



Businesses as Spaces where Community is Practiced? The Socio-Spatial Features for “talking about everything,” “coming down,” and “staying in touch”¹⁶⁷

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This chapter analyzes data from interviews and observation with regard to the precise features that make businesses sites for interaction, and eventually, for community. More precisely, I aim to determine the distinct material and social features that support sociability and interaction among customers, staff, and owners. The data and concepts generated from interviews and observations are thereby analyzed using the features Raymond Oldenburg ascribed to his so-called third places as a conceptual lens. In addition, the characteristics that Lyn Lofland (1972; 1973; 1998) and Erving Goffman (1959; 1963; 1971) (and partially Margarethe Kusenbach 2006; 2008) assign to (semi-) public behavior are also useful to my analysis of the social life in the businesses. Disentangling the different practices allows us to holistically understand how they merge together to create an easy-going atmosphere that often supports networking and community building practices. In contrast to the sites that Oldenburg (mostly bars and restaurants) and Lofland and Goffman (mostly public places and cafés) investigated, this chapter reflects on the comparatively broader business sample used in the entire study.

Oldenburg's ideas about third places and their importance for neighborhood life are discussed in section 3.1. Here, I aim to tailor his work into an operationalized sensitizing concept in order to guide my own empirical research. Therefore, this chapter first offers a brief recapitulation of Oldenburg's main arguments and

¹⁶⁷ Quotes from owner of Café I (l. 287, 159, 212).

my critique thereof. I then use the features found in my case-studies to present an “updated” argument about third place attributes. To this end, Goffman and Lofland’s elaborations are also included in order to conceptualize the practices observed and how they may (or may not) relate to other socio-spatial features, and how they reveal perceptions and usage of the business for more public, parochial/ semi-public, or private aspects. Different degrees of publicness also influence the social life in the businesses. This conceptual framework, derived from the sensitizing concepts, in turn enables me to develop own conceptual statements about the practiced communal social life and enacted senses of home or belonging in the respective business.

According to Oldenburg (1989, 2001), being neither places of residence (first) or work (second), third places allow for communities¹⁶⁸ to develop through the gathering of people and the discussion of a broad range of topics. However, Oldenburg’s analysis (and that of his followers) of neighborhood bars, taverns, and cafés is methodologically unclear and seems to lack empirical evidence. Moreover, he fails to plumb the depths of the rules and norms of the micro-interactions in these businesses.¹⁶⁹ Oldenburg’s study further suffers from his restricted focus on gastronomic facilities. However, from his investigation of this very restricted sample, he derives the following third place attributes: “neutral ground;” an “egalitarian ideology;” “conversation as the main activity;” “easy accessibility” (ideally by foot); a certain number of “regulars” who develop a set of specific behavior for the place; “playfulness”; and a “particular type of freedom” that creates a sense of “homeliness” but with a portion of “novelty” that one could not find at home (1999: 22 f.). These attributes, according to Oldenburg (1999: 43 ff.), allow people within a given place to generate and sustain generalized friendships and habits of association.

Despite my critique of Oldenburg’s methodological unclarity and his narrow reliance on US American “neighborhood taverns”, his list of features and respective terminology serve as a point of departure to categorize and conceptually enhance my interview and observation findings (cf. Chapter 5).¹⁷⁰

My field site and business sample typify “ordinary” (Hall 2012) inner-city (for most part pre-war) spaces and ordinary mixed-use shopping streets common to German cities. The street and the businesses are more ethnically, socially, and func-

168 Oldenburg never clarifies what he means with community, whether of shared geographical location, shared interests, or shared practices.

169 See for instance the collection of third place case studies in Tjora/ Scambler (2013), focusing on cafés and coffee houses.

170 If the findings are coherent in different businesses, I present only some of them as examples in order to avoid redundancies and repetitions.

tionally diverse than most of Oldenburg's cases. Since the 1980s, when Oldenburg first applied his communitarian idea to businesses, inner-city and suburban neighborhoods have changed dramatically; as have shopping patterns and retail districts (see Chapter 2.2.). Furthermore, as discussed, the recent increase in information and communication technologies (ICTs) has changed the ways shoppers and retailers buy and sell and other leisure-oriented consumptive practices (Memarovic et al. 2014). In his 2009 edited volume, Oldenburg denigrates bar games, books, laptops, and smart-phones¹⁷¹ as being too distracting from the playful conversations that make a business a third place. However, as will be shown in the following subchapters, ICTs can also invite personal conversations, as well as virtual conversations with those not present; therefore, they may perhaps create a new contemporary third place characteristic.

Over the course of his career, Oldenburg's writings reflect a shift in his focus from the "abstract" atmosphere of third places to more concrete social aspects (e.g. in his 1999 book *The Great Good Place*). More recently (in Tjora/ Scambler 2013), Oldenburg also highlights the practice of "hanging out" as one of the main "functions" (p. 10 ff.) of third places. My analysis reveals more detailed and more praxeological findings that show that Oldenburg's "hanging out" provides only a social basis, but is alone insufficient for further networking and interaction between diverse people. The following sections argue that hanging out depends on a specific spatial design, on the availability of furniture, and on the acceptance of behavioral norms that prioritize a particularly social kind of consumption that may differ from everyday commercial transactions. This undermines Oldenburg's deterministic language of "functioning" and "functions." While examining each of Oldenburg's ascribed socio-spatial features in turn, the discussion below draws particular attention to practice-related aspects. My research showed that owners' practices are the most important in shaping the social lives of the businesses; therefore, the owners' special role for the practice of community is discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

171 These are summarized under the term *Information and Communication Technologies* (ICTs) in this book.

6.1 “The idea was to create a meeting point.”¹⁷² **Neutral Grounds or Inclusive Publicness**

In accordance with the urban studies literature on placemaking and the production of space, my observations and interviews indicate that there is no such thing as a neutral space, as a space without power relations and meanings (e.g. Fainstein 2005; Lefebvre 1991; Smith 2010). For instance, the **flower store** owner’s social practices create clear hierarchies. Whenever she hosts her regular customers for a coffee meeting beyond the purchase, she decides the seating plan and moves her customers to their respective folding chairs, while she makes herself comfortable in her lambskin-covered, pillow-stuffed chair, pouring out coffee out and serving her guests. It is solely the owner who starts conversational topics and she freely interrupts others if they bore her or if she disagrees with them; she also often prevents her customers from fully expressing their opinions. Whereas the flower store might indeed serve as a “neutral ground” (Oldenburg 1997: 9; 1999: 22 f.) for drop-in customers and all customers that are able to afford fresh flowers, the exclusive coffee table is less neutral. The coffee parties raise distinct (role) expectations and obligations, such as showing up regularly, bringing cookies or cakes, consenting to the owner’s opinions, and so on. Whereas third place customers are free to come and go in Oldenburg’s model, the flower store owner decides whether or not to set up a coffee table and who is allowed to participate. The clear differences in status between the host and the guests/customers structures the conversational topics, service, furniture placement, and (im)personal interactions, all of which go beyond commercial exchange. Thus the flower store’s ground cannot be considered neutral as in Oldenburg’s conceptualization.

Power relations between staff and customers are comparatively more balanced in the **butcher’s shop**, or, at least, they are not as obviously differentiated. Employees do not act like hosts as in the coffee table setting in the flower store. Furthermore, even if they serve the regular customers with an intimate and aligning gesture, the employees almost never leave their positions behind the counter. Hence, the front room belongs solely to the customers. The staff does indeed foster open social exchanges with customers, sometimes initiating personal conversations; however, they never dominate these conversations as long as other customers are present. The owner has set a behavioral code and a standard for hard work that prevents staff and customers from pursuing such conversations if other customers are waiting in line. The owner also limits open exchange whenever he thinks it is slowing down

¹⁷² Paraphrased quote from organic store owner (l. 107): “The idea was first to create a meeting point.”

sales or business operations. However, customers and staff do discuss a variety of private topics, particularly during lunch time, sometimes ending up in heated debates. Customers come and go as they please, but other lunch customers and employees may tease them if they haven't shown up in a while. The butcher shop's "neutrality" (Oldenburg 1999) thus comes with loose strings attached.

The neutrality of all the sampled **cafés**, whether new or old, is directly related to their spatial setting. The cafes all have multiple tables and chairs, where customers can exchange private information or engage in small talk against the murmuring background noise, without having to worry that other people will listen or interrupt. However, if customers or employees realize that others are watching or listening, they immediately quiet their conversations. Since the main practices in cafés besides eating and drinking are talking to others or interacting with electronic devices (often still in the presence of others), the comparatively neutral ground seems to place few limits on what can be discussed: everything is allowed so long as the conversations is appropriate in volume and gestures. Because of this easy-going atmosphere and the primary practices of selling, serving, and purchasing/consuming, less self-confidence and performance (in the sense of Goffman 1959) are needed. This supports and encourages low-threshold participation.

For instance when I entered the **main café** for the first time, and particularly when I was watched by the other people in the store, I (and I assume all other newcomers) had to immediately discern the implicit and explicit rules of the café's space and how things "are to be done." This included figuring out how orders are placed (self-service or waiters?), which products are where – and if one is allowed to touch them, what volume is appropriate, where the line for the cashier or the counter begins and ends, where the free tables are, and so on. Taking the atmosphere and ambiance into account, I had to decide quickly how to act in that social and material environment.

Hence, my own experience as well as my ethnographic observations show that the decoration, lighting, background noise and music, furniture arrangement, the (physical and symbolic) display of the merchandise, and the presence of other people all have a strong impact on how customers act and interact in these spaces. This is in line with Goffman and Lofland's observations, but it diverges from Oldenburg's idea of neutrality: The café's ground is anything but neutral; the atmosphere and the degree of familiarity determine if the café is used as a public or as a semi-private space.

Furthermore, the social life in the sampled cafés can be framed as a dynamic "business ballet" (to borrow from Jacobs' "sidewalk ballet"): The image of the ballet refers to the constant movement of bodies and material—a dance that is confined to the café space, the duration of the stay, and the respective social setting. The

dance is always changing, involving different dancers in different *tempos* and styles depending on the available space and time of the day or week.

An analytical look at this ballet provides insights into what exactly the businesses might mean for the neighborhood. As micro-publics (Amin 2002), the cafés¹⁷³ blur the lines between public and private. To understand how this works, it is useful to imagine the business as a stage, divided by a “curtain” into front and back stages. In the café, the front stage/ space could be considered the sales area and dining room, where as the back office, the kitchen and the space behind the counter might be the back stage/space. At a different spatial level, we could also think about the street as a front space and the business as a back space.

Intimate behavior and private relations can be found in all these spaces, which are nonetheless rarely neutral. So, too, do we see the “performances” that Goffman (1959) ascribes to public spaces (an individual’s activities in front of a particular set of observers) in all spaces. Both spaces are performative and are not neatly aligned, but often with different audiences and different senses of familiarity. Since the different public and private settings in the cafés have different audiences, the actor (e.g. the waitress or customer) must alter their performances for each setting. In the front stage, the performance defines the social situation to the observers. However, the front stage, which is not necessarily restricted to sales or dining rooms or public sidewalk, is where customers and employees formally perform and adhere to specific conventions that hold meaning for the “audience”, i.e., the other people present in or around the business. The performer knows that he or she is being watched and acts accordingly (Goffman 1959). The primary practices of selling, serving, buying, and consuming ease the performance and invite further interaction and conversation. For instance, one actor, the owner of the **main café**, uses the performance to give meaning and identity to himself, to others, and to their common situation. When he greets or hugs certain customers as they enter the business, he enacts and reaffirms their esteemed identity as regular customers or members of his social circle. At the same time, the owner reinforces his status as the owner, as the one who can decide who is “in” and who is “out” of that special circle of regulars. Significantly, the performance is enacted for the benefit of all the other customers and staff. However, these social settings (*social scripts* as per Goffman) sometimes become institutionalized, creating (abstract but also often concrete or stereotyped) expectations about how the owner should behave or interact in that situation. If the store owner does not continue to greet a customer in such a warm

¹⁷³ Observations indicate that the same processes and phenomena of blurring lines of public and private spaces can be found in all gastronomic businesses and the flower store, but not the lunch restaurant.

way, the customer may feel disappointed and excluded as a result of this moment of abstraction. This, however, applies to both customers and staff: If either one takes on a new role or task, they might encounter several already well-established fronts among which they will be forced to choose (Goffman 1959).

My ethnographic fieldwork in the main café thus reveals that the business' everyday ballet comprises both frontstage and backstage behavior, and the two are often blurred. Performers alternate between confident, purposed frontstage performances that are directed specifically toward an audience with more relaxed, muted, and intimate interactions. So if we imagine the main café as a theater, wherein the frontstage is mainly confined to the dining room, sales room, and the furnished sidewalk, one can observe the actions and performances in the front and the back interlacing in a dance.

