

ASSESSING THE ROLE OF TEA STALLS AS THIRD PLACES IN RAJSHAHI, BANGLADESH

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Abstract

According to author Ray Oldenburg, third places are spaces used by people to escape the routine of home and work. Conversations, discussions, hangouts, jokes and laughter are main activities of these social spaces. Different places in different context such as Coffee shops, bars, taverns, pubs act as third places. However, due to rapid urbanization, the social life of the people is hardly paid attention to, and infrastructures are preferred rather than public spaces. Tea stalls are small, shabby structures scattered about throughout the cities and even rural areas of Bangladesh that sell tea and snacks. Looking at the characteristics of third places, and observing the stalls, it becomes evident that these local tea stalls also act as third places. This paper attempts to assess and measure the performance of various types of tea stalls as third places in Rajshahi city. A questionnaire survey was designed to measure their performance. Based on the results and participant observation methods, it was seen that tea stalls act as potent third places. As lives are becoming more mechanized and social spaces are shrinking, third places can fight the lack of accessible, inclusive social places and enhancing the experience of city for the people.

Keywords: Third places; tea stalls; city; urban design; urbanism; Rajshahi.

1. INTRODUCTION

As we face rapid urbanization, especially in developing countries, more importance is given on rapid building projects and less to the urban life of its citizens. Developing

nations are currently plagued with rapid, unplanned urbanization. Bangladesh suffers from uncontrolled urban growth [1]. As the nation develops and more funds are available, this growth has spread to almost all the major cities of the country, driven by the undeniable need to make space for the increasing city dwelling population. In such a scenario social public spaces are shrinking, only to be replaced by commercial facilities. Open spaces, parks are ever declining [2]. These spaces are vital for the social and psychological well-being of the city-dwellers. One such type of place is what Ray Oldenburg calls 'third places', places where apart from home and work, people hangout, engage in conversation, enjoy leisure and recharge themselves in an attempt to balance the stress of the modern life. Third places as a concept signify the quintessential essence of informal public life of a city [3]. Greek agora, Roman forum, French cafes, German bierstube or Italian taberna – all of these spaces act as third places [4]. Which naturally indicates that the local tea stalls of Bangladesh should also be able to act as a third place. This study attempts to figure out and measure the role of local tea stalls in Rajshahi as third places. In a time when public realms are ever- decreasing, studying and improving already existing archetypes like these can enrich the public life of a city by becoming a sustainable solution to a pressing need.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

As developing cities are subjected to rapid infrastructural and morphological changes, the search for meaningful social places gain momentum. Tea stalls are local structures within the urban and rural area, and have always been a hub of social interaction. The study aims to gain an understanding of the role of the local tea stalls in the larger urban fabric and in the experience of a modern city life. The objectives of the study are to-

- i. Understand the morphological variety of tea stalls in general
- ii. Assess their role as third places
- iii. Investigate in how different types of tea stalls perform as third places and identify the possible reasons behind their success and shortcomings

3. METHODOLOGY

Literature review was done on Ray Oldenburg's third places and related concepts. The characteristics of third places and their indicators were carefully identified. Tea stalls were also studied and classified according to their morphological properties. The research uses data collected from primary sources in the form of participant-observation and structured interview. 49 random people took part in the interview. Apart from the responses from the structured questionnaire, participants were also interviewed. Likert scale was used to quantify the data. Collected data was then analyzed. and compared with the characteristics of third space to assess the performance. Due to the lack of study on tea stalls in an urban context, this research also uses data from secondary sources in the form of books and newspaper articles, to gain an insight into the nature of tea stalls.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1. THIRD PLACES: DEFINITION, CHARACTERISTICS AND NECESSITY

In a broad stroke, third places are defined by Ray Oldenburg as places where people go to escape the stress and monotony of modern life. The first place is the home, the domestic realm, where people spend most of their time. Second place is work, the productive realm, where people are valued only for their productivity. Both these places can become very mechanical, repetitive and suffocating. Even "home" can become paradoxical, acting both as a refuge and generating emotional claustrophobia [5]. Third place acts as a spiritual tonic and a social remedy [6]. Third places are informal, inclusive social places. Studying Ray Oldenburg, the following characters of third places were identified-

