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Third Places Are Being Reimagined—and Welcoming Travelers in the Process

Outside of home and work, spaces like parks, food halls and libraries are stepping up with social offerings



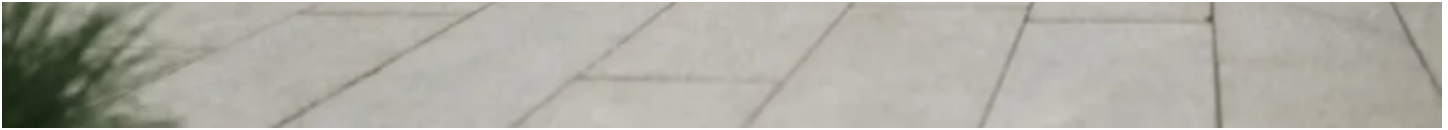
Laura Kiniry - Travel Correspondent

August 14, 2025



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Apps like the newly launched Runmates provide links to running clubs worldwide. Sergey Mironov/Getty Images

Every Wednesday morning, Erin Klenow leaves her apartment in San Francisco's Sunset District and heads to the city's Aquatic Park, where she spends up to 40 minutes swimming in the frigid waters of San Francisco Bay. For the last several years, Klenow, a bookseller at Omnivore Books on Food, has been a member of the South End Rowing Club, a historic athletic club dedicated in large part to open-water swimming, though she's been exercising in the bay for more than a decade.

"You just feel great afterward," says Klenow, "and can go about your day with a fresh perspective." But while the swimming is often meditative, it's in the club's showers and sauna where things really get social. "Sometimes there are women aged 70-something in there, reminiscing about the old days," she says. "Or on days when there are organized swims, everyone's enjoying the showers' hot waters and talking—it's almost ruckus."

San Francisco's South End Rowing Club is what's known as a "third place," a social environment outside of both home ("first place") and work ("second place") where people can socialize, connect and build community. American sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term third place to describe these informal gathering spaces, first using it in his 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*. Today, the concept is a part of the common lexicon, often used to refer to places like cafés, parks, libraries and

community centers where people go to gather, interact and relax.

! Fun fact: Origins of the term "third place"

- American sociologist Ray Oldenburg defined a third place as "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work."

Third places are nothing new. In the 1960s, coffeehouses like Caffe Mediterraneum in Berkeley, California, and the Gaslight Café in New York City served as de facto meeting spots for musicians, artists and intellectuals, and in the 1970s and '80s, teens would often fraternize in parking lots. Not only do third places provide an alternative to home and work life, but they are also good for us, offering a sense of belonging that might be otherwise hard to find. For example, in 2022, the Survey Center on American Life found that 58 percent of Americans feel close to their neighbors when they have third places—such as parks, coffee shops and gyms—nearby that they visit regularly. A 2024 article in the *Week* suggests that the bulk of these shared spaces are disappearing, though in many ways they're being reimagined—and welcoming both locals and travelers in the process.





In the 1960s, coffeehouses like Caffe Mediterraneum in Berkeley, California, and the Gaslight Café (shown here) in New York City served as de facto meeting spots for musicians, artists and intellectuals. Bettmann/Getty Images

“When we think about thriving cities and how they’re set up, we don’t just think about the economic value of these cities,” says Kimberly Burrowes, a senior manager at the Urban Institute. “[We consider]: Can you work there? And also, can you *live* there?” This includes third places. “Part of livability in a city is really thinking about community attachment—those places where you might go to really foster social connection when you come into a city.”

A study published in 2022 in the journal *Cities* argues that third places can enhance an individual’s psychological health, and that the mental benefits of a place can vary by each person’s disposition, meaning that spending time in a Starbucks can be just as nurturing for one person as an outdoor yoga class in Manhattan’s Central Park might be for another. It’s all about finding your groove.