However, Oldenburg's plea for neutral grounds does not address power relations in public or private or front and back stage spaces and how these relations result in specific behaviors. Rather, he explores the alleviation of the roles and relationships required in first and second places, i.e., mother-/father-child, wife-husband, employer-employee. Since the customers do not own the businesses, nor are they responsible in the same way for other people as they might be in "first" or "second" spaces, the places of businesses are comparatively more neutral for customers. But the dominant actor groups are the owners, customers, and servers in the cafés; yet the observations also revealed amicable interaction between them. In addition, since owners and staff in all the cafés only approach regular customers whom they already know in a particularly friendly and intimate manner, these employees do not change or interfere with the content of the observed customer-to-customer interactions. Usually, the volume and seriousness—but also the playfulness—of conversation topics increases as the day grows later and increasingly more alcoholic beverages are consumed.¹⁷⁴

However, a comparison of the observed interactions across the gastronomic facilities (main café, additional cafés/restaurants, the lunch restaurant and the bar) reveal that each place has its own norms and codes with regard to both public and private behavior: For instance, during one of my visits, a regular customer entered the **lunch restaurant** during the early afternoon, and the owner engaged here in the

174 The main café does not serve alcoholic beverages. Two of the three cafés that are open into the evening and night increase the volume of the background music at sunset. In the new café, which many customers use as a "public office," employees make sure to keep the tone and volume of conversations much lower in order to not disturb working customers.

following terse, churlish exchange, conducting a transaction in a tone that sounded more like they were trading barbs than negotiating a transaction:

Owner: Hunger?
Guest: Yes, hunger, hunger.
Owner: Hunger. What else?
Guest: What's left?
Owner: Bean stew with lamb. Yummy.
Guest: Yummy?
Owner: Yummy.
Guest: Yes (nodding) [...] if you say the daily special is agreeable, is good, then I take it (l. 304–320).

In any of the other restaurants and businesses, such a gruff exchange would be considered inappropriate and would create discomfort. For instance, in the **café II**, when a customer shouted into his cell phone for a couple of minutes, the surrounding customers cleared their throats and rolled with their eyes to signal him to calm down. Finally, the waitress went over and asked him to lower his voice. He then complained to the person on the phone about the rude service, so the waitress reacted in a harsher way and stopped serving him for the rest of his stay. So even if the café is open to any paying customer, it is not neutral toward inappropriate behavior: The staff decides if customers are served or asked to leave.

However, in the “hunger?”-social exchange above, between these two well-acquainted men, such a tone and style binds them together as “partners in crime.” By “speaking the same language,” they are reinforcing their relationship, as they told me when they saw my puzzled face.

The **bar** offers a neutral ground so long as customers want to consume alcoholic beverages before closing. There, men and women of various ages and ethnic backgrounds discuss an incredibly broad range of topics with acquaintances as well as with total strangers. At the counter, the owner moves in and out of conversations, sensitive as to whether her opinion is or is not wanted by her customers. Customers discuss very personal issues; they cry and moan – usually apologizing in embarrassment to others immediately thereafter. The bar thus functions also as a private (therapeutic) space. However, the owner does not universally allow all kinds of topics or behavior and will ask customers to stop or leave if she does not like what they are saying or doing.

The two examples show that business space is thus only a neutral ground as long as those conversations happen out of sight of the owners or staff or remain in line with their norms and codes.

The degrees of neutrality within the **pharmacy** play out first and foremost in professional behavior of the staff. The staff services a wide-range of clients and engages in a variety of conversation types. They comfort, consult, diagnose; they tease and chat with the customers; they celebrate holidays and birthdays – but always maintaining a professional distance in order to create a neutral ground that will allow their customers to raise their concerns, needs, and sorrows. Customers, after all, come first and foremost to receive help. Hence, conversation stems from and circles around health-issues and is conducted in hushed tones. This formal and professional way of speaking maintains privacy and avoids any performance that includes a wider audience. Nevertheless, employees and the owner repeatedly welcome long-term customers with a hug or a pat on the shoulders, acting as more than a pharmacist, but as a friend or helper. Despite the place's emphasis on discretion and the customers' purchasing needs, the pharmacy's salesroom also serves as a ground within which to discuss topics beyond health issues. Customers and staff exchange words on neighborhood change and neighborhood gossip; in these conversations, the staff acts in a more open and less commanding way than the bar owner.

The limited physical space in the (now-closed) **fruit and vegetable store** and the fact that customers cannot serve themselves means that employees were always involved in interactions with customers about their purchases. Because the store, as piled up boxes with fruits and vegetables in a gateway to the 19th century building, opens to the sidewalk, the business has a more public appearance than some of the other shops, and seems even to be perceived as part of the sidewalk. Customers stand and chat in the entrance threshold just as on the sidewalks. Being constantly exposed to passers-by increases the perception of the business as part of the public sphere. The absence of a host or symbolic owner fosters the neutrality of the space. The salesperson seems to welcome any potential customer and almost any form of conversation. Many customers continue to talk on their phones, or to address their children or to engage in similar “distracted” social practices while looking for fruits and vegetables in the open store. For these reasons, the business space seems to be more public than private, and in that regard is more “neutral.”

My findings therefore indicate that in comparison to the home or the workplace, where age-, position-, or relationship-based hierarchies determine whose opinion or norms dominate social interactions, the stores are comparatively more neutral partially because of the perceived or practiced publicness of the spaces. Nevertheless, the stores' owners and their employees formally hold power over the space and the conversations held therein. So the observations of the behavior in the businesses, which range from “public” to “private” (in the Goffmanian sense), indicate that the spaces function as more public or private spaces for individual customers and staff

with high levels of sociability. However, a higher degree of publicness and public behavior in business does not necessarily increase the businesses' neutrality. So it remains unclear what Oldenburg means by "neutral ground" as a feature of business that fosters sociability. If Oldenburg only means some kind of "openness" or "publicness," given that these businesses are all public accommodations (Feagin 1991) or semi-public/parochial places (Kusenbach 2006; 2008; Lofland 1998), the businesses I am studying can be conceptualized as third places.

They are also "public" in the sense that the law prevents private owners from refusing entry to any would-be customer (with a few small exceptions). The neutrality of these public places is limited both by the different domiciliary rights of their owners and by their implicit and explicit "house rules" (Britton 2008). In practice, the sampled businesses play with physical arrangements and legal statuses, but also different patterns of social interaction.

For instance (and detailed further below), customers and staff "privatize" the (semi-)public space, by turning the front rooms into non-neutral or more private spaces. The changed design and socio-spatial features of public accommodations and semi-public spaces then ease encounters among strangers. Further, if Oldenburg's neutral ground requires a balanced role among owner, staff, and customers, my observations show that one kind of actor (usually staff and owners) always remains "responsible" for, or "serves" the other, even if different nuances of (mutual) dependency exist.

So as Oldenburg (1999; 2001) notes, the occupants of third places have little to no obligation to be there; they can come and go as they please and are not tied down to the locale financially, politically, legally, socially, or otherwise. This holds true for the businesses along Karl-Marx-Straße insofar as neutral ground refers to the publicness of the business spaces. Depending on their physical outlay, the social practices in the store simultaneously wander between the poles of public and private. Nevertheless, they are still less-rigid than in family or work situations, where participants need to fulfill more hierarchically-structured roles.

Hence, in comparison to the home or office, the businesses' socio-spatial settings often allowed for more neutral exchanges, even if the level of neutrality was limited. According to Oldenburg, neutrality should foster the development of a broad interactional web. But while the interview and observation data does not support Oldenburg's general notion of neutrality or neutral grounds, they show that the sampled businesses offer a ground for a high variety of social exchanges, for people with diverse backgrounds and equally diverse opinions and worldviews to meet without being constrained by having to play a particular role; that is, as long as they follow the formal owners' behavioral rules. Even though my data shows that

there is no such thing as a purely neutral ground, the next subchapter discusses how the businesses level differences between the customers.

6.2 “We are committed to all and we also want the store to be for all.”¹⁷⁵ Businesses as *Levelers*

According to Oldenburg (1999: 22 f.), third places “level” and balance social inequalities; they are spaces without specific criteria for inclusion, e.g., specific educational or income background, lifestyle, subculture, or age group. Although the majority of sampled businesses offer quotidian products, they still take customer lifestyle considerations into the account when deciding how to deliver goods or services.¹⁷⁶ One would think, for instance, that the **flower store**, a small localized “regular” shop, would appeal to anyone who could afford flowers (even though flowers are still luxury goods). The owner mentions, however, that since most customers are not in urgent need of a bouquet as they pass the store, their decision to enter is influenced by the window (and outdoor) display. She thinks that most customers already have preferences about which flower store they like, a statement confirmed by my (walk-along) observations of the customers on Karl-Marx-Straße. Taste, aesthetics, and lifestyle all influence the decision to purchase flowers or home decorations. Hence, market segmentation along these lines restricts the degree to which a flower store, as a luxury good provider, can be a leveler (cf. Chapter 3.1.).

Being included into the social life of a business levels some of the socio-economic or educational differences between customers or between customers and staff – even if only for the time they are in the store or eatery. For instance, the flower store owner approaches all drop-in customers, regardless of their ethnicity, age, income-level, or spending habits, in the same polite yet perfunctory way. However, esteemed customers receive benefits such as service-based extras like item reservation and pre-orders, as well as social benefits like empathetic listening or the exchange of interesting newspaper articles and magazines. But only customers, who have developed a relationship with the owner and her mother, especially those who receive the regular coffee invitations, are truly included socially in this store. In this case, social inclusion means a “business-related friendship,” from which both owner

¹⁷⁵ Paraphrased quote by owner of main café (l. 66 f.): “We are committed [to everybody] and we also want {the business} to be for everybody.”

¹⁷⁶ Everyday supplies are increasingly becoming lifestyle products, such as (organic) cleaning products or take-away food.

and customers benefit. Through some of her services for her customers, such as going shopping for the elderly women, exchanging local news, and delivering or picking up goods for regular customers, the owner endows the customer with a status equal to her own. She also acts respectful to the long-term venerable women who frequent her business (many of whom own local buildings or are wives/widows of honorable businessmen). For the owner, the benefits of the “business-related friendships,” include distraction from her work-days, a transformation in her own social status, and an emotional fulfillment that comes from being needed. The observed conversations reveal that although the regular customers appreciate and respect the owner, they nevertheless still consider themselves as having a higher class background than the (younger and still-working) owner. My question about their former employment was answered with irritation: “Nooo, we never had to work!” The “we” refers to two of the coffee table regulars. That they didn’t have to work is supposed to underline that they were always sufficiently well off. Few of the senior women had a career and many consider their status as non-working wives or stay-at-home-mothers a luxury allowed by their husbands’ high incomes, whereas the owner still has to work long hours. Hence, despite the owner’s efforts to use special treatment to balance her status with that of her customers, the flower store owner does not successfully level the different backgrounds between her customers and herself. Hence, in this regard and despite the manifold attempts on behalf of the owner, on her willingness to offer “more” through caring for and socializing with her regulars, she is not rewarded with a “levelled” status.

While in the flower store, customers only stay for a chat and take a seat, if the owner invites them to do so, the employees in the **main café** invite customers to sit as long as they like, as long as they have purchased an item, be it either a full meal or just a cup of tea (according to the owner and my observations). Elderly people can stay the whole day while having only one or two small cups of tea (for around 80 cents). Staff approach both familiar and unfamiliar guests with the same polite tone and customers are treated even more “equally” in the self-service or checkout lines. Due to the limited size of the café, the cramped sales space is packed with furniture and fast-moving people; making physical contact and interaction is therefore likely and acceptable. For instance, when the waitresses enter from the backroom with hot meals in their hands, they shout the name of the meal into the dining room in order to get the customer’s attention and to secure free space through which to move. This call may also be a performative attempt to gain respect for how hard they are working. They then push through the crowded room, directing customers out of their way. They “dance” while carrying the meal to the table. They often tease the customers that their body size is preventing them from moving forward. If they have a free hand, the servers may lightly touch the customers in a friendly

and familiar way. Usually, further verbal and physical interaction evolves out of this contact: customers tease the waitresses in return or comment on the meal they are balancing. Never during my observations, did any of the customers react with irritation to the rather intimate contact initiated during this small ritual.

The owner states that even if the saleswomen and owners chat more with regular customers and provide special service to the elderly, all customers receive the same consultation and treatment. As a matter of principle, professional service thus levels socio-demographic differences – the business is “for all people” (l. 61). Even though the owner trains his waitresses to serve all customers in the same polite and open way, more extended conversations were observed mostly between Turkish or German speaking customers. Given that the employees speak Turkish and German fluently and have decent English, their treatment of the different groups in the café does not seem deviate because of ethnicity. The cafe has low prices and a standardized business design that makes only few aesthetic references to the Turkish origin of the owners and staff. Rather than appealing to a specific ethnic or lifestyle group, the café’s hybrid design aims to appeal to multiple inclusive lifestyles or milieus, according to the owner. The observations show that the café receives customers from most of the local income, age, and ethnic groups. The owner is proud of his diverse clientele and considers each new person as a potential repeat customer. He has trained his employees to serve everyone equally and has designed his store in a manner that appeals to a broad range of people.

[The employee] needs to have little **bit of a good tact and sensitivity** [...] she also has to want the customers, because **you want to encounter the customers and exchange with them and how beautiful is it when you get greeted and if you can order „the usual“**, then this means that [the other person] remembers, that the **customer has a history** [with the business] and **that is important and you feel at home, you feel that you're in good hands**, yes, this is not the case everywhere (l. 330–336).

For him, a good employee is someone who treats all customers with the same respect and level of service, thereby levelling potential (status or ethnic) differences between them, this being an “unanticipated gain” (Small 2009) of frequenting the café. Hence, the café works hard to mitigate differences among customers, in particular ethnic differences, and these levelling practices support the social inclusion and the sense of belonging in the business.

If the **butcher shop** works as a leveler, it is only for people who eat meat and sausages¹⁷⁷ and can afford its slightly higher prices (than those found in the local

177 Most German sausages and meat products are made from pork, so many local observant Muslims, Jews, or Buddhists will not shop at this store.

