

WHERE  
*Everybody*  
KNOWS YOUR NAME

AFTER HOME AND WORK, THERE ARE “THIRD PLACES.” ELEANOR BROWN EXAMINES WHY WE LOST THEM AND HOW CROSSFIT AFFILIATES ARE BRINGING THEM BACK.

BY ELEANOR BROWN

*M*ELISSA CHERNAIK SPENT 17 YEARS working as a political consultant in Portland, Ore. She was driven and focused on her career, and her work was a large part of her identity.

“A big chunk of my friends were all in that same field,” she says. When she met new people, there would always be “that first screen: Which are you (politically), right or left?”

Passionate and committed as she was, Chernaik found that her work focused her on the big picture.

“I was so involved on the macro level for so long, thinking about the community as a political body—Congress, the legislature, the city council.”

But when Chernaik joined CrossFit PE in Portland, she found a different kind of connection—to new people, to her local community, and, most meaningfully, to herself.

Chernaik had found her third place.

**RAY OLDENBURG AND THE THIRD PLACE**

For hundreds of years, places like bookstores, cafés, barber-shops and pubs served as informal public gathering spaces. Without requirements for membership or formal organization, people gathered together for companionship, to talk about their concerns and ideas, and to feel like they belonged.

Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls these spontaneous communities “third places” and has made his name arguing for their importance in our lives.

His landmark book *The Great Good Place* argues that everyone has two main spaces in life: home (our “first place”) and work (our “second place”). But we are at our best, as people and as communities, Oldenburg says, when we have an additional place we can call our own—that third place.

At home or work, attendance is required and roles and responsibilities are rigid. But in a third place, people expand their identities beyond those expectations and associate with their neighbors in a different way. This informal connection creates residents who care about and engage with their community and each other, and who spend time together casually for the pure pleasure of it.

People who have third places are invested in the quality of life in their neighborhoods and the amenities they offer. They have an opportunity to bypass mass media, and they can react and discuss their opinions. They have a place to vent their frustrations and celebrate their joys.

Being a part of a third place, Oldenburg says, “enhances the sense of being alive.”



J.C. Hutchins

**THE DEATH OF THE THIRD PLACE**

Sadly, third places are disappearing, as are the benefits that go with them. For many, life has turned into a two-place existence.

“So many of us go through our days feeling stressed, tired, busy and just move from work to home,” says Laurie Fish, one of Chernaik’s coaches and one of the principals at CrossFit PE.

Oldenburg argues that the effects of such a constrained life are drastic.

Interacting exclusively with people of similar backgrounds and interests limits learning opportunities and exposure to a diversity of thoughts and ideas. Without third places, shared experience is limited. Neighbors become strangers, and people feel disengaged from their communities and unaware of how to influence the way those communities are run. The elderly and youth are sequestered, and their perspectives neglected.

Social media is sometimes touted as a new kind of third place but does not serve the same function. Online interactions connect people globally as never before but break the involvement with the ultra-local: streets, neighborhoods, towns and cities.

And the connections made via social media do not expose us to the same sort of diversity as third places. Online communities are self-selecting, allowing us to limit our involvement to subjects that already interest us or people with whom we feel comfortable.

Conflict on the Internet is rarely enriching; debate in the comments section of blogs and articles is vitriolic and often violent. It’s more common to watch an online discussion descend into insults and ridiculousness than it is for a participant to gain a genuinely new perspective on an issue.

Again and again, we turn away from opportunities to connect with each other, often in the name of efficiency. We choose ATMs over bank tellers. We choose drive-thrus and eating in our cars over restaurants. We choose online



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donations over volunteering. We choose the self-checkout over the grocery-store cashier. We choose elaborate home theaters over movie theaters. We choose e-books over libraries. We choose a game of Candy Crush over chatting with other people waiting in line.

Urban geography has supported this increasing isolation. Suburban sprawl has left residents living in communities that demand a car, and time in public spaces is limited to anonymous strip malls, where transactions are kept brief and the only identity is as consumer.