Table 1: Characteristics of third places

	Characteristic	Elaboration
1.	Neutral ground	Spontaneity and autonomy of coming and going
2.	Acts as a leveler	Inclusive/ democratic in nature, accessible to people from all walks of life, no exclusivity
3.	Conversation is the main activity	Conversation is the life of the third place, its main activity
4.	Accessibility and Accommodation	Kept open for long hours, people can come and go at any time without restriction They are also close to the residence of the people going there regularly
5.	Have "regulars"	Sustained and kept alive by their regular visitors.
6.	A low Profile	Typically, plain and unimpressive structures, no physical extravagance
7.	Playful mood	An environment of joy and acceptance
8.	A home away from home	a) a center around which people arrange their comings and goings b) a place where people feel in control c) where people are replenished and restored d) where people feel the freedom to act out their authentic personality e) a place of warmth

Home and work, when routinized becomes boring and dissatisfying. They no longer contribute to our sense of identity [7]. Bertrand Russell theorized that if one part of life appears habitual and routinized, then the other should be open and indeterminate. The places to hangout offer exactly that, a place to retreat, an escape from the routine of daily life. Furthermore, they also offer the pleasure of 'sense of oneness' – found in collective behaviors or crowd experiences. People, in these settings become audience-performers and are able to catch glimpses of real-life drama that is other people's conversations and life [8]. Urban critic William H. Whyte greatly valued this passive role

of people-watching. Some of these activities might have started out as temporary activities and later solidified. These activities have long term positive effects. Oftentimes they create and enforce cultural practices and lifestyles [9].

4.2. RAJSHAHI

Rajshahi is a divisional city located at bank of the Ganges (Locally called Padma) river, at the northern part of Bangladesh. Formerly it used to be an area where fishermen lived. In 1825 The administration was shifted from nearby Natore to Rajshahi by the East India Company. This shift ushered in an influx of Kings, zamindars, landlords, teachers and scholars from Natore, Puthia, Dighapatia, Balihar. These people became patrons and built literary, educational, cultural and social welfare institutions [10][11]. As a result, Rajshahi is known as the city of education of Bangladesh and is also famous for its rich cultural environment. Although a divisional city, Rajshahi has been often neglected when it came to infrastructural development, it lagged behind [12]. It is only in recent years the city is witnessing rapid infrastructural development and is currently in a constant state of development, with new roads and buildings are being built, areas being developed and the city expanding into the fringes. Due to the abundance of educational institutes, students make up a significant part of the population. Literacy rate is also high in the city.

4.3. TEA STALLS OF RAJSHAHI

People of Bangladesh have a strong love for tea, and it is the 'the beverage of choice' for any occasion here [13]. Tea is so popular here that it has gone beyond its functional aspects and become a daily ritual. People enjoy a cup of tea indoors, outdoors, while waiting for someone, while hanging out friends, during serious discussions, debates and meetings, even guests in our homes are welcomed by a cup of tea [14] [15]. As a result, tea stalls (locally called 'tea tongs') are one of the most common things one will encounter throughout this country, maybe even the subcontinent. Innumerable numbers of tea stalls are scattered throughout the villages and cities alike. Perhaps tea stalls are even more popular in Rajshahi because people enjoy being outdoors due to the clean and fresh nature of the city [16]. Another possible reason is the students from numerous institutes making up for a considerable part of the demography. 51% of the population is literate [17], according to Kelly, there is a significant relationship between literacy and participation in such leisurely activities, as literate people actively try to pursue quality of life [18].