(discount) supermarkets). However, the observations show that during lunch, customers in both blue- and white-collar positions exchange news at the four standing tables. This observation aligns with the statements from the owner that his customers have very diverse incomes and occupations. While observing the shop I noticed that everyone present is a hungry lunch customer and is treated as such: Employees serve them in a quick and friendly manner, occasionally initiating conversations with both familiar and unfamiliar customers if time allows. They serve all customers in the same perfunctory manner, regardless of how much money they spend. If anything, seniors receive the most attention and patience, even though they only buy small portions of sausage and meat. When an employee perceives that a customer is slowly becoming a regular, the saleswomen takes the time to introduce this new guest to the more established regulars. However, often this introduction is unnecessary as most often the “new regulars” are welcomed in by the older ones themselves. Interactions between customers emerge spontaneously regardless of how long they have been coming. Any new customer is welcomed as long as she or he does not interrupt the routinized order of the lunch breaks. During opening hours, lunchtime is the most inclusive time due to the presence of the lunch regulars, at other times of day, fewer customers occupy the sales space, so most social exchange happens between saleswomen and customers and without the stimulation of other already familiar customers.

Both my observations and interviews show that in the **organic shop**, the leveling that does occur happens partially through formal membership and partially through the social skills of the owners. As a comparatively expensive store, its customers seem to be primarily well-off people who care about organic nutrition, which already restricts the shop’s customer base significantly. According to the owner, the majority are well-educated people with German, West-European, and Turkish roots. The employees cultivate social relationships with customers across these ethnic lines. Employees work in both the front and back spaces, intermingling, hugging, teasing, laughing, helping, and chatting with customers, blurring the distinctions between the roles of employee and customer. However, based on my observations, the staff and customers largely belong to more or less the same social milieu and staff behavior makes customers feel all the more equal to one another. The dynamic and informal way in which the business is operated further levels the few differences that do exist both among customers as well as between customers and staff.

By contrast, in the **new café**, the **lunch restaurant**, and the **hair salon**, the employees and customers retain distinct and easily distinguishable roles. This separation is emphasized by the businesses’ spatial layout and the way people move within the store. Back spaces, counters, and certain corners belong exclusively to

staff; customers use only selected places and furniture in the businesses (where they are seated). In this regard, these business spaces also convey a less private sense than the other stores. In the hair salon, regulars and customers who request more expensive services receive special treatment: They are served coffee and invited to use the massage chair. Drop-in customers (most often men) are seated on the regular waiting chairs and receive nothing to drink. In contrast to the main café, the new café and the lunch restaurant only treat daytime customers the same as long as they consume an appropriate amount – meaning that they need to buy more than one or two cups of coffee if they want to stay the entire day. But so long as customers are hungry, thirsty, and able to pay, employees serve them regardless of gender, income, age, and lifestyle. However, in all gastronomic businesses the employees do respond better to those who tip as a reward for special service. Sometimes only with a smile and thankful look, but I also observed that some waitresses and waiters will give extra attention and improved service to customers who are known for their generous tipping habits, particularly in the lunch restaurant and in café II. Regular customers also receive special attention, but only if employees consider them “good” customers.¹⁷⁸ The lunch restaurant staff welcomes customers with a consistent performance: greeting them at the entrance, guiding them to tables (if they don’t place themselves on their favorite tables), presenting them the daily menu, and chatting with the regulars about weather, local politics, and their orders. Observations did not indicate any differential treatment based on the customers’ professional backgrounds (which are most often known by the employees). This also holds true for the fruit and vegetable store, where the sales personal serves all customers the same way, even if they are only purchasing few items.

The **pharmacy** employees also seem to offer the same consultation and medication to all customers, even knowing that many are short on money. Since they have lived in the neighborhood for a long time and have watched it change, the pharmacy staff has a good idea about the socio-economic background and medical conditions of both the established and comparatively new customers. The owner and her employees are highly dedicated to providing care, and therefore they do not let socio-economic or ethnic differences among the customers affect their service and consultations. The professionalism and staff, as well as the training they received, accounts for the levelling of differences among the customers. As both

¹⁷⁸ Waitresses, waiters, and other gastronomic personnel tend to complain about customers, regardless of their frequency, spending, and even to a lesser extent their tipping habits. Stated simply, “good” customers do not require or demand extensive or special services; they appreciate the employees’ work without demanding too much of their time; and, they do not have allergies or “special” desires. Generally, they are “easy to handle” as they told me.

groups reside and socialize in the neighborhood, customers and employees often speak in the “same language,” meaning that consultations and further conversations often include teasing “Neukölln wit”¹⁷⁹ (a certain type of gentle teasing) and dialect. This localized language blurs the diverse backgrounds of customers and employees, and thereby serves as a leveling agent.

The types of interactions that Oldenburg describes as “levelling” are also used by staff to cultivate customer loyalty. “Every paying customer is a good customer,” as one of the butcher’s employees told me. These interactional “rituals,” according to Goffman (2005: 57), therefore are not solely hospitable, but are also used to smooth working routines and increase customer satisfaction. Such ritualized performances that show “personal deference” (Goffman 2005: 72 f.), include salutations, invitations, and compliments. They ease staff-customer interactions and are part and parcel of any business dependent upon customer-service. However, this “host” and “servicing” behavior affects the “leveling” qualities of the businesses (e.g. where waitresses do not seem to be full-time professionals, they often re-ascertain the customers’ orders and move around in a slower and less ballet-like way than in the other cafés). A certain degree of friendliness can smooth the social exchange of selling and buying with a stranger. When made routine, this results in a shared socio-spatial and physical setting where sales persons and customers do not intrude on each other’s comfort zones (seen exceptionally strongly in the pharmacy). Most simply, the performed or strategic “hospitality” means providing food, drinks, and accommodation (Bell 2009) but as a rather commercial exchange between the owners and staff (as “hosts”) and the customers. These hospitable exchanges include publicly performed, routinized, and trained social practices, which help also to “civilize” and “manage” potential “strangers” and thus foster more structured relationships (Bell 2009). This is in line with Goffman and Lofland’s analysis of public behavior as a means of managing everyday life (together with strangers) in public settings. Hence, the serving practices level not only paying customers, but they are also used to manage difference or diversity by alternately excluding, tolerating, or welcoming particular customers. If guests or customers want to continue to patronize the business, they must follow the place’s behavioral codes.

So again, according to Oldenburg (1999: 22 f.), third places “level” and balance social inequalities; they are spaces without specific criteria for inclusion. However, the aforementioned examples have shown that customers are expected to purchase something if they are to remain (physically present and feeling socially equal) in the store. The degree to which leveling occurs depends primarily on how the staff behaves toward customers. Customers frequently enter businesses on Karl-Marx-

¹⁷⁹ Both the owners of the flower shop and the pharmacy mentioned this in the interviews.

Straße to window shop or get information, yet unless they purchase something, they are not welcome to linger. My observations have indicated that the more formal training the staff has received, the more consistent and polite they are toward the customers, regardless of status. Not only do stores from the outset exclude people unable to purchase something, but they routinely pay special attention to affluent customers and extravagant spenders. This preferential treatment reveals an important limit to the role of third places as levelers. The only ones who are leveled, who are included, and who are accepted are the ones who can pay. Consumption, not the space, is the ultimate leveler and in spite of all other actions, this means that there remains a social disparity based on economic level. To repeat the saleswoman in the butcher's shop, "all [paying] customers are good customers."

6.3 “They are pulling my leg a lot.”¹⁸⁰ *The Conversations*

The (interactional) practices and behavioral rules that level customers also affect how conversations unfold in the shops and stores studied. According to Oldenburg (1999: p. 26), face-to-face conversations are the most basic and most fundamental social practices that take place in third places:

The conversational style of third places embodies the spirit of pure sociability. A person must not remain silent, nor must he dominate conversation. In the free and uninhibited atmosphere of third place fellowship, conversation is remarkably democratic. Everyone seems to talk ‘just the right amount’ (Oldenburg/ Brissett 1982: 272).

This assertion about a balanced conversational style rests on Oldenburg’s assumption about the leveling-function of third places: conversations are freed of power dynamics only if the place successfully levels all customers.¹⁸¹ Oldenburg (1999: 22f.) considers conversation as a main focus of activity in third places, in which playfulness and wit are collectively valued. He does not discuss whether this desired “playfulness” might simply be the result of more general (or culturally-specific) behavioral codes and practices. I translate his so-called playful conversations into

¹⁸⁰ Paraphrased quote by owner of café I (l. 233): “They are pulling my leg a lot, also in front of other guests.” With this the owner refers to the constant teasing practices between customers and owner and the playfulness of their conversational tone.

¹⁸¹ Oldenburg does not discuss the carriers of interaction and largely excludes staff involvement, particular types of customers, and the ways in which people are stratified. Reckwitz (2002; 2003) argues that social practices are performed by their so-called carriers.

teasing and joking elements in the observed interactions. However, more serious conversations and discussions also took place in the businesses, which Oldenburg does not consider. The physical layout of the place might also deter the discussion of more serious or contested topics. So, this section explores the conversations, their participants, spatial and social circumstances, and their (eventually *playful*) contents.

My ethnographic work shows that power relations and differential roles remain salient in all observed conversations; and moreover, the main activity is consumption rather than conversation. Social exchange is thus only a by-product – and sometimes an unanticipated or anticipated gain – of shopping and eating out. It is not a *necessary* component of everyday life and work in Karl-Marx-Straße (cf. Small 2009). Interviews and observations across all cases demonstrated that customers come first and foremost for food, drinks, and services, and that conversation and interaction are only secondary concerns (even though both are mutually related).

Owner: One lady, she comes almost every day, I know her for more than ten years, I know her from another business [on Karl-Marx-Straße], where I worked before [as a waiter] and now she comes over again and again [...]

Why does she come?

Owner: For everything, everything. Well, sometimes only for coffee and tea, sometimes only tea, sometimes only for a short stay, because she has to do something over here [in the area] and just wants a brief break, or [she comes] for a pastime with me and reading and such things and then, because we know each other so well, right, and that's why she knows when she comes over she doesn't have to necessarily buy something or so, but can simply rest briefly, because she is here really almost every day and frequently consumes, but there are also days [...] where she doesn't eat [...] and then there are other colleagues or regulars that come over briefly on their way home after work and only have one for the road and then quickly home and so (Owner Café I, l. 130–145).

The owner's statements underscore the aforementioned point that only a limited number of regulars or "special" guests are allowed to spend time in the business without purchasing anything and that their presence and conversations are always welcomed and appreciated.¹⁸² Certainly not every customer or staff person puts the same level of importance on interaction. For instance, interaction seems very important for customers that meet regularly for lunch, dinner, or a beer. "Regulars" at a given business greatly value interaction with staff, just as much if not more so, than interaction with regular customers. For non-regular customers, conversations

182 Among the examined businesses, the main café is the only place that allows people to stay without buying anything and this also depends on the customer's physical health and personality.

with employees seem less important, but whenever the staff initiates conversations, customers seem to enjoy them and respond with sincere, active engagement. On only one occasion did a customer in the main café turn down the exchange started by a saleswoman, apologizing that he was in a hurry.

The observed conversation topics range from small talk and teasing to heated political debates. People use these spaces for professional work meetings as well as for intimate dates. Sometimes fights break out, mostly between couples or friends or acquaintances. Digital co-conversations occur simultaneously – people chat and send texts, check emails, staying glued to their devices while in these businesses.

In short, while Oldenburg describes conversation as the main practice for his early 1980s third places, in all the observed businesses along 2010s Karl-Marx-Straße, work, recovery, leisure, care, and most notably individual consumption practices are as just as common and more important than conversational practices. These research findings contradict Oldenburg's claim that customers, particularly regulars, are not attracted to third places because of the products they offer, but rather because they want to interact with their fellow customers. In the visited shops, customers do not refuse to use, as Oldenburg asserts, ICTs, newspapers, TVs, and games, considering them to be distractions from the main goal of conversation. Rather, in the Karl-Marx-Straße shops, the use of electronic devices coincides with on-spot conversation with digital or telephone conversations. Often ICTs invite further conversation as well.¹⁸³

Nevertheless, conversations remain a significant social practice, leading to, as previously mentioned, the leveling and social inclusion of certain customers (conversation can also make customers "regulars"). Yet, staff and owners and not, as in Oldenburg's work, other present customers initiate and carry out the majority of these leveling and conversations in the sampled businesses. For instance, the owner of **café I** describes that customers will initially approach him, and then if he includes other customers into the conversations, they might all continue chatting without him. He is very proud of the fact that two customers whom he introduced to one another are now a couple. Both continue to visit the café, either alone or together, and always chat for a while with the owner. As he says:

Yes, **he really tells a lot and she tells a lot**, too. Of course, she is also [employed], she travels a lot and so and, yes, **when they have problems, then they talk about it, that's**

¹⁸³ This difference in activity between my observations and Oldenburg's may also result of the more than thirty year difference between his study and mine. However, most of the side activities, such as watching TV in bars or reading newspapers in cafés have also been common practices in many 20th century gastronomic facilities.

for sure, not so much family stuff but rather things related to work or how much they have to do or if less is to do and [...] well, yes we **definitely talk a lot** (l. 153–158).

The café owner initiates and conducts conversations with his customers that range from teasing to mutual support.