Across town from San Francisco's South End Rowing Club is Saluhall, a “food hall experience” that neighbors Ikea along the city's main Market Street corridor. Opened in 2024, this two-story gathering spot is in an area of the city that has seen better days. But, while Ikea has been bringing more foot traffic, Saluhall is encouraging people to stay. Visitors can load up on Indian curry wraps, Puerto Rican pinchos (chicken skewers) and smashburgers; grab a craft cocktail; or simply enjoy free Wi-Fi and ample table space to hang out with friends. The hall offers free Tuesday trivia nights, concerts and even drag bingo brunches.

While some third places like urban parks and farmers markets attract a wide range of visitors, others are more focused, drawing together like-minded people with similar interests. According to a piece by *Governing* contributing editor Alan Ehrenhalt, libraries across the country are focusing their efforts on community, offering everything from sewing classes to open chess play. Group cycling rides, running clubs and dedicated athletic clubs also offer ways to connect in urban spaces.

“I liked the idea that I could join a space and find people who care about what I care about,” says Klenow, speaking about both the rowing club and some of the other third places, like San Francisco's The Ruby—an arts-and-letters-focused community—that she frequents. “But then there's the thought that I can also find out about who my neighbors are, in a new way. That's really appealing.”

While third places exist across the U.S., Burrowes stresses that not all third places are created equal. “We look for places in a community where you're

able to foster connection, it's free of charge, welcoming, and the quality of the place is kept up," she says.

Here are several types of third places that fit the bill (though some require a nominal fee) for both local residents and visitors alike.

Urban parks



Chicago's Millennium Park is home to public art and summer concerts. Armando L. Sanchez/
Chicago Tribune/Tribune News Service via Getty Images

“Parks are very interesting because if you have quality park spaces, you increase social capital,” says Burrowes, referring to the positive

connections between individuals. “You’ll see people volunteering, riding bikes ... and they’re flourishing.” San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park is a great example. This 1,017-acre public space offers activities like pick-up volleyball, live music and free outdoor swing-dancing lessons every Sunday. Chicago’s Millennium Park is home to public art and summer concerts, while Forest Park in St. Louis features both a zoo and an art museum, both of which are free.

Outdoor clubs

Apps like the newly launched Runmates provide links to running clubs worldwide, while Rapha connects cyclists. Looking for a hiking partner? Try AllTrails or Strava. Many cities also have public skateboarding parks and swim clubs that are open to anyone (The South End Rowing Club offers public access on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays).

Board game cafés





Tea & Victory was Houston's first board game café. Karen Warren/Houston Chronicle via Getty Images

For a small fee you can spend an afternoon or evening playing games like Exploding Kittens and Monopoly with like-minded souls. Places like Game Point in Nashville, Sip & Play in Brooklyn and Victory Point Cafe in Berkeley all offer a large selection of board games with the option of food and drink—to help keep your body nourished and your mind sharp. The Board Room in Washington, D.C. hosts chess events on Monday nights that are quite popular, and it serves up a variety of draft beers and craft cocktails to boot.

Reading rooms and community spaces

Along with libraries, reading rooms are wonderful spots to find a collective community beyond home and work. San Francisco's Radical Reading Room provides a free place for reading and study during select open hours, and it also hosts various events and meet-ups, such as comedy shows and song circles. Brooklyn's Free Black Women's Library is a literary

hub, Black feminist archive and community care space with free public programs and a backyard garden, while Sacramento's Lavender Library hosts events that celebrate LGBTQ+ identity, like a monthly Queer "Crafternoon" and an LGBTQ+ fiction book club.

Food halls



In Los Angeles, the century-plus-old Grand Central Market hosts local artisans and makers twice monthly, and family crafting days. Luke Johnson / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

Beyond eating and drinking, many food halls (like San Francisco's Saluhall) serve as central hubs for local communities. Swing by Essex Market in Manhattan's

Lower East Side for free [Zumba classes](#), cooking demos and occasional [tango dancing](#). In Los Angeles, the century-plus-old [Grand Central Market](#) hosts local [artisans and makers](#) twice monthly, as well as [family crafting](#) days. [Fareground](#) in Austin, Texas, offers complimentary [Sunday yoga](#) and weekly live music, while the Boston Public Market features [free events](#) such as Wednesday night trivia and story time with puppets.

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