Small, independent businesses that attract and encourage a vibrant, casual, third-place-friendly community have

been replaced by homogenous chains. In our search for a comfortably predictable experience, we have sacrificed local character: a suburb of Wichita, Kan., can look curiously like a suburb of Vancouver, B.C.

And while they have literally changed the landscape, those nationally and internationally owned businesses have little commitment to the health and well-being of the community, funneling away profits, tax dollars, jobs and a place's unique identity.

“We aimed,” Oldenburg says, “for comfort and well-stocked homes and freedom from uncomfortable interaction and the obligations of citizenship. We succeeded.”



At CrossFit boxes, people from all walks of life interact before, during and after a workout, creating a third place where external status is irrelevant.

J.C. Hitchens

## CROSSFIT BOXES AS THIRD PLACES

Following the cultural move toward isolation and anonymity, the fitness industry has built gyms where people work out in parallel, sealed off from each other by headphones and personal television screens.

But CrossFit affiliates are different. Applying Oldenburg's criteria for third places to boxes (such as a welcoming atmosphere, a diverse membership and a low-key physical space) yields a shockingly apt fit—as though affiliates were designed as gathering spaces first and gyms second.

CrossFit is not just a novel workout; its boxes offer a new community space, an alternative to the village tavern or the general store, with the power to reconnect us to our communities and to each other.

In a CrossFit box, neither status nor external responsibilities matter. Senator and janitor are equal, and even internal CrossFit achievements—by elite competitor or recent on-ramp graduate—do not affect members' enjoyment. That leveling quality brings athletes into contact with people they would not encounter in a home-work-home existence.

To Chernaik, leaving her political identity behind has been a positive side effect.

“Meeting people who are teachers and artists, folks who I never would have come across in my life otherwise, reminded me that your whole world doesn't have to be one thing,” she says.

Unlike work or home, attendance at a third place is not required at any specific time. Athletes, however, often develop a routine, and the connections they make at their box encourage attendance.

“It's not unusual to miss a day and get two or three text messages asking why you didn't show up to class,” says Anna Lee, who trains at CrossFit 5th Ave. in New York City.

While the explicit intent of going to the gym is the workout, conversation is one of its greatest joys, from the pre-WOD trash talk to the mid-WOD encouragement and the post-WOD chatter. This light and positive mood characteristic of third places is evident in the banter between athletes and in interactions between members and coaches.

“That's what happens when you bring a group of friends together; you can spend hours talking about practically anything,” says Ryan Flores of CrossFit PE. “I've heard people getting advice (on topics) from parenting to cooking to kipping pull-ups ... nothing ceases to amaze me.”

Ultimately, a third place offers a feeling of belonging. Athletes develop a sense of ownership—it is not “the box” but “my box.” Their attendance roots them and reminds them of their identity outside their responsibilities at work and at home.

It isn't just the workout that offers a feeling of what Oldenburg describes as being “regenerated or restored”—it's the place itself and the people in it.

“Community is the base of everything,” says Mike Poppa, head trainer of RFS CrossFit/Real Fitness Sarasota. “Yeah, the workouts are crazy and we push ourselves mentally and physically, but being able to step into a place where everyone has the same common goals and is here to help each other—that's the most important.”

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A

### *Third Place*

#### THIRD PLACES:

- » Are “neutral ground” for the attendees, where everyone feels equally welcome.
- » Act as a “leveler”: external status does not matter.
- » Have “conversation (as) the main activity.” Though third places are designed with a specific purpose (coffee shop, hair salon), conversation makes the experience special.
- » Are “accessible and accommodating,” with a convenient location and flexible opening hours so people can attend when they are free from other responsibilities.
- » Are frequented by “regulars,” who set a positive tone and keep the community lively.
- » Have a “low profile”: a physical space that is welcoming, not formal or intimidating.
- » Offer a “playful mood” with lighthearted interactions.
- » Become “a home away from home” for the attendees.

Source: *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg (Da Capo Press, 1999)



## BEYOND THE BOX

What happens inside the box cannot be contained.

In *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg argues that third places have created genuine cultural change: as an example, he cites the American tavern and the French café as centers of the activities that produced both countries' revolutions.