Certainly, **greeting each other, I find that definitely good**, well, I find **this is courtesy, because to keep contacts warm is very important** in my opinion. [Why?] Why? Because **this is always giving and taking, I could need him one time**, no, it is definitely not the case that he has to come over and has to eat something or so. [...] he gets] these **kind words from me**, but rather that one shows, well, as a restaurateur, **they are important for me**, these guests. And how they are doing and **if everything is okay with them** and so and if they don't show up for a couple of days, one says, **long long time no see** and yes, lot of work, or this and that, or did something happen, right, while I was away or so. I mean, I have no idea, I'm also not here for 24 hours and that's why it [**the conversation**] is **very very important** for me as well as for the regulars, definitely (l. 189–201).

Conversations develop over the course of the customer's stay in the café and thus the extent to which they unfold depends strongly on the length of time they spend there.

Sometimes so [they rest], sometimes so [eat and go], certainly [they come] more for sitting and so, **for gossiping, talking, laughing and everything** and But also **some come indeed to eat quickly**, particularly those who work here [...] half an hour break or so they have to eat quickly and to leave quickly, but [...] the **rest comes in order to sit and eat calmly**. Of course, we shouldn't forget the opera guests; they have no time at all (l. 562–570).

Customers approach him to discuss their love lives, family issues, and work complaints. They let him know when they are in need of certain things; for instance, when they are looking for an apartment in the neighborhood. Just as many of the other interviewed owners, the café owner puts customers in touch if they think customers might be able to help each other out with something. For instance, the café owner mentioned that he referred customers (looking for a specific book) to a particular local bookstore employee who also frequents his café. Another time, he referred a sick customer to another customer who was a medical specialist.

In the **flower shop**, the most intimate, "playful," and serious conversations take place between the owner and her circle of elderly customers who visit regularly for extended coffee chats. These same women also frequent the business for quick purchases, and then, small chats sometimes evolve into longer conversations. The women support each other emotionally, keeping account of each other's health conditions and seeing to it that people are looked after should their partners have

passed away. The women also help one another with grocery shopping and collecting deliveries. They trade newspapers and keep one another informed about things such as upcoming funerals, street repairs, and supermarket offers. Beyond her “inner circle,” the owner also includes certain other customers in her conversations. Drawing on her local humor and generous personality type, she likes to downplay her role for playful conversations but also, and more importantly, her role in the neighborhood as a main information hub:

Well, just like it usually is, right, the baker, the newspaper store, the flower store, it's always like that, well, yes **somehow they all come and then they ask and did you hear or do you know** [laughs] [A: If something has happened, or ...?] Yes, in general, yes. Have you heard already, such-and-such has died [laughs] or do you know when is the funeral and well, such things. [A: Do you know so many people around here or how does it come?] Yo! Actually, yes (l. 1-15).

The owner's mother adds, “She is now already 17 years in this store. Word gets around” (l. 21). Beyond her “inner circle,” the owner also includes other customers in her conversations, often in a more balanced way. If familiar customers meet each other accidentally in or in front of the store, the owner enjoys joining their conversations; however, she also emphasizes that in order for her business to survive, it is important that people do not come only for the interaction, but first and foremost for the purchase: ”No[oooooooo], well, they also buy flowers. Well, [they come] not only to chat, for god's sake, I wouldn't have that much time” (l. 109 f.). Even if the owner enjoys playful and serious conversations with her customers, as a business woman she must secure steady revenue for her shop. This, as already stated, applies to all other owners as well. Some owners push conversational topics toward a purchase or try to close down conversations (especially when they are busy); others take a more relaxed approach, trusting that customers will inevitably purchase something – indeed, few leave without purchasing at least one item, be it a cup of tea, some sausage, or medicine.

The one benefit all interviewed owners and employees reported gaining from conversing with customers was information exchange. The regular sharing of information eases everyday life in different matters from housing and job searches to looking for bargains at local stores. Some of the information helps the business owners survive the challenges caused by the local urban renewal projects. The florist, for instance, was able to make use of information that she gained from her customers about upcoming street repairs. The owner, and her regular customers who also live on Karl-Marx-Straße and given their different statuses as renters, home owners, or local business people, were all given different information material. Thus, only together could they build a comprehensive picture regarding what was

going to happen along the street and who would potentially be affected (l. 422 f.). The flower store owner was able to make plans to close her store for an extended period, because with the help of her customers, she knew well in advance that massive construction would begin in January of 2015. She knew from customers living further south on the street that the construction site would stop nearly all traffic, resulting in a huge loss of passersby, customers, and delivery trucks in the months of January and February 2015. Therefore it was in her better interest to close her store during this phase and go on vacation.

Another example of an owner who benefited from his customer's local knowledge through the conversations was the owner of the **main café**. His business strongly depends on the availability of parking spots for his own and his suppliers' cars. His business neighbors, who visit his café for their lunch breaks, provide him with information on the current location of the shifting construction sites, the parking spots currently available, upcoming delivery problems, and so on. All owners complained heavily about the lack of information communicated by the local authorities, saying that as a result, they only rely on word-of-mouth updates traded among customers. In the café, conversations between staff and customers were mostly concerned with information exchange about the street's or neighborhood's changes, including the opening or closure of nearby stores and potential competitors.

Other conversations between staff and customers included more private issues, such as funerals, weddings, or updates on relatives and neighbors. The conversations among customers seems comparatively more "playful," (more laughter, more joking), although a certain amount of teasing or joking exists between customers and staff as well. The owner of cafe I said to me, "they [the customers] are pulling my leg a lot" (l. 233).

In the cafés, a diverse array of furniture, seating arrangements, and lighting support conversations strongly affect the level of the "publicness." For instance, tables in the middle of the salesroom expose café or restaurant customers to many would-be-listeners, whereas dim lights and sofas encourage more private, intimate conversation. Most customers also consider cafés a place for relaxation, because of the special physical features allow for eased conversation. During my observations, it appeared that the café visitors who choose to sit at an exposed table were aware that they were being observed, and they responded in turn by fooling around, using large big gestures and engaging in stage-like behavior (Goffman 1959). Those customers, who preferred the more hidden tables with dimmed lights, usually seemed to have more subdued conversations with friends or family members. However, other customers relaxed alone: without direct social exchange, they observed the social scenery and seemed pleased if a staff member or a familiar customer stopped at their table for a short social exchange. It seems to be the friendly atmosphere and

playful conversations that foster this relaxation. During my ethnographic work, customers also mentioned the relaxation qualities of the place (along with product quality) as one of the main reasons for their visits.

Oldenburg fails to account for the various types of sociability one can experience being alone. He argues that public sociability is central to third places. But customers in the gastronomic facilities along Karl-Marx-Straße often enjoy solitude in public without participating in playful—or any—conversations. This, I argue, in no way undermines these places' function as third places. Public solitude refers to the search for an abstract “invisible community” (Henriksen et al. 2013: 94), based on personal traits such as religion, gender, ethnicity, or lifestyle. The observations convey the impression that customers seeking public solitude in the sampled businesses, and most of all the cafés, seem to enjoy the public surrounding of people. In the more homogeneous business settings such as in the new café or the organic store, it seems that customers enjoy also the presence of people that belong to similar milieu (regarding their similar clothing styles, age groups, food preferences, etc.) As per Henriksen et al. (2013: 94 f.), people who enjoy being alone in public are trying to escape the problematic aspects of a more intimate social world by entering a more public world whose networks or ties are loosely knit, if at all. Hence, one reason people may choose to be alone might be that public solitude represents an escape from established (and eventually demanding) social relations, while being provided with enough social interactions to prevent boredom or loneliness. In the cafés, bars, and restaurants on Karl-Marx-Straße, public solitude is sought by both occasional and regular customers. Customers practice public solitude in different ways: Whereas some apparently enjoy observing other guests, others stay concentrated on their work—the din of other customers perhaps serving as a pleasant and stimulating background noise. Some customers seem hopeful for interaction with other customers or staff members.

Another way in which my analysis departs from Oldenburg's is in his dismissal of electronic devices (ICTs). Even in his more recent work (2013), he dismisses the idea that electronic devices often invite further on-spot interaction and playful conversation. As mentioned above, this was incongruous with my findings. In the **main café**, for instance, cell phone chargers constantly occupy the limited number of available outlets. Since there are only few tables around the outlets, unacquainted customers often ask one another to mind their cell phones while they eat or drink at tables further away. During one of my visits, for instance, a teenage boy's particular cell phone model attracted the attention of a student in her late 20s reading at the table adjacent to the outlet. When he plugged in his phone and asked the woman if she could keep an eye on it, she quizzed him about the technical details of the new phone, its pros and cons, and if he would recommend it. Finally, the boy took

a seat at her table and the two began discussing their experiences with this and the other cell phones. This impromptu conversation between two strangers turned more casual, with the two making jokes on other topics as they continued to discuss cell phones. The phone, therefore, as a catalyst, generated more social interaction and inclusion to the business' social life world. Other examples include customers playing together with one cell phone, fellow students meeting with their laptops while discussing their work over a cup of coffee, business people checking emails during their lunch breaks, and other customers talking on and off on their phones while often including the other person seated at the table in the phone conversation.

Furthermore, just like the customers, all owners of the sampled businesses use their smart or cell phones during work. They too draw the attention of other people as they play new games or show people text messages from common friends. They use phones to discover common music tastes, complaining or joking about too loud music. Only in the **butcher's shop** do staff and owners not use their phones while working behind the counter (mainly for hygienic reasons). And in the organic store, staff and the two owners place value on the maintenance of a relaxing and quiet atmosphere that doesn't welcome the obvious use of cell phones and tablets in the store. So for them, cell phones would take away third place qualities: relaxation and face-to-face interaction. Therefore, the employees and owners only use their ICTs if no customers or if only regulars are in the businesses.

Along with the newer ICTs, "older" devices also play a part in cafe life. In the **main café**, the television hanging from the ceiling plays Turkish pop music and is mostly ignored by customers. Customers sitting alone may pay attention to the music videos from times to times, but otherwise the television does not seem to distract from personal conversations as Oldenburg assumes it does. In fact, the background noise of the television often bridges uncomfortable pauses between conversation partners. It also gives customers sitting alone a fixed spot (or alibi) to concentrate on when they get caught observing other people. In addition, "bad" or funny music videos often stimulate further interactions between the casual mix of television watchers.

This interplay between social conversation and material devices and the stimulation of conversation through objects also apply to the **additional cafés**, where the (comparatively more common) social practices of working with or without electronic devices, reading newspapers and books, and the discussing serious topics complement playful conversations.

In conclusion, even if some of the sampled gastronomic establishments sometimes lack the type of third place playfulness, they do reveal high levels of public sociability among customers as well as between customers and employees (e.g. owner of café I, l. 733, 764 f., l. 777: "contact market" "information market"). However, the

majority of conversations – playful or not – occurs either only among customers or only among staff. In the **lunch restaurant**, the owner mostly induces (playful) conversation, trying to connect his disabled employees with customers. These short conversations mainly seem to serve to make the customers feel at home or to build up, maintain, and refresh the customers' status as regulars. In the other businesses and particularly in the **butcher's shop** and **pharmacy**,¹⁸⁴ playful conversations between employees and customers lighten the atmosphere and make the business operations and work tasks less monotonous. These are also part of the work performances discussed in subchapter 6.2.

A final point that must be made concerns power relations in conversations and the role of playful conversation in leveling practices (as in Subchapter 6.2.). Oldenburg describes playful conversation as one of the leveling practices that helps third places equalize status differences. In direct contrast, my observations across all cases demonstrate that power relations among customers, and even more so between customers and owners, affect all conversations, even those that are playful. For instance, during both interviews and observations, when an owner would make a joke, both staff and customers responded by laughing, even if they did not seem to find it funny (evident by the faces they were making). And vice versa, owners and employees purposefully laugh at certain "important" customers' jokes in order to maintain a good mood and to ensure the customer will return. Indeed, staff in the cafés, in the bar, and in the butcher's shop often can't "escape" the customers' conversations and jokes, not only because they feel entitled to remain "good" hosts, but also because they are physically trapped behind the counter. In this vain and in regard to the power relations, during one of my visits, the owner of the **bar** described her role also as a "psychological garbage can" (*Seelischer Abfalleimer*), because she had to listen to all her customers' problems, often repeatedly, while hardly being able to bring up her own problems or pressing issues or getting away from these customers' "tirades." So while the owner sets the topics and tone of the wider discussions in her bar, she is also trapped while listening to her customers' stories and opinions.

However, in all the businesses, if owners and employees strongly disagree on customers' statements, the furthest the owners and employees will go is telling them to leave. Most often, the staff tells customers to "just calm down" in order not to disturb other customers' "privacy" (the term used to mean their right to be

¹⁸⁴ Particularly in the pharmacy, the playful conversations but even more warm words often serve to cover or distract from the seriousness of the diseases and the pain. The owner and her employees describe that consolation and even pastoring are often involved in customer consultation, regardless of their status as regulars or unacquainted customers.

undisturbed). Depending on the level of mutual knowledge and status as a regular, employees and owners react more directly, sometimes refusing customers service if they cannot stand their issues anymore. For instance, the flower store owner told me that when her husband was seriously sick, she had no patience for her elderly customers' concerns about their own health anymore. This creates another important power dynamic. And overall, regardless of the playful or serious nature of the conversations, power relations always impact the type, content, consent, and duration of the social exchange.