The tea stalls in Rajshahi are very shabby in nature. Most of them can be seen having three core parts- The stall, the stove and seating provisions. The stall comprises of only a table and a tray that is the table top. Instead of a table, some stalls have a shelf/cupboard like storage unit made of wood or metal. Some of them has metal rods attached to hang and display packets of goods. A big tray is placed on top pf this table. Sometimes this whole arrangement is put on wheels so they can be moved easily. Umbrellas are used in daytime to provide shade. The stove is either a gas stove or an earthen burner called 'chula' that burns wood/charcoal. The stove is placed right by the stall. For seating the customers, benches and tools are used. The bigger ones may have a rented room where they operate, while the smaller ones are set up at any available spot. Typically, the ones with the rooms are more permanent in nature and offer large

numbers of benches and tools to sit. Other smaller stalls make use of the structures like stairs, planter boxes as their seating. Apart from the generally 2/3 types of tea, some of them they also offer biscuits, breads, sweets, chips and cigarettes. The stalls are so frequent in the city, it won't be an overstatement to claim that one is sure to run into one tea stall every couple hundred feet. The bigger stalls are hotspots for social mixing, leisurely recreation and friendly hangouts.



Figure 1: Breakdown of a basic tea stall (Photograph by the authors)

5. MORPHOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATIONS OF TEA STALLS

Tea stalls of the city were studied and based on the observed morphological properties; they were categorized into 4 types, as illustrated in Figure 1. Some of them may have additional features, but these categories offer a comprehensive general idea about their morphological features).

Type 01: Tabletop and a table, nothing else, not permanent, outdoor:

These are very small stalls with nothing but a large tray like tabletop placed on a table (sometimes with storage built within). The stoves are placed beside the unit on the ground. These are not permanent in nature; they are generally set up in the morning and packed-up in the night. They can be set up on pedestrian walkways, beside roads and any other open pockets of space. There is no arrangement for sitting and consumers generally stand close to the stall to enjoy the tea. These types of stalls are more common at the sides of busy roads and nodes where pedestrian area is tight. Only rarely do this type can be seen with their own rented place.

Type 02: Tabletop with table, few seating (less than three benches), not permanent, outdoor: Alongside the tabletop and table, these types of stalls have a few benches laid around for people to sit. Still, it is very temporal in nature and the arrangement is set up and packed away on a daily basis. Generally, they can be seen on wide pedestrians.



Figure 2: Morphological Classification of tea stalls of Rajshahi (Photographs and drawings by the authors)

Type 03: Tabletop with table, more seating (3-15 benches), with a semi-permanent location, outdoor.

This type has more seating provision and the hangouts are more engaging as people can sit for longer times. They are not permanent but they become so popular with people that they can be at the same spot for years, even decades, unbothered. The setup is not assembled and taken away everyday rather they are stacked and chained/locked to nearby structures. They can be found beside large nodes with big pedestrians, but they are not commonly seen directly beside primary roads. These types of stalls attract relatively large number of people, as William Whyte shows people are attracted by other people (Whyte, 2001).

Type 04: Tabletop with table, more seating (3-15 benches), with a permanent location, indoor (dedicated structure):

Same as the type before, only difference being this type usually has a structure rented, that may house the entire setup or parts of it indoor. Some of them have television, that are tuned to news, movies, songs, or the most popular- specific sports during the season, which attracts a large crowd. Some of the more popular type 04 stalls in Rajshahi can be seen in open spaces at Rajshahi University, or at the open spaces alongside the railway tracks. These types are permanent in nature, so there is no need to pack them away every day. They have the capacity to cater to a large number of people simultaneously. Like type 03 stalls, these stalls also attract greater number of people.

6. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Ray Oldenburg's definition and characteristics of third places were studied. For each characteristic, the indicators were identified to be measured. A structured questionnaire was prepared to assess how the respondents felt the tea stalls performed for each indicator. 5-point Likert scale was then used to rate the responses, with 5 being the most positive rating, and 1 being the most negative rating. Responses were then analyzed and their score was calculated to get the score for each characteristic. For each characteristic and each type of tea stall, the positive feedback rate was also calculated. For example, for a type of tea stall if a characteristic was denoted by a single question, only the positive reviews (4, 5 of the likert scale) for that question was counted. It was then analyzed what percentage this number constitutes among the total reviews for that question. For example, if for a any type of stall and any question there were total 4 responses but only 2 of them were positive, the positive feedback rate is calculated to be 50%. Beside Likert scale, multiple choice questions were also included and analyzed for some of the indicators. Beside the survey result, participant observation approach was also used to assess some of the indicators. From the survey data, a summary was prepared. Overall score of tea stalls in general and performance for each type of tea stalls were studied.

