

Planning News – Commentary

**Jeff Merz, AICP-LEED AP
E-Blast Newsletter Editor and Planner with AECOM**

Beaches - Our Sandy, Briny “Third Places”

We have heard much recently about the importance of ‘third places’ in our community. The sociologist Ray Oldenburg has championed the phrase and frequently talks about its role. Oldenburg identifies third places as,

“the public places on neutral ground where people can gather and interact. In contrast to first places (home) and second places (work), third places allow people to put aside their concerns and simply enjoy the company and conversation around them. Third places host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work”. Oldenburg suggests that “beer gardens, main streets, pubs, cafés, coffeehouses, post offices, and other third places are the heart of a community’s social vitality and the foundation of a functioning democracy. They promote social equality by leveling the status of guests, provide a setting for grassroots politics, create habits of public association, and offer psychological support to individuals and communities”.



First Fridays at Hawaii State Art Museum Grounds– Honolulu

HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter
Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

We in Hawaii are blessed with some of the best beaches in the world. Our state has beaches of all types to satisfy the most discerning shoreline aficionado. In what is now becoming an annual occurrence, a sampling of our beach spots continue to be awarded “Best of” status by Dr. Beach. 2012 was no exception. Check out the listing of Hawaii’s winning beaches [here](http://gohawaii.about.com/od/beaches/1/bl-2012-best-beaches.htm). <http://gohawaii.about.com/od/beaches/1/bl-2012-best-beaches.htm>. The unmistakable allure of Hawaii’s beaches and beaches in general, needs no elaboration here. Instead, I offer thoughts on the less tangible ‘third place’ benefits our community gains from our shoreline public spaces.



Annual Lantern Floating Ceremony – Ala Moana Beach Park, Oahu

To a greater degree than other types of third places, our beaches reflect substantial core cultural, historical, recreational, celebratory and psychological values for Hawaii residents and visitors alike. We recreate, gather, protest, eat, compete, relax, and share all kinds of experiences on the beach. Uniquely, we assemble at the beach by self-formed groups, families, causes, competitors, and interests. Counter-intuitively, even as the beach remains a very public, visible, shared venue, we sometimes go to the beach to be ‘alone’. In this time of an increasing chasm between the haves and have-nots, the beach remains the great socioeconomic equalizer.

Aside from the obvious laws that are posted at the beach (ie; no littering, no alcohol, no camping, etc), the beach experience requires adherence to unwritten social norms such as cooperation, sharing of resources, consideration of personal space, reciprocity and social coordination. In fact where else does

HAWAI'I PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter
Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

one learn how to 'navigate' socially with all its attendant courtesies, compromises and nuances, but in demographically, culturally and economically diverse environments such as the beach?

We live in an age when increasing numbers of citizens' only interaction with people they don't know involves competing as drivers for limited roadway space during commutes or dealing with a service provider to complete a specific task. If one's only truly serendipitous encounters with the 'public' are via territorial driving battles and assistance with the completion of quotidian chores, it then should come as no surprise that those same people would be less inclined to value civic engagement, community facilities and informal public 'third places'.



Road Rage and a Return Counter at Wal-Mart – Modern Forms of Serendipitous Community Interaction

A great book from a few years ago called "Bowling Alone" by Robert Putnam outlines the decline of 'social capital' in America since the 1950s. One of his observations on social capital is the 'reduction in all the forms of in-person social intercourse'. While the book is primarily focused on the decline of engagement in civic institutions and community networks fused with an '*every man for himself*' attitude, loss of public third places can certainly be a symptom of our reduction in social capital as outlined in the book.

As our society increasingly eliminates true, free public third places, the intangible value of the remaining ones increases. Regardless of how one feels about calls to shutter hundreds of uneconomical rural post offices in the coming months to balance the postal budget, one can't help but notice the passionate calls from rural residents for preservation of these post offices for their role as community centers, communication conduits and connections to the outside world; same deal for public libraries pools and senior centers. The 'value' of these spaces transcends their original function, many of which have become obsolete in the modern world. And while institutional/private spaces can and do

HAWAI'I PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter
Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

sometimes fill this void nicely, informal, truly free public spaces are arguably best for community psyche and civic health as they reflect a shared commitment and obligation from the citizens of a community.



Lumaha'i Beach, Kauai

In Hawaii, the timeless draw of the beach as third place has withstood our modern push for privatization of public space, an increase in the marketing of costly 'entertainment', formalization of our leisure time and our reduced informal interaction with people we don't know. Is the beach experience always a civic nirvana and panacea for society's ills? No. But our beaches remain at the precarious apex of an increasingly fragile societal compact that for generations has provided free, civic, third places for us to gather, mingle and connect with each other, sometimes one wave break at a time.