Overall, my observations indicate that rather than playful conversation, direct, churlish, and contentious conversation is more a sign of people feeling at home and familiar with the stores and their staff. This type of conversation indicates more the levels of trust (in their own skills as business people but also in their customers), loyalty (from customers), and mutual knowledge. For instance, during one of my visits, the saleswoman of the butcher's shop told a lunch customer that he gained weight. She commented "such a beautiful potbelly," which to my surprise, did not offend the customer and ended with both of them laughing together. Goffman and Lofland's differentiations into public and private behavior or performances also help to distinguish the different nuances in the conversations and their different types: the more public the socio-spatial setting is perceived, the more playful the conversation. The more the furniture and atmosphere enable private conversations, the more intimate those discussions are. However, more intimate conversations also include heated discussions and fights. The salespeople and owners, who mostly act toward their customers as if they were an audience, endeavor to generate and maintain a good atmosphere. For instance, the bar owner also uses churlish teasing to stop their customers' discussions. Therefore Oldenburg's "playfulness," as playful conversations, also helps the store owners cover and calm underlying conflicts. Finally, the ethnographic findings show that playfulness is a part of small talk; an act might help to ease the interaction between mostly strange people in the businesses. Such playful conversations are more shallow than the gentle chiding and do not indicate the same level of trust and comfort. But I also conclude for the role of the businesses that contested and blunt conversations express that customers and staff have a mutual understanding and trust in their relationship, and that customers feel at ease in the business.

6.4 "For quality we need to go to another neighborhood, this is really difficult here."¹⁸⁵ The Businesses' Accessibility and Accommodation

According to Oldenburg and Brissett (1982), third places are easily accessible, geographically, financially, and socially. Ideally, they are accessible by foot and do not have high price points. "A third place is a public setting accessible to its inhabitants and appropriated by them as their own." (Oldenburg/ Brissett 1982: 271) This chapter interrogates these notions of accessibility and accommodation. However, the quote of one of the owners of the organic store in this chapter's title demonstrates that accessibility and accommodation, often framed as "quality" places and "quality" products, can mean very different things to very different people. While the owners of the organic store bemoan the lack of "high quality" businesses around Karl-Marx-Straße and thus a lack of accessibility, other people (e.g. flower store owner, pharmacist, owners of café I and II) describe the street as offering everything that is needed for both daily and special supply. Hence they praise the street's businesses' accessibility. For the organic store owner, accessibility means the presence of high-quality stores. However, for most of the owners and customers, a "highly accessible" store indicates financial accessibility in the form of affordable prices and spatial accessibility in terms of distance between shop and residents. Indeed, most local residents prefer to acquire their daily goods within walking distance, but will, for specialty products, travel to other neighborhoods as well.¹⁸⁶ As outlined in Chapter 2, most of Neukölln residents have highly localized lives, shopping, working and spending their leisure time in the neighborhood where

185 Paraphrased quote from organic store owner (l. 899 ff.): "[For quality] we need to go in another neighborhood. No, this [quality shopping] is really also more difficult here. "

186 The conversation and interview partners state that also those local people who can afford (time-wise and money-wise) shopping trips to stores outside of Neukölln nevertheless mostly shop in the neighborhood and spend time in its local gastronomic facilities. Despite their visits to these businesses outside of the neighborhood, none of these businesses seem to play an important social role for the customers' everyday lives. In addition, the urban renewal program's preparatory investigation and the interviews show that most customers live in close proximity to Karl-Marx-Straße and appreciate easy accessibility and immediate accommodation. Only around 200 out of 1000 residents in North-Neukölln have a car and most travel to shops and eateries by foot, bike, or public transport. Cf. Aktion! Karl-Marx-Straße (n.d.). Vorbereitende Untersuchungen Neukölln – Karl-Marx-Straße, http://www.aktion-kms.de/files/be100506_vu_karl-marx-strasse_-_bericht_2010.pdf, accessed 03/23/2016 and Berlin.de (n.d.). Mobilität der Stadt, Kenndaten zur Mobilität, http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/verkehr/politik_planung/zahlen_fakten/download/Mobilitaet_dt_Kap-1-2.pdf, accessed 09/14/2015.

they live. These facts align with the owners' observations that the majority of their customers live nearby and come by foot. In particular, "regulars" all live and/or work within walking distance. Hence, the availability of stores, where interaction beyond the purchase seems possible, coupled with the proximity to customers' apartments, increases the likelihood that people will stumble into a business before, in between, after work, or during a walk through the area. Hence, if Oldenburg's notion of accessibility is understood as accessible by foot, the sampled businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße are highly accessible for local residents.

Yet, again, people's backgrounds define what they consider as accessible and accommodative. For the social makeup of the businesses, the social milieu of the customer base in the sampled businesses along Karl-Marx-Straße seems similar to the social milieu of the surrounding neighborhood (cf. Dröge and Krämer-Badoni's (1987: 71).¹⁸⁷ In regard to the businesses' socio-spatial qualities and particularly with regard to features of accessibility, it is important to contrast the structures of the respective interior and exterior social milieus. Given that their customers are mostly locals and that the neighborhood is highly walkable, all the sampled businesses are geographically accessible. And thus, the customer base is recruited from the immediate neighborhood, as mentioned by the interviewed store owners and city officials and matching my ethnographic observations. In their study of bars, Dröge and Krämer-Badoni (1987: 71 f.) find that the social milieu of bars' customer bases is more homogeneous – in terms of the customers' educational and employment background – than the already quite homogeneous surrounding neighborhood. They suggest that this homogeneity stems from larger patterns and processes of city-wide segregation that resulted in multiple ethnically and socially segregated neighborhoods. They also cited an uneven distribution of businesses and eateries as a cause for this segregation pattern. Their latter observations hold true in North-Neukölln along Karl-Marx-Straße: the nightlife is clustered to the north and the residences are all located southward. However, Karl-Marx-Straße does not have a differentiated commercial structure (the one exception being the wedding dress stores clustered along the northern part of the street). However, the neighborhoods surrounding Karl-Marx-Straße have a much higher degree of ethnic

¹⁸⁷ However, drawing conclusions between the local living conditions to the customers' leisure time behavior and respective selection of grocery stores, cafés, or shopping malls is not possible. Equal living conditions do not necessarily result in the preference of same shopping facilities. With the increasing ethnic and social diversity of Neukölln, the local place of residence or postal code often seems to be the only commonality. On the other hand, a conclusion from the visit of a certain business regarding a certain lifestyle or living condition is likewise impossible.

diversity than the neighborhoods in Dröge and Krämer-Badoni's analysis.¹⁸⁸ While both Oldenburg and Dröge & Krämer-Badoni argue that homogeneity is the basis for the development of trust and playful conversation, my research shows that the Karl-Marx-Straße businesses – being located in one of Berlin's most ethnically and socially diverse districts – foster interaction and the development of ties across a sometimes very diverse mix of individuals – precisely due to their accessibility and leveling qualities, evolving from the staff's practices.

Oldenburg and Brissett (1982: 270) argue that,

[a] third place is a public setting accessible to its inhabitants and appropriated by them as their own. [...] it is a taken-for granted part of their social existence. [...] It is simply there, providing opportunities for experiences and relationships that are otherwise unavailable. The most obvious of these opportunities is the possibility of pure sociability.

With this quote, the authors argue that a location allowing for spontaneous visits without any great effort is the spatial basis for the generation of sociability. Oldenburg repeatedly emphasizes the importance of accessibility since most US-Americans live in car-dependent suburban settlements:

What suburbia cries for are the means for people to gather easily, inexpensively, regularly, and pleasurable — a “place on the corner,” real life alternatives to television, easy escapes from the cabin fever of marriage and family life that do not necessitate getting into an automobile (Oldenburg 1997: 6).

Compared to American cities, eateries and shops in Berlin are distributed throughout walkable neighborhoods – even if large chain supermarkets and discounters are increasingly dominating the city's fringes. My ethnographic data indicates that accessibility does not necessarily result in sociability on Karl-Marx-Straße, but questions of access do matter for the selection of customers for the in-store social interaction.

First, the easy accessibility and most-often low-threshold accommodation of the businesses allows for an integration of the business visit into the flow of everyday life. The availability of seating facilities eases the level of accommodation: The **gastronomic facilities** offer easy self-accommodation on the comfortable sofas, tables and chairs, low-priced goods and services, ample space for strollers and wheeled walkers, and special service for disabled or elderly customers. This low-threshold

¹⁸⁸ Dröge and Krämer-Badoni (1987) researched bars in the much smaller city of Bremen in the early 1980s, where most bars were frequented by predominantly ethnic German working class men or students.

accessibility and accommodation (offered to all not just those with signifiers of specific lifestyles) result in a publicly sociable space, where people of different ages, incomes, and ethnic backgrounds intermingle. The **flower store**, the **butcher shop**, and the **pharmacy** do not offer seating facilities for easy accommodation. While Oldenburg would consider the chilly temperatures in the butcher shop and flower store and the hygienic, sterile smell of the pharmacy and the lack of seating therein as reducing the businesses' accessibility and easy accommodation, all three businesses receive (regular) customers who intentionally come for social exchange. They use the businesses as social spaces and stay long after they have made their purchase.

Appropriating practices in Oldenburg's sense certainly vary across cases: In the cafés, some customers make themselves at home; in the organic store, customers seem to use the space a part of their own identity; whereas in the pharmacy, customers appropriate the space in their search for help. In detail, in the **main café**, people loosen their clothing and sometimes even remove their shoes. They relax in the chairs, often stretching their legs as if they were in their own private living rooms; they scatter their belongings on tables, benches, and chairs and use the electrical outlets for recharging their ICTs without keeping an eye on them; they spend entire days from late breakfast to early dinners chatting, observing, reading, watching TV, snoozing, and caring for their children. The sense of ownership and comfort that customers show is made possible, I argue, by the dim lighting, the comfortable seating, the background noise, and the ballet movements of the business people – all of which creates a sense of privacy. Hence the café's atmosphere itself fosters easy accommodation and the appropriation of the space.¹⁸⁹ The crowdedness and interior design of the café's (semi-public) space with the correlating and rather intimate practices, such as touching, shouting, or teasing, along with other "private" practices such as hugging, child caring and nursing, hair dressing, putting shoes off, et cetera create the specific type of sociability that Oldenburg (1989; 2001) ascribes to his third places

Appropriation in the other **gastronomic facilities** includes similar social practices; yet employees frequently "push" customers to consume more. Furthermore, in these other businesses, people are more aware of being observed and thus do not behave in such "private" ways. Part of this is also spatial: The other businesses

¹⁸⁹ The term atmosphere tends to the spatial qualities that exist between an object (e.g. business) and a subject (e.g. customer) and that are not only perceived but 'felt' by the latter. An atmosphere may further be defined as a *tuned* space, a space with a mood (Böhme 1995; 2006). The experience of an atmosphere is a process between the subjective and the objective as the socio-spatial environment. From this follows that an atmosphere represents a medium of perception and describes the invisible parts of socially-constructed spaces (Kazig 2007: 179 ff.; Löw 2001: 205).

are less crowded, more orderly, and quieter, all of which undermines a feeling of anonymity. Whenever a customer realizes that he or she is being observed, they return to their “public” performance. Nevertheless, in certain ways, customers of these businesses also act “at-home:” They greet employees and other familiar customers in loud voices while entering the business, also slapping one another on the back, shaking hands, or hugging. They also spread work items, tools, mobile phones, newspapers, and other private belongings on the table, but sleeping for longer than a quick nap seems to be going too far (although employees rarely sanction this), for instance.

In the **organic store**, the surroundings likewise offer little in the way of privacy. The bright light and the central location of the tables, leaves the customers feeling exposed. The lack of background music, loud conversations, and cell-phone use (phones being banned) further inhibit feelings of privacy and thus any sense of ownership that might develop. The regular customers, who extend errands in order to socialize with familiar customers and salespeople, limit these interactions to hushed conversations in the aisles. Arguably, this is likely why the owners erected a dividing wall to the sales room in fall 2015, thereby giving the “food court” a cozier atmosphere. The social life of customers’ children is less inhibited. Upon entering, they immediately start to run around and play in the store, fully aware that they are welcome by the staff, who often gives them free fruits and organic sweets. Certainly, children do not necessarily change their behavior from “private” to “public” in any location, but compared to other businesses, the owners in the organic shop make a particular effort to welcome children, inviting them to use the entire business space as “their” space.

The physical appropriation of space does not occur in the **butcher’s shop** and **pharmacy** given the hierarchy established between a consulting salesperson and the “consultee.” In addition, the counter demands that customers line up and wait until they are served. There are only a few standing or seating possibilities, and this greatly limits the people’s use of the space. The pharmacy in particular has a serious atmosphere that forces customers to use lowered voices. However, regular customers of both businesses are greeted and welcomed in a very warm and public way, also often being called to over the heads of other customers. Furthermore, since regulars usually know what they want to purchase and where to find the respective goods in the counter and the shelves, they move through the sale spaces competently – integrating them as everyday places in their quotidian routines.