And while members of CrossFit affiliates may not be gathering to overthrow an incompetent monarchy, as athletes become part of the life of their third place, the way they deal with their community changes, in both formal and informal ways.

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## AS SMALL, INDEPENDENT BUSINESSES, CROSSFIT AFFILIATES ARE GENUINELY CONNECTED TO AND DEPENDENT ON THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

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CrossFit boxes, like any other local business, are dependent on the community's health. Their income is derived from local citizens, they pay salaries and wages to local workers, and their taxes benefit local government. They become part of what makes the community special—a great independent bookstore, an excellent family-owned restaurant, an active and lively CrossFit affiliate.

Because affiliates are independently owned and operated and have very minimal obligations to CrossFit HQ, they can develop programs that benefit and appeal to their particular community—programs for high-risk youth or SAT-prep programs, faith-based programming and yoga classes, self-defense seminars and women-only workouts, nutrition challenges, and book clubs. Instead of striving to offer an anonymous and infinitely replicable experience, a box becomes a unique member of its neighborhood.

As small, independent businesses, CrossFit affiliates are genuinely connected to and dependent on the local community. They often seek out opportunities for outreach and charity work, defining themselves as members of the community, not just businesses.

"It is great to have our tight little community, but we feel it is important to reach out to others in the area," Fish says of CrossFit PE's fundraising activities.

Lee agrees: "Our box organizes a ton of events in the community: fundraiser workouts, family days, meet-ups with other boxes in the NYC CrossFit community."

The more members of boxes engage in face-to-face interactions locally, the more they change the way they see the impact of their actions. The emotional impact of a charitable contribution is exponentially increased when there is a local, personal connection.

In Sarasota, Poppa struck up a conversation with a man on the beach who turned out to be the father of Brian Bill, a fallen Navy SEAL (the CrossFit Hero WOD Brian is named for him). RFS CrossFit's Memorial Day WOD this year was a fundraiser to benefit Little Warriors, a non-profit created to honor Bill's memory.

"To be able to hand the check directly to his father was amazing," Poppa says.

### THE PERSONAL BENEFITS OF A THIRD PLACE

Sometimes the greatest impact of a third place can be personal. The comfort of membership in a community eases the fear of stepping into a wider world, of re-engaging in what has become the discomfort of public space.