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Most of the participants from the survey were aged 20-49 years (98%), while only 2% were teenagers aged 13-19 years. 67.3% of the people surveyed were students while the rest 32.7% were employees or had a permanent profession. 77.6% of them confirmed they visited tea stalls regularly. Most popular with the people were the Type 3 stalls, followed by type 4, type 2 and the least popular type 1. From the data collected, the performance of tea stalls was rated.

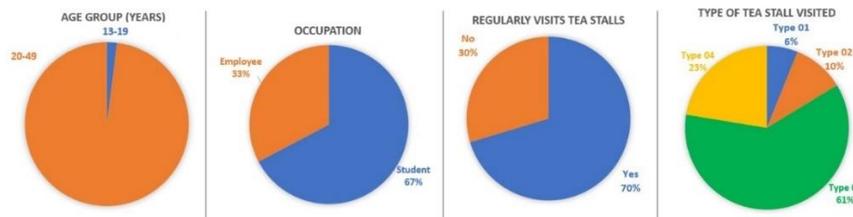


Figure 3: Participant's demography

Table 3: Summary of results

Characteristic	Parameters measured	Overall Score (in 100)	Positive Feedback rate				Comments
			Type 01	Type 02	Type 03	Type 04	
Neutral ground	Engage with others without permanent commitment	90.20	66.67 %	100%	96.67 %	100 %	Type 02 and 04 performed best
Acts as a leveler	Inclusiveness, accessibility to people from all walks of life	85.3	100 %	80%	88.3%	86.36 %	Type 01 performed best
Conversation is the main activity	Is conversation the main activity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Fulfilled
Accessibility and Accommodation	Kept open for how long, can people come and go at any time without restriction, closeness to the residence of the customers	77.82	66.67 %	80%	61.11 %	54.54 %	Type 03 performed best
Have "regulars"	How often people visit, do they hang out alone or in groups, do they spot other regulars	75.61	66.67 %	45%	70.83 %	72.73 %	Type 04 performed best
A low Profile	Physical morphology	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Fulfilled
Playful mood	Is the environment joyful and accepting	86.53	100 %	80%	93.33 %	100 %	Type 02 and 04 performed best
A home away from home	a) a center around which people arrange their comings and goings b) a place where people feel in control c) where are replenished and restored d) where people feel the freedom to act out their authentic personality e) warmth	76.66	45.45 %	67.27 %	73.94 %	77.69 %	Type 04 performed best

As Neutral ground:

The tea stalls scored 90% as effective neutral grounds. Majority of people felt they can come and go there spontaneously as they pleased.

Acts as a leveler:

Performance as leveler is 85.3%. Aspects like the inclusion of people from all walks of life and affordability were measured. Type 01 stalls performed best due to the fact they are mostly roadside stalls and there is no seating provision. All kinds of passersby stop for a casual cup of tea and move on, while type 03 and 04 often has regular groups of visitors.

Where conversation is the main activity:

87.8% of the participants singled out conversation as the main activity. Other activities were found to be just drinking tea (53.1%), browsing phones (16.3%), reading books (2%). Other miscellaneous activities such as group studies, academic discussions, event planning, musical activities, games made up rest 2% of the activities taking place. Type 03 stalls were also the venues for other group activities. Type 01 stalls are spaces for conversation and a quick cup of tea, while in type 02 stalls, due to the availability of a few seats, people sit by themselves and lazily browse/use their phones.