In the **butcher’s shop**, every midday construction workers, employees from the local schools, banks and doctor’s offices, as well as local seniors and students meet at the same four tables in order to grab a quick lunch. The midday social setting has an observable, routine social order. Some of the customers walk by the business

in the morning in order to figure out the day's lunch special. By 11 am at the very latest, lunch customers arrive to get the best standing places at the tables where interaction with the salespeople and parallel observation of the sidewalk life and the entrance are the most facilitated. During my visits, the bank and doctor offices' employees arrive in little groups (around noon) – some of the seniors have already reserved places for them. The construction workers, who usually show up early, leave and then usually have a smoke outside; they greet the office employees and share cigarettes. The customers come in waves, followed by the students (usually between 1.30 and 3 pm), who usually come alone. The exchange of the tables seems to follow implicit but well-known and accepted routinized rules. In regard to Oldenburg's easy accessibility and accommodation, this ethnographic example of the butcher's shop shows that even if the spatial design, the temperature, the lack of seating possibilities, and the overall atmosphere do not invite customers to easily accommodate themselves in the businesses, businesses are nevertheless used for social exchange and sociability. Customers make themselves at home and owners and their employees invite them to do so. So most shops on Karl-Marx-Straße – with the exception of the new café, the organic store, and the lunch restaurant – seek not only to be highly accessible by being located close to customers' homes, but by not adopting specific lifestyle-signifiers, and relying on the social skills of the staff to foster easy inclusion. In a diverse neighborhood, such as northern Neukölln, businesses are low-threshold places for interaction among people who may not interact with each other outside of the stores. This social mixing is supported by the leveling practices of the shop owners. Their practices cut across class and ethnic lines and thus support the easy accommodation in and appropriation of their business spaces.

6.5 “We really have lots of regulars.”¹⁹⁰ The Role of Regular Customers

The previously discussed socio-spatial features are all interlinked with each other, as is the found fifth characteristic that turn businesses into places where community is practiced, the “presence of regulars” (Oldenburg 1999: 22f.). This chapter explores what makes a regular a regular, how they make places, and in what ways they interact with other people.

¹⁹⁰ Paraphrased quote from lunch restaurant owner (l. 265 f.): Lot of [regulars] [...] we really have people who come every midday.”

Regulars are very important to Oldenburg. He argues that regulars are involved in many leveling interactions that create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. He sees regulars as responsible for rendering a third place “attractive,” for setting up the tone and overall atmosphere that allows for eased public sociability. Oldenburg further claims that customers choose bars or neighborhood taverns precisely because of the regulars that mingle there. Being a regular means developing a trusting relationship with other people in the business, customers and staff alike.

However, Oldenburg and his followers do not ever clarify what a “regular” is. They do not distinguish what makes customers regulars, or how this status is reinforced or maintained, nor do they examine how it might be lost or if there are any internal differences or hierarchies among so-called regulars. Second, while a basic definition is missing, they also overlook the potential exclusive and normative social practices of regulars, their domineering behavior or their reinforcement of certain behavioral norms or implicit/explicit codes. And third, one does not naturally become a so-called regular. Furthermore, Oldenburg neglects to analyze and accept that, as my research indicates, the owners and staff play the most important role in generating customers’ relationships and attachment to the place and its people. More so than any customer, the staff determines the atmosphere, norms, rules, and sociability of the business. Moreover, it is the staff that creates the customer’s status. This subchapter addresses this topic, showing how regulars make places lively and emotional and the ways these processes are affected by the people working in the businesses. However, before comparing the role of owners and regulars, it is first necessary to define what a regular is.

One can ascertain who is and is not a regular in a bar or cafe as well as the characteristics of a regular by “sitting it out” (Dröge/ Krämer-Badoni 1987: 237; see also Oldenburg 2001). However, for the much more varied sample of business types (often without seating facilities) the question of why certain individuals make a certain business their “home” must first be addressed. My early assumptions about customers’ perception and use of businesses led me to develop the research goal of discerning what makes people come back to particular enterprises. These reasons seem to go beyond necessity, the ease of accessibility, the quality of products sold. During field work, customers listed the following characteristic as factors influencing their decisions about what businesses to frequent: the (type of) owner and salespeople and their personalities, a welcoming environment, an atmosphere conducive to whatever activity they want to do there (such as working or meeting friends), the place’s design and style, the ease of routine purchase, the possibility of interaction with staff, and last but not least, the expected presence of other recognizable regulars.

For Oldenburg, the presence of other regulars comes first. He considers that already knowing people who visit as place is crucial for a newcomer's inclusion: People either visit a neighborhood tavern because they already know people who drink there regularly, or they have heard of the place through a friend who is already a regular there. They come because they anticipate that they will get introduced to other regulars through a mutual acquaintance. For gastronomic facilities, this assumption that customers already have social ties in the businesses is linked to Oldenburg's as well as Dröge and Krämer-Badoni's research in only highly homogeneous settings (in terms of gender, ethnic, and income background). So the question begs to be asked, how do people become regulars in extremely diverse neighborhoods? The question for 21st century Karl-Marx-Straße remains, if the owners and their staff's socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds differ widely from the customers, does this affect how people become regulars? In addition, people on Karl-Marx-Straße can select their favorite places among many gastronomic businesses, while Oldenburg and Dröge and Krämer-Badoni (1987: 68) focus mostly on neighborhood bars. In their focus, the social need for exchange is the main selection criteria for regulars. By contrast, this chapter's findings reveal that other businesses also generate and foster similar social exchange on Karl-Marx-Straße. But customer motivations on Karl-Marx-Straße seem nonetheless much more tied to a planned purchase and show more variations than in the prototypical male neighborhood bar.¹⁹¹ Given that the process of becoming a regular is a social practice that involves objects of consumption, what does this mean for the differences in the process of becoming a regular in a non-bar location?

The observations show that the main practices (as well as the main skill) necessary for developing a regular-status are talking and/or initiating conversations. Talking, as a social practice, requires a command of implicit or explicit rules and local norms. One needs to know how far one can tease another person and when to remain silent. Only with this knowledge do customers seem to be able to perform self-confidently in the business. Knowledgeable performance fosters the development of a casual customer into a regular. Through talking, customers are able to expand their commercial exchange into a social exchange by, for instance, making a joke or asking a question. Although it is clear that familiarity increases

191 For Oldenburg, Dröge, and Krämer-Badoni, the (obvious) presence of people of the same milieu or occupation group is a prerequisite for the development of a relationship between the regular and the place. The pressure of the peer group to visit a given place as a matter of fact results then in an institutionalization of the visits to that place. The customer integrates this institutionalization into their everyday life, thereby "becoming a regular" (Dröge/ Krämer-Badoni 1987: 239).

through social interaction or conversation, my research did not conclusively find a specific “point” that indicates when someone has become recognized as a regular.

The second social practice that makes a customer a regular (in addition to conversations) is recognition. In the butcher’s shop, for instance, employees sometimes remember customers’ names even after one or two visits, and will still remember them if a week passes in between visits. While in the organic store or some of the additional cafés, for instance, customers who come twice a week still do not gain the status as a regular. Hence, customers don’t just become regulars by “sitting it out” or by frequenting the business at a regular basis. Rather, “talking” with salespeople or other regulars is required. While many customers on Karl-Marx-Straße frequent their favorite businesses on routine basis, i.e., on the same days of the week, or at the same times of day, a “real” regular, according to the staff of the butcher’s shop and the cafés, is someone whose name and family background as well as purchase preferences is known by the owner.

Thirdly, regulars know their place *in* the business, both socially and in terms of location. While their status as regulars is constantly established and reestablished through interaction with staff, the status deeply depends on a sense of mutual recognition along with routines that maintain this status, such as ordering the same coffee or sandwich every day (Henriksen et al. 2013: 92). Regulars perceive the business as “their” place, and are increasingly acknowledged as a “natural inhabitant in this home away from home” (Henriksen et al. 2013: 92). This is illustrated by how regulars use the businesses for private and for social purposes, such as the following behavior witnessed in the **main café**: sleeping on the benches after having a coffee, shouting over other customers’ heads with other customers or staff, lingering in the chairs watching TV, and spreading their clothing over the extra chairs.¹⁹²

To give another example, in the **bar**, regulars are “rewarded” with their “own” seat at the counter. The farthest stool to the right, for instance, is reserved for a long-time regular who works as a theater technician at the German Opera. Due to his late working hours, the owner reserves the seat and whenever he enters the business, she asks other customers to move if they have occupied his stool. She places a special beer mug in front of his seat as he nods at the other regulars and hangs up his jacket. He almost never chats with the other regulars: he is either silent or speaks with the owner. Their exchange usually follows the same routine: The owner waits until he is settled and has had a few sips before she asks him about his day. He gives her then a short update, and the conversation ends with her offering

¹⁹² These practices were also observed in non-regulars; however, those customers that I could distinguish as regulars, performed these space-appropriating or occupying practices more often.

her lighter for him to use to light his first cigarette. This routine, in particular the non-verbal components, reinforces the owner-customer relationship and his status as a long-time regular.

Once customers are recognized as regulars, their (still public) performance (Lofland 1998; Goffman 1959) is further eased due to their perception of the place as a “home territory” (Dröge/ Krämer-Badoni 1987: 69). Hence, in those businesses that allow for more private behavior, the presence of regulars blur the dividing lines between what Oldenburg distinguishes as first, second, and third places. My observations demonstrate that the presence of regulars in some of the businesses also stimulates more “first-place” or “private-place” practices. For instance, in the bar, some regulars choose the music played in the bar and in the butcher’s shop, it is two lunch regulars who usually collect the dirty dishes. These practices make businesses social spaces that offer even “more” than the “public sociability” Oldenburg (1999: 22f.) has ascribed to his third places: They become places for social inclusion and belonging, where customers (and the regulars in particular) take over some of the staff’s tasks.

However, for those regulars who use the cafés, the bar, the butcher’s shop, and the flower store as ordinary comfortable social places outside of their “real” home, the (semi-) public places are additional and less problematic social contexts that stabilize and give meaning to their self-presentation. In the **bar**, regulars decide on the music and assume that they can switch to another song as they please. Regulars walk right up to the stereo equipment behind the counter and introduce the next album or song to the other customers and the owner, as if in their own private living rooms. However, the owner who originally gave them permission to do so will ask them to change their selection if she does not like the song they have chosen.

Hence, from the customer’s point of view, being a regular is first and foremost including the businesses as a fundamental element of their everyday life. They seem to perceive the social space of the respective business as an extension of their everyday life private spaces. As one bar customer repeatedly mentioned:

Here, you go to work, on your way home, you go shopping for dinner, but then you end up in the bar. And five beers make a schnitzel [instead of dinner], too. And when the chips are down, I’ll get my pretzel sticks here.

Customers develop a comfortable routine that makes them feel grounded. This routine often has a strong temporal dimension, as in the case of the main café and bar, where most regulars come during the same time frame on a daily or weekly basis (Dröge/ Krämer-Badoni 1987: 69).

Furthermore, the ethnographic data indicates that it is the owners, staff, and other regulars that confer a customer the status as a “regular.” They can also withdraw this status in the case of inappropriate behavior or prolonged absence. Thus, in addition to the customer’s own ease and comfort in the business, being a regular also requires that other people perceive, acknowledge, and confirm this status. Hence, staff and owners take an active part in shaping and maintaining the (special) status and role of regulars (Henriksen et al. 2013: 93). So while owners seem to benefit from regulars in terms of often predictable social exchange and a reliable customer base, customers also seem to enjoy the status of “regulars” because of the insider knowledge that comes with this status. Regulars know more about the place than other people; they know, for instance, which bar stool “belongs” to which customer and will take other stools in order to avoid conflicts. Or in the butcher’s shop, regulars know about special mustards that can be asked for; in the bar, regulars order special beer glasses that otherwise would not be served.

In all the businesses studied, staff or owners greet regulars by name and know or can anticipate what the customer is going to buy and how he or she “likes it.”¹⁹³ The social exchange then follows a standardized routine, which involves teasing, handshaking, or inquiring about business, the weather, family members, and so on. Customers all seem to enjoy being recognized as regulars and being known by name: After having entered the salesroom or restaurant space, they directly look for familiar faces, also among staff, often walking straight to the counter for a short conversation. If no seating is immediately available, they rest at the counter to continue their chats. This applies in particular to the smaller stores, where staff outnumbers the other customers and thus the status of a regular is most reaffirmed by the staff.

If other regular customers are present, they also greet entering regulars, often shouting through the salesroom, waving their hands to signal to the newcomer—sometimes even standing up and walking toward him or her. This underlines Oldenburg’s ideas about the internal structure of third places with its conventions, rituals, and rules as “patterns of intersubjectivity” among the people present (Dröge/Krämer-Badoni 1987: 81). These patterns are generated by the regulars and staff, who bring their social realities to the business, where they encounter other people with often similarly constituted subject-structures and social realities.

This leads to the question of the withdrawal of the regular status. It is rare that a regular lose their status as such, and it only happens when customers speak and

193 A few times when customers ordered or bought something unexpected, the staff became confused or irritated. However, these shifts in behavior usually then led to an extended and particularly humorous exchange about the reasons for the change.

behave inappropriately, such as using politically incorrect language, speaking too loud, disturbing other customers, not paying on time,¹⁹⁴ or failing to show up for an appointment as promised. This applies to men and women customers alike. For instance, in the **organic store**, a customer who did not pay her membership dues after multiple reminders was then met coldly when she approached a salesperson, who replied to her query in a very taciturn manner. In the **bar**, by contrast, the senior owner first asked a fighting and belligerent drunken customer to leave and then, with the help of other regulars, threw him out.

In contradiction with Oldenburg, my research showed that regulars are not necessarily welcoming or inclusive of others. Quite the opposite, throughout the field visits, regulars and staff turned away from and rejected customers whom they did not like or did not welcome. For instance, in the gastronomic facilities, regulars (often sitting along the counter) pulled their chairs away from unwelcomed customers, or spoke in an intentionally loud voice about topics the unwelcomed person would disagree with. Furthermore, but only during quieter hours, customers watched the entrance door as it opens, screening the newcomer from head to toe, regardless of whether they knew the person. Always curious, they sometimes reacted with a smile, but just as often with a grim face, turning their back on newcomer. In a business where everybody knows everybody and interactions are determined by well-established routines, customers seem to feel disturbed by newcomers they do not know. They sometimes convey the impression that they want their time with the other regulars, the staff, and owners to remain exclusive.