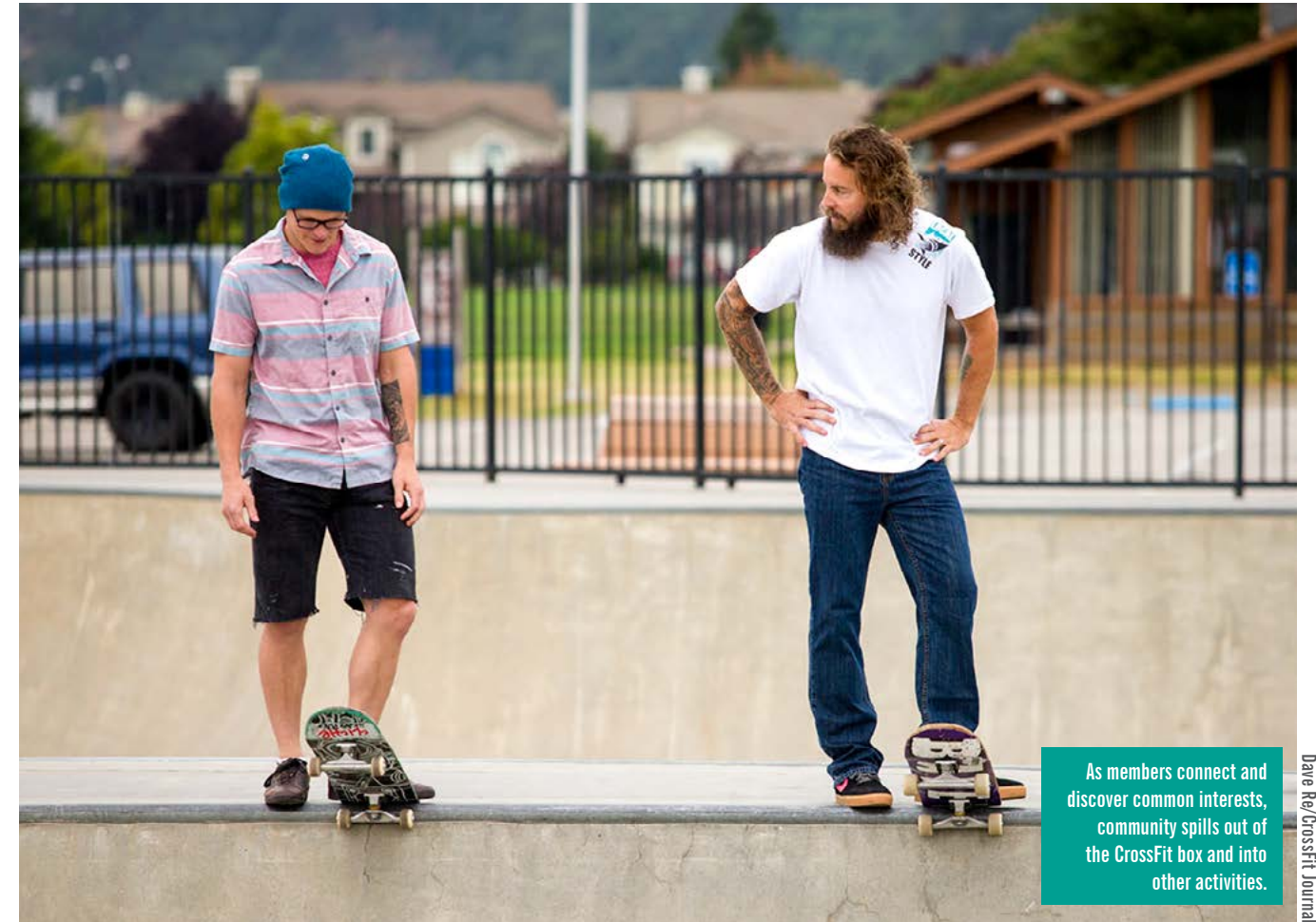
When Flores first moved to Portland, he found joining a box eased the transition.

"Having this core group of friends has given me the opportunity and confidence to go out and experience the Portland community to the fullest," he says.

And the friendships forged during workouts do not end when the clock stops. Chernaik's social life is now full of events with people from her affiliate.

"I've gone to people's houses for burgers. We have a member who does pole dancing, and she's having a recital, so a bunch of us are going to that. We had a women's weekend, where a dozen of us went up to Hood River and hiked and made food and drank an undisclosed amount of wine. We got to know each other on a deeper level and had fun," she says.

CrossFit PE's Fish and Flores both mentioned the Happy Hour WODs the box hosts once a month on Fridays, where



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

they "do a fun team WOD, encouraging members to bring friends and family to join in and (hosting) a barbecue afterwards. We always have a great turnout. People end up staying for hours, just hanging out," Fish explains.

When one of RFS CrossFit/Real Fitness Sarasota's coaches left, Poppa says nearly 50 members showed up for a celebration.

"There's a huge line waiting to get into this place, and here comes this mass of sharp-looking CrossFitters, one after another. It all starts in the gym, but they become friends, and that's what friends do—they want to spend time together," Poppa recalls.

And for Chernaik, finding her third place has been part of bigger changes in her life. She is leaving politics and going back to school to earn a master's degree in counseling.

"I've lived in my house for eight years and have just recently become close friends with my neighbor—we've waved to

each other for ever and ever, and one day I just approached her and started talking to her and struck up a friendship.

"Being a part of this great box has opened me to developing relationships and friendships in new ways. It's put me more in touch with the micro: interpersonal interaction and the value that has." ■



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleanor Brown is the *New York Times* and international bestselling author of the novel *The Weird Sisters*. She has been doing CrossFit for two years and trains at CrossFit Modig in Highlands Ranch, Colo.

Joe Henson/NYC