Accessibility and Accommodation:

Score was 77.8%. Variables like open hours of the tea stalls, distance from anyone's residence and mode of transportation to get there were measured. 93.9% of the participants agreed that the tea stalls they frequented were kept open for long hours. Only 14% of them reported that the stalls were far from their homes. Large portion of the participants said they got to the tea stalls either by walking or by motorized electric bicycle-rickshaws, which are a cheap, popular mode of transportation for covering short distances in Rajshahi. This further proves the proximity of tea stalls to the participant's residences. Type 02 had the most positive reviews possibly due to the fact that these type offers the 'quick-cup-of-tea' like type 01 stalls and also offer few seatings. They are also more in number and spread everywhere around the city, which means from any given residence, one is most likely to find a type 02 stall nearby, making them more accessible. Type 01 stalls are located near busy streets or places where it is not possible to have seating provisions. Therefore, they are often crowded, even when people are standing, making them less accessible.

Has "regulars":

The stalls combinedly scored 75.6% in having 'regulars'. Parameters like how often participants visit the stalls, do they hang out by themselves or in a group, and do they spot other regulars at the stalls were measured. 42.9% of the participants frequented tea stalls 3-4 days a week, 22.4% visited 5-6 times a week and 12.2% visited daily. Participants mostly hung out in their groups, and rarely did they sit there by themselves, which proves that their groups are regulars at the stalls. 67.4% said they spot other regulars either frequently or very frequently. Not surprisingly, type 04 had the most positive ratings, as they include large number of benches and tools, more people can hang out for longer hours without keeping anyone waiting. The benefit of a permanent room also contributes here.

Has a low Profile

From the discussion on the classification and physical properties, it is very clear that the local tea stalls are indeed made of humble materials and are almost always have a low profile.

Mood is playful:

The tea stalls scored 86.5% on having a playful mood. 93.9% either agreed or strongly agreed that the tea stalls have a playful mood and that humor, laughter and smiles dominate the atmosphere.

A home away from home:

Combined score was 76.6% in acting as a home away from home. Participants attested to being found there apart from home and work/studies, they use the stalls as meeting points before going elsewhere, use the tea stalls as reference points while describing other places and are generally surrounded familiar faces. They also agreed that they had the freedom modify the stalls by moving or rearranging elements like benches, tools etc, and also refer to the tea stall in first person, which demonstrates appropriation and control. Most people feel like a part of the stalls and said the regulars enjoyed extended privileges. 79.6% of them confirmed they feel recharged there after a long stressful day. Most participants (77.6%) participants also testified that they can be their authentic selves, engaging in joking, teasing, playfighting with their friends without any judgement. 95.9% of the people perceive the tea stall as having a warm environment of friendliness and cheerfulness. Type 04 performed the best. A progression is noted in the gradual increase of the positive feedback rating for each type. This indicates the more seating provisions there are, and the more time people can stay, the more the place starts to feel like a home away from home.

Type 03 tea were the most popular with both students and employees, followed by type 04 stalls. Both groups frequented these two types regularly. The reason behind this is the large number of seating provisions, which ensures longer stays for more group of people, turning them into popular places for relaxing, hanging out and recharging. Type 04 also has these features, but they fall short mainly because they are not as common as type 03 stalls. Type 03 stalls enjoy the added benefit of being situated in proximity to main streets or intersections, while type 04 stalls are slightly offset from main roads. Locations of type 03 stalls offer people the vantage point for people-watching, which attract more people. These two types of stalls also offer overhead shade sometimes, a feature absent in type 01 and type 02 stalls, which explains people preferring them over the other two types.