A common metaphor that was used by the interviewed owners in the discussion of customers' in-status and out-status was that of the *family*. Businesses were framed as "family-like" (e.g. owner of main café, l. 46, 48, 53) settings. The owners want to create places with a sense of family, because „people need encounters and people also need physical encounters. Well, we worked out a little that when our employees come then you hug each other“ (organic store owner, l. 1018 f.). But also other owners, such as of the flower store, bar, main café, and of the pharmacy, admit that their businesses are inclusive and supportive for members of the business' "family". Hence, rejecting newcomers may be one way that customers try to defend the group and their position in it. If the "family" metaphor might explain in-group ties among regulars and staff, it might also help us understand intragroup conflicts. This is described by the owner of the organic store who feels guilty when

¹⁹⁴ In most businesses, regulars are allowed to get a tab. While in bars and cafés open accounts are widely accepted and historically institutionalized, the flower store, butcher shop, and organic store also allows their customers who run short of money to pay with their next visit or when they get their next paychecks or welfare transfers.

she takes her anger out on her employees, “and then I projected this grudge” (l. 662). But a family like setting can also result in social control on the one hand and boredom and a lack of conversational topics on the other hand. Hence, in the bar and butcher’s shop, for instance, where the very same men usually gather, new customers can also serve as a distraction, a new spirit, and a new social dynamic.

Furthermore, the presence of a certain group of regulars can also deter new customers: During one of my observation dates, two women regulars approached the **lunch restaurant**. Standing in front of the business and reading the weekly menu, they saw a group of colleagues who, they seemed not to like through the glass door. “Oh no, not these idiots again,” said one woman to the other. She pulled her friend’s sleeve and told her that they better grab lunch somewhere else. The women usually frequent the restaurant later during their lunch break; therefore the two groups do not usually intersect. But on this day, the presence of certain colleagues caused a conflict.

Being a customer in the sampled businesses myself, I also at times experienced various levels of exclusion. For instance, due to my limited financial means, I can only buy some of my necessities at the organic store. While waiting in line at the cashier I often felt observed by the other customers who seem able to buy all their housewares, cosmetics, and food in the organic store. I felt uncomfortable disturbing their more intimate conversations, as I was not part of their organic store “family” or community of regulars. Once, I pulled out my inexpensive, no-name hand cream, and the woman behind me shot me a nasty look and mumbled “another [mineral] oil based product.” During a visit in **café I** around 4 pm in the afternoon, I was the only customer along with a group of theater employees, who were all already acquainted with the café staff. The theater employees and the café staff were joking and talking loudly, playing around with the music and enjoying their break from work. I felt like an outsider and a disturbance. I had to wait to be served because of this (private) interaction and then, when they did turn to me, they assisted me only quickly and unwillingly.¹⁹⁵ Sometimes the regulars and the waitress turned their heads toward me, lowering their voices, realizing that there is indeed an “outsider” present in “their” café until I left.

Regulars might also exclude other customers by making fun of them or by issuing provocative comments. In my observations, I saw this frequently in the gastronomic facilities along Karl-Marx-Straße; however, as previously mentioned, jokes and particularly Berlin wit (*Berliner Schnauze*) is also used to relax the general atmosphere in the businesses and as a means of inclusion. Because of their longer-term

¹⁹⁵ Usually, in this café the service staff is very attentive, friendly, and committed to their work.

relationship and their mutual understanding of the Berlin wit, customers know when someone is being mean or when someone is simply joking. The staff also knows and maintains these boundary lines. Regardless of any structural similarities that the respective outsider might have with the regulars, each visit remains still a test to see if that person fits to the group of regulars and thus will be included in the social setting. For instance, the performance and understanding of the Berlin wit helps achieve social inclusion into the businesses' social life. With the exception of the regulars of the lunch restaurant, the butcher, and the bar, regulars in the other gastronomic facilities, who really consume in the businesses every day but during the very same time window, regulars might miss each other. Hence, Oldenburg's idea of "regulars making the place" also holds true for the negative or exclusive practices that are part of placemaking. And since regulars come mostly during the same time windows, different regulars make the place differently during different time phases of the opening hours.

In the **main café**, the regular morning customers never meet those who come at lunch time. Hence groups of regulars or even individuals do not necessarily develop relationships with each other. Moreover, if regulars affect the businesses' atmosphere, then *different* regulars will create very different atmospheres. Early mornings, for instance, are quite busy, with mothers meeting for tea; their children crying and playing around, while workers are grabbing a quick breakfast. The later morning is quieter: Most customers, enjoying their public solitude, work, read, or enjoy a small meal or cup of tea during their work breaks. Lunch time regulars mostly work or live on the street; they arrive in groups with their colleagues or fellow students, chatting loudly, eating, and rushing out again. During the late afternoons, the majority of customers are elderly people, couples, and students. It is during this time, when the café has an attentive and relaxed atmosphere, which unfamiliar newcomers can most easily integrate. Different groups of regulars do intersect at the entrance when one group is leaving and the other one is coming. Only staff and owners know all the groups of regulars and can link them together. For instance, when a waitress heard that one of the morning mothers was looking for a job, she referred her to an afternoon customer who owned the adjacent clothing store and was currently hiring new sales staff.

Regulars can only support one another if they are regulars of the same time window and have a reason to interact. Oldenburg (1997: 8 f.) writes that,

[t]hird places also serve as gathering spots [...] — to help and support each other, and to decide on courses of action. [...] Third places help reduce the cost of living. Where people meet regularly to relax and enjoy one another's company, natural support groups or "mutual aid" societies tend to form. As we take our relaxation with people, we grow to like them and, as we come to like them, we are inclined to

“do for them.” Third places are also easy places to collect time-saving, labor-saving, and moneysaving advice — sometimes without even asking!

The relationship between the regulars and particularly between different groups of regulars is thus generated by staff and owners, who know their customers’ needs, but also their competencies and other resources. The benefits that Oldenburg ascribes to the status of being a regular largely depend on the mediating role of staff and owners. The ties between regulars and staff are highlighted in the different owners’ accounts of how much they enjoy time with their regulars inside and often also outside the businesses. They enjoy running into them on their commute to work or home (as mentioned by the owners of the gastronomic businesses), during their leisure time activities (organic store), on vacation (flower store), or on the street or in other local businesses. For instance, the **lunch restaurant** owner explains that he constantly runs into his regular customers on his commute to or from the restaurant. When this happens, he teasingly reminds them to come again the next day, even though he knows they will come anyway. During my observations in the restaurant, exchanges that were started outside of the business were often taken up again during lunch. This pattern of ongoing, multi-sited conversation reassures the customers’ statuses as regulars and may even give customers the impression of a privileged or special relationship. The owner also enjoys conversations and jokes with his regulars: “and then I just meet regulars in the train and I ask, of course, well, are you coming for lunch and then [they ask back] well, what’s on the menu, this is how it works” (l. 609–611). Hence, the ethnographic work reveals that it is much more the staff and owners’ who build up, reassure, and alter the regulars’ status – inside and outside of the businesses.

Furthermore, it is the special bond between staff and customers that lays at the very heart of what makes a bar or businesses favored (“Stammkneipe” in Dröge/Krämer-Badoni’s and “neighborhood tavern” Oldenburg’s work). Preferred regular bars and businesses are either close to work places, but mainly in the walkable vicinity of customers’ residential places, who develop a more functional, exterior relationship to the first type. Bars close to work places are largely frequented in order to break monotonous working routines, cheer up business meetings, or to have after-work meetings. Dröge and Krämer-Badoni (1987:117) found that in the bars close to customers’ residences, bonding among customers as well as with staff is more emotional, also because of the socio-spatial segregation of the surrounding neighborhood and the self-selection among the businesses.¹⁹⁶ On Karl-Marx-Straße, working and living

196 Of all the discussed business types, more than one can be found along Karl-Marx-Straße. For instance, there are three flower stores and fourteen pharmacies in the main field

are deeply intertwined, even physically so, as the businesses are found on the ground floor of residential buildings and segregation is lower. This makes the functional and emotional relationships of regulars very strong. And regardless of the types of relationships between the businesses and their people, customers have different motivations to become regulars in a business close to their home or work. According to the conversations with customers and interviews with owners, proximity is an important criterion for a regular's selection of a favorite bar; however, it is not the only criteria. Although the regulars all live close to their favorite businesses, it is not necessarily the *closest* business that becomes their favorite. One exception perhaps is the flower store, where the group of senior women meets in the store because of their relationship with the owner and each other, but also because they live on the same block and their limited mobility prevents them from meeting elsewhere. However, discerning the complex and manifold motivations of why customers select a single business as their regular place remains outside the scope of this study.

To summarize, I found that regulars make places. All businesses under examination have a significant number of regulars who play an important role in the social life of the businesses and beyond. But there are different groups of regulars for different time windows, so their placemaking is also restricted to these times. However, the findings demonstrate that it is predominately staff and owners who contribute to the generation and maintenance of regular statuses and who link regulars with one another. Hence, the described benefits of being a regular and the capacity to which "regulars make the place" emerge mostly with the help of people who *work* in the businesses.

6.6 “**Stability**” and “**Reliance**”¹⁹⁷ allowing for the Practice of Community: The Businesses’ Appeal and Profile

Another characteristic that Oldenburg attributes to third places is that they have a “low profile.” However, it is unclear what Oldenburg means by this term. “Low” for whom? “Low” from whose perspective? What is a “profile?” Does this term refer to the first visual impression, the places decoration or interior design? Do the customers and staff have a “low profile”? Or, does “low profile” refer to the type of interactions or conversational tone in the businesses? And furthermore, what gives a place and its public, semi-public, and private social practices a profile at

site. However, their products and price ranges do not differ significantly (see Chapter 4).

¹⁹⁷ Quotes from butcher (l. 302, l. 318).

all? In response to these questions, this subchapter explores the design and appeal of the sampled businesses as well as the social practices of owners, employees, and customers that give the place a special profile and atmosphere.

Oldenburg (1991: 37) states that as “a physical structure, the third place is typically plain [and] unpretentious” (p. 36): The plain appearance¹⁹⁸ is supposed to maintain the leveling social effect and the everyday nature of the place. The simple design is supposed to foster customer relaxation and comfort. If Oldenburg’s low profile refers to the material aspects of a third place, a low profile third place in his terms would mean a business that is not flashy or prestigious, and has no noticeable upscale design features at all.

My observations refute this argument, because if the businesses are too plain, they may not attract customers. They must project *something* that customers find appealing, be it the wall decoration, a particular type of coffee, or the background music. Oldenburg states that third place businesses do not advertise extensively: “In cultures where mass advertising prevails and appearance is valued over substance, the third place is all the more likely not to impress the uninitiated (1991: p. 36).”

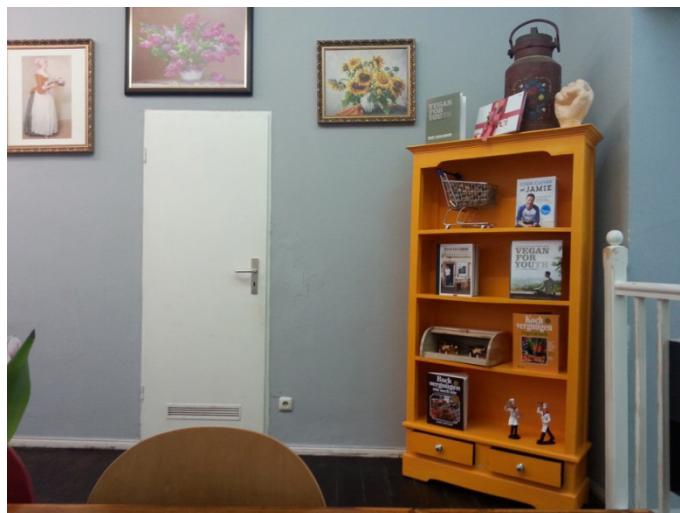


Fig. 41 Back wall in the new café, displaying vegan cook books and homey decorations

198 It also remains unclear if for a low profile, this “plainness” refers to the interior or exterior business design.

However and certainly, all the businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße do care about their interior and outdoor design. The interviews with the store owners reveal that they are very aware of the impact of their front windows' displays as a form of advertisement. In addition, the owners of the cafés and restaurants advertise in local magazines, newspapers, and online; they also diligently manage their ratings on relevant gastronomic websites. Other business owners advertise with posters, stand-up displays, and billboards. And while Oldenburg states that "the third place is all the more likely not to impress the uninitiated" (1991: p. 36), none of the examined businesses could compete without advertisement. Owners also try to please customers with their interior design or product display. Due to the competition with the nearby discount supermarkets and e-commerce (see Chapter 2), brick and mortar businesses are all the more dependent on self-promotion. Hence, in order to compete with for instance their online competitor, the pharmacy had to drop its "low" (or rather regular) profile in order to give special consultations and to offer workshops and training for special diseases.

