great Good Place* deserves considered attention by church leaders and other ministers of the gospel. What can we draw from this work, such that our churches can function better as third places within our community, as beacons of light and association in a culture increasingly lacking such qualities?

That question is acute. Tellingly, churches do not merit any attention within Oldenberg's book. His only two mentions of church are brief and negative, referring to clerical

attempts to oppose the development of third places. This absence sharpens the book's usefulness, especially in communities where the local church might be the only obvious contender for fulfilling the roles which Oldenberg desires from third spaces.

It also dulls the book's usefulness, unless and until a theological dimension is forged for it. Otherwise, the desire for third places risks reducing to mere optimism, or denying the historical influence of the gospel on many of the cultures which have created Oldenberg's exemplars.

Nevertheless, as it stands, Oldenberg's vision for third places provokes us to ground and flesh out what God's vision of a community of believers in a place can look like in particular local expressions. Thinking about the local church as both its people and its physical spaces challenges us to build and nurture churches of local, relational influence.

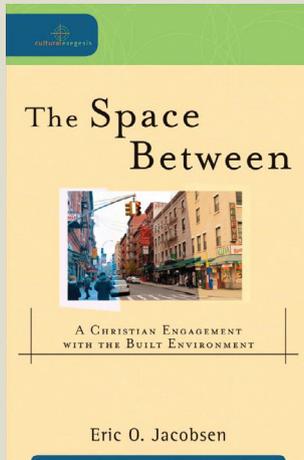
More recent desires for a 'big society' have politicised Oldenberg's ideas. While such a notion remains contested and undefined, there is room for local churches to lead and to project a vision for our future. The question is, do we have the theological and relational imagination for such a task?

Eric Jacobsen, a Presbyterian pastor, has recently written a book which will help individual Christians and local churches light the fuse that is provided by Oldenberg, but which Oldenberg has failed to light. The book's title, *The Space Between*, portrays a double

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meaning which locates its course. On the one hand, this is a book about the built environment: as such, it looks beyond mere architecture to a wider concern with how buildings interconnect the spaces between them as part of the wider urban sphere. On the other hand, the title heralds a stimulating theological reading of that built environment, locating it between the two comings of Christ.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, following a helpful introduction outlining what is meant by 'the built environment', orientates readers by sharpening them to their surroundings. Jacobsen has particular focus on American urban forms, but



he does explain terms such as 'exurb' and 'functional zoning' which will be unfamiliar to many British readers.

Put simply, he opposes constructing the built environment around car ownership, preferring instead more localised communities where people build their lives among people whom they tend to know. He prioritises roots, not routes, and the dream of a porch to sit in and engage with neighbours, rather than that of a Porsche safely parked up behind a garage door. He locates this vision within scripture, and within a reformed framework of creation-fall-redemption-eschaton. Such a framework might be familiar to many, but the insights gained from it by Jacobsen will be new.

The book's second section, 'Participation', is somewhat more

fragmented, but draws further insightful connections. Three chapters examine family, politics and church. Jacobsen locates the family within the built environment, exploring how different kinds of urban environment influence family life, for better or for ill.

His chapter on politics moves into more theoretical spheres which might at first glance appear less appetising to church ministers and members, but part of Jacobsen's intention is to widen the aperture of our vision to accommodate such matters. At the very least, this chapter will help pastors care and counsel better those working in such spheres.

The chapter on church will be more immediately home ground – literally, so, with its appeal for local churches to be local. Jacobsen risks romanticising the parish model (perhaps consideration of places beyond America would help him here), but us old-world readers will benefit from his fresh insights.

The book's final section, 'Engagement' brings together what has gone before. Part cultural critique, part cultural

manifesto, the final two chapters cap the book with some fine cultural exegesis. Jacobsen remains wide-ranging, which has the strength of stopping conclusions being drab, but sometimes leaves me, at least, wanting more. Throughout the book, there is a focus on the North American experience; what this all looks like in the contemporary but different British situation is left for the reader to discern.

Such comments do not dent my enthusiasm for a thoughtful book on a rarely explored topic. His final vision of 'a geography of rest' is challenging and suggestive. For churches seeking to be 'real' within 21st century Britain, however, there remains more to be said and much more to be done.

How we make a world of difference – how we nurture local churches as sites of particular, lived transformation within their surroundings is begun here in this book. But the question remains a vast one, and one which requires the careful crafting of answers as this century begins to mature.

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