8. SIGNIFICANCE

Tea stalls are vibrant places for friendly hangouts for students and employers alike, the number one preference for 'adda' – the Bengali term for leisurely, after-work hangouts [19]. Similar to coffee shops, tea stalls are the places where you can converse, discuss, debate. A place where you allowed your mind to drift [20]. This freestyle, spontaneous chattering and leisurely hangout is perhaps exclusive to Bengali culture [21]. While casual hangouts can happen anywhere, what makes tea stalls act as third places is the pattern in which people frequent these spaces regularly, after office or class. It is like a daily ritual for people, no more insignificant than going to work, at the same time without the obligation of having to go there mandatorily. People use the stalls as momentary escape from home and work. Tea stalls in this regard act as a coping mechanism. As

suggested by Ray Oldenburg as 'spiritual tonic'. Novelty or difference is also one of the benefits, providing people with new experiences on a daily basis [22] [23]. The hangouts that happen in these pocket spaces have a strong relationship with the educated middle-class of the city. People staying away from family use these places to build meaningful friendship and acquaintances that act as a proxy for family [24]. The tea stalls become places or forum where discussions are made, meaningful relations are established, complaints are made and tantrums are thrown [25].

As mostly leisurely hangouts happen in these stalls, people initiate deeper connection to others during these hangouts [26], enriching their social life, experience and engagement. Jan Gehl and Clare Cooper Marcus, an advocate for public space, agrees that simply occupying same space as others is the most prominent form of socialization [27]. As these hangouts become voluntarily repetitive and regular, they acquire the characteristics of a ritual, it gains spiritual meanings [28]. The stalls become places for retrospection and introspection, where one becomes aware of their morality, their association with self, others and their places in the world.

Thus, tea stalls transform the city into a lively tapestry of variety and joy. The road side tea stalls breathe life back into the streets by encouraging street level activities, thus transforming the sensual experience of the street into a more vivid one. They also transform the adjacent spaces and roads into centers around which transaction on news and gossip happen [29]. Christopher Alexander believed abundance of street cafes make for a humane city [30]. Triangulation, a process put forth by William Whyte is another mentionable process that occurs in these stalls, where people are linked by observing a common third person or an activity. Watching other people on the street, or watching the games on a tv at one of these stalls or simply observing other customers, triangulation takes place. Richard Sennett believes that out of fear of illegal activities, pollution or just human variety, public spaces are actively 'designed out', which in turn makes our private and work lives feel more claustrophobic and unbearable [31]. Prolonged outdoor stays also mean lively residential areas [32]. Type 03 and type 04 tea stalls offer the option for staying outdoor for longer hours.

In our modern auto-pilot life, third places are absolutely essential places, where one can go to escape the tyranny of home and work. While the personal benefits are obvious, these spaces also ensure our social being and reinforces our social bond with fellow individuals. These places also contribute in the composition of our identity. Enhancing the unique features of a city ensures the city performing optimally [33]. Why not design a city where tea stalls are the main social hubs? Something as simple as a few people gathered in a stall like this, discussing sports can transform the city from a collection of buildings to a vibrant site of 'play', and ensure our right to the city. Spaces like this also enable us to enjoy the collective life of the city [34]. Presently, in times where public spaces being stressed due to constant infrastructural development, third places can be potent way of offsetting this stress. And local tea stalls can be a sustainable solution, as it is already a part of our urban fabric and the daily lives of the people. Considering these stalls in city and community level planning with minimal intervention to improve some of the features can lead to sustainable, healthy, urban communities.

9. CONCLUSION

From the discussions presented, it is evident that tea stalls effectively act as third places, although to various degrees based on their morphological properties. Certain types were seen lacking in some of the characteristics, but even with their shortcomings, they do act as effective third places. The results from this study can be used to retrofit and upgrade the tea stalls to turn them into highly effective third places for cities. Faced with the gradual shrinkage of public spaces in modern life, minimal improvement to local idiosyncratic structures like these can contribute towards building a healthy and sustainable city. Ensuring accessibility to all genders is a must in this scenario. It will also contribute towards a strong identity of the city and enhance the experience of the city for its people. Furthermore, future research into the topic and implementation of the outcomes in the urban planning of the city will ensure a healthy and lively community and promote the local tea stall as vital parts of urban life in the sub-continent. As prominent architectural researcher and critic Kazi Khaleed Ashraf reminds us, a city is not just a material collection of buildings. It is a site to play, recreate and discover.

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