If Oldenburg's sense of low profile refers to rather unpretentious customers and design, then all the more established businesses largely have this third-place feature. However, the low-profile design has also been increasingly fetishized over the last decades. For instance, Sharon Zukin (2011) and Susan Fainstein (2005) frame this fetishization as promoting certain businesses, streets, or neighborhoods as "authentic" or "diverse" places by tourists or gentrifiers. The **butcher's shop** represents an extreme example of this, as its customers (established regulars and the younger new customers) do not allow the owner to change the old (electricity-consuming) refrigerated counter for a new, up-to-date, and more energy-efficient interior design.¹⁹⁹ They use the shop as their third place and in order to maintain its function as a meeting and community place, the design thus needs to remain reliably stable. But it is not only the design that needs to be stable, so do the merchandise, the opening hours, and the staff:

There are ten employees, **always the same ones**, there is the same chef, the same saleswoman [...] Well, there's still [...] **this face behind the sausage**, this old butcher. I'm part of the furniture, and here the sausage tastes just like it tasted last year, five years ago, ten years ago, 20 years ago [...]. **There's the mirror crooked, the tiles are cracked, the counter is ageing, but this is exactly what the customers like, this is what makes the difference for them, really.** We conducted a customer survey and

¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the butcher does also promote his business by putting up all the awards he won in the last decades for his products in the front window. He also makes sure that the new "hip" burger spots that he provides me to all promote his butcher shop on their webpages and in front windows.

'it should remain exactly like it is,' right. [...] This is why this [the store] is indeed a real anchor when you had a bad day [...]. People strive for stability, they simply need some few stable points, a little bit of new things is interesting, but finally, if it gets tumultuous, right, we experience this here again and again, then you wish for a piece of stability. This is first, your home and then, it's the stores that you always frequent and this is such a store, [which] doesn't change at all, no. [...] obviously I'm not allowed [to change] (l. 292–310).

The design of the flower and butcher's store, the pharmacy and gastronomic facilities refer to Karl-Marx-Straße's "good old days." The decoration design, which includes many nostalgic photographs, shapes the business' profile. The design, including these small items, is a part of the owner's business strategy. For this reason, small design items serve as communal fetish objects and many customers and staff identify with these small symbolic objects. Although some business owners also remember periods of financial instability, they refer to the "past" or the "good old days" in a nostalgic gesture that romanticizes the street's working class history and the strong neighborhood solidarity in the final decades of the 20th century. In addition to standard shopping routines, the material signs – photographs, pictures, old furniture, and decorations – of a common past bind customers and employees to one another and to the place itself. Since Neukölln still has a reputation as an impoverished working class district, many business owners and customers perceive themselves as having

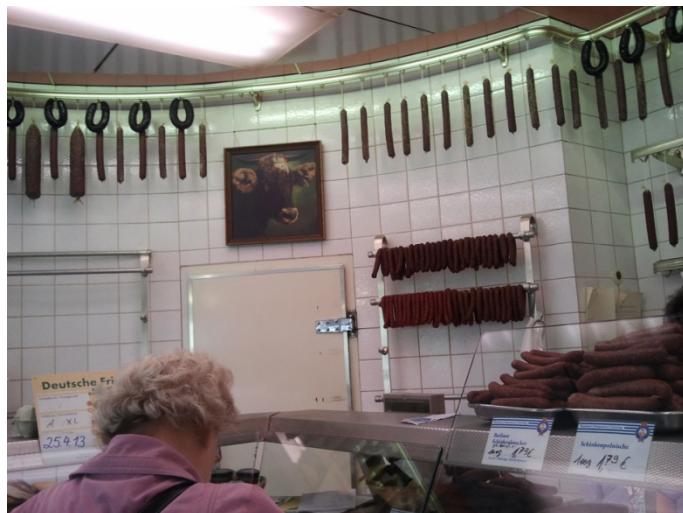


Fig. 42 Butcher's shop with its long-standing wall decoration

a low profile, even if not necessarily being working class themselves. They use adjectives as “working class” or “normal” and self-descriptions as “simple people” (butcher) not in a pejorative way, but rather as a forthright neighborhood character they can relate to – but importantly, as one that might soon be lost.

As described in Chapter 5, the specific aesthetics of the sampled businesses support their character as everyday places, with references to the owners and customers’ origins and the neighborhood’s past. They are designed for local people and not for visitors seeking a certain kind of working-class authenticity (Zukin 2011). This aesthetics is considered as low profile, but the owners nevertheless do target customers with their businesses and shop windows’ design. The florist, for instance, sees her decorations as being flashy and eye catching, but the owner of the organic store sees the flower store’s design and offers as old-fashioned. By extension, while some customers on Karl-Marx-Straße may see their businesses as everyday places with no extravagant appeal, others may perceive certain business as fancy or high-profile.

However, since the stores’ profiles and interiors are also intentionally used as identification markers, group symbols, or as common nostalgia or fetishes (particularly in light of recent neighborhood changes), these former often more *everyday* or *low profile* decorations seem to have become *high profile* – all the more so if the new businesses have ostentatious or eye-catching displays. For instance, the butcher’s and flower shops’ business signs as well as their unchanged interior design (e.g., from the 1950s) indicate their longstanding service for the neighborhood. The pharmacy, the bar, and the fruit and vegetable store decorate their sales and back spaces with black and white pictures of the street, of the store’s facade, and of former employees and customers. In addition, the stores clearly make an attempt to root the stores physically and to sell a sense of localness. They offer “traditional” German cuisine, homemade dishes, or sausages made from old recipes, and locally brewed beer. The main cafe that sells Turkish baked goods also offers German cream cakes that are typical of the 1950s and 60s. These specials, along with plastic flowers or home remedies, locate the neighborhood’s past as an ethnic German working class area. In designing their enterprises in this way, owners honor and pay tribute to the remaining customers from these by-gone days.

With this the question remains, what could “plain” design signify and to whom might plainness appeal? None of the sampled businesses, with the exception of the **organic store** and the **new café**, seem to appeal only to one or very few upscale consumers that long for a particular shopping experience and atmosphere supported by a specific design and price range. However, the people who shop at these stores are socially and ethnically more homogeneous compared to the other shops’ customers. In the organic store and new café, customers and staff also practice or enact more a

“community of interest” (cf. Gusfield 1975; McMillan/ Chavis 1986; Durkheim 1964 [1893]), built around certain products (e.g. espresso, pastry, or organic food) and particular aesthetics. Certainly the customers in the other businesses may also form a community of interest, but less around the offered products, but rather around the people working or spending time in the businesses. But aside from lifestyle products displayed or served in an accordantly styled surrounding, all business people do care about their stores’ design and decorate their businesses according to their own or assumed customers’ aesthetic preferences. Oldenburg considers the simple design of third places as fostering customers’ relaxation and comfort, but on Karl-Marx-Straße, customers find relaxation and comfort in manifold ways. For instance, senior customers across all cases seem to have preferences that differ not only in terms of the design, but also in terms of the desired service (with the exception of the butcher and pharmacy). The senior customers in the flower store seem to share a preference for specifically designed flower bouquets and decorations, which fits the owner’s style as well. The overflowing décor of dolls and glittery flowers does indeed support – following Oldenburg’s claim – the senior women’s relaxation and comfort during their purchase. However, contrary to Oldenburg, the design is anything but “plain.”

In contrast, the organic store does have a very plain design; there is almost no additional decoration or pictures on the wall, and the furniture is functional and rather purist. However, the simplicity is also what many customers of organic



Fig. 43 Shelves in the flower store

products or LOHAS²⁰⁰ seem to favor, also for their private spaces, as the owner describes. Hence the plainness comes from the owners' decision to present the rather expensive, exclusive products in a clean and chic environment without any distracting decoration; they do this to appeal to their customers as well as their own. Also if Oldenburg's low profile and plainness mean that there are no distractions from the main practice of having a conversation, as mentioned earlier, all of Karl-Marx-Straße' gastronomic businesses that allow for a longer stay also offer background music, newspapers, and magazines – and in the case of the main café, even a TV.

Hence, the ethnographic work shows that although the businesses offer more to the customers in the sense that they find a place for recovery and social exchange there, it disproves Oldenburg's (1999: 22) often romanticized idea of third place working-class taverns with blue collar men sitting at a plain counter, engaging only in ritualized "natural" and "levelling" conversations. The ethnographic work shows that other places also work as third places but function in a different way, often regardless of their "profile." But the socio-spatial setting, with a focus on image and design, attracts certain customers more than others and thus, the Karl-Marx-Straße' businesses are only partially, not wholly, inclusive.



Fig. 44 Diverse customers chatting over a coffee or tea in the main café (afternoon)

200 LOHAS – Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability – are people, who (presumably) put health and sustainability at the center of their life and action.

Some, such as the **butcher's shop** and **main café**, even include customers in the design process. Knowing that many customers have roots in the region in Turkey where the owner's family comes from, he decided for a "modern" style, but combined this modern aesthetic with pictures of coastal towns and landscapes from that region. He also brought in Turkish chandeliers in order to make his customers feel more at home and to stir up common conversation topics. Yet, the owner intentionally combines the "Turkish" elements with more "modern gastronomic elements," as he frames it, in order to signal to passersby that they are "all" welcome in the business. The butcher's customers did not allow the butcher to renovate his business space, because they liked the nostalgic design and how it symbolized "good old craftsmanship," and reminded them of "their neighborhood's past." It seems that the two newer businesses in the sample, the **new café** and the **organic store**, are the only places, where the design references and targeting of a distinct lifestyle or age group are comparatively obvious. For instance their clean-cut shelves made out of sustainable material target their customers' taste for "holistic sustainability;" the plain flowers in vintage vases on the table, lifestyle magazines, books on the shelves, the alternative background music, and plain bulb lighting on the ceiling are thought to appeal not only to their own taste and to make the businesses distinctive from other business competitors, but also to adjust the business' design to the assumed interior design of the customers' own private apartments. Hence, it is not surprising that it is also the two newer businesses that stand out in the sample as having the least heterogeneity among customers and the lowest degree of interaction among people with different age, lifestyle, or ethnic backgrounds. Hence, in the case of the new café and the organic store, the clear stylistic elements lead to a strong preselection of the customers and thus it is predominantly the more established businesses that offer inclusion in terms of diverse social exchange.

But even with a low profile, diverse customers and staff interact with each other in highly different ways, ranging from small talks to personal assistance to heated debates. But status backgrounds also remain eminent in all the observed conversations. The owners, for instance, remain always the ones who might stop conversation if they consider the topic as inappropriate or if they see customers disturbed or feeling uncomfortable with the social interaction's direction. Although in most businesses people with different socio-economic and education backgrounds mingle at the counters and although their mutual opinions seem equally respected and appreciated, status differences remain obvious in terms of rhetoric, bodily performance, as well as spending habits. And wealthier patrons sometimes receive more attention and special service from the staff than less-affluent customers do. Hence, while these businesses allow for safe and easy interaction between people and particularly with strangers from different stratification groups, the interactions

that take place within the businesses do not abolish status differences, prejudices or stereotypes. Yet, it is possible that these interactions would decrease prejudice.

To summarize, the design of the stores influences who shops there and the kinds of social practices that take place therein. On Karl-Marx-Straße, it seems that all store owners (not just those sampled), including chains, franchises, and independent businesses, attempt to attract attention, to target specific groups, and to please customers' tastes through their businesses' physical appearance. As per the owners' framing of their stores' idea, vision, and design (cf. Chapter 5), they decorated and designed their store according to their own taste, financial means, and visions or ideas of what their potential customers would like.

So, while Oldenburg states that third places "fall short of the middle-class preference for cleanliness and modernity" (1991: 36), the businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße do show (social and physical) third place characteristics but mostly do not serve a single class. Moreover, they are indeed "clean" and try to appear "modern" with regard to goods, tools, skills, training, interior design, and so on.

6.7 Businesses as "Male Playful Places,"²⁰¹ Businesses for "Self-Confident Women."²⁰²

As argued in the previous subchapters, despite the usefulness of Oldenburg's criteria catalogue for conceptualizing businesses and the ways they create sociability or even a "home away from home" atmosphere (Oldenburg/ Brissett 1982, Oldenburg 1999: 22f.), he never explicates his concepts of "low profile," "plain design," "modern," or "clean" to middle-class lifestyles and further, he does not relate his empirical work to other contexts. His preference for "male working-class" places where people mingle and share their problems betrays a highly nostalgic and protectionist view of his research subjects and the everyday places where they meet. However, in order to analyze what makes a business a place for socially significant interaction and a place where customers and staff mold feelings of belonging or attachment, the overall atmosphere and tone are just as important as the material design of the commercial spaces and the social practices therein. Therefore this section looks at the relation of the businesses' atmospheres, tone, and mood – eventually as "playful" as Oldenburg (1999: 22 f.) sees necessary for business to be a third places.

201 Oldenburg 1999: 22f.

202 The owner of the main café describes the customers as "self-confident women" (l. 19). I assume that he means women that frequent stores without male accompaniment.

In the course of this section particularly examines the gendered placemaking practices in and of the businesses.

As previously discussed, Oldenburg assigns third places a "playful mood" (1999: 22f.). He sees them as places full of rough laughter, wit, and strong statements—places where customers go to escape from their presumably tough everyday work and family lives. As distinctly male places, he praises their function to provide an escape or neutral ground for stressed-out husbands fighting with their moaning wives at home, for hard working males dealing with strict or mean bosses, long working hours and their families' survival, and so on. Hence, the playful mood attribute Oldenburg ascribes has a direct relation to the distraction that men require from their stressful and tiring everyday lives. While he formally welcomes the increasing inclusion and openness of some of the third places toward female customers, his descriptions from both the early 1980s and from his more recent work refer only to interactions among male drinkers sitting up at the counter. Although men and women might have the same kind of wit and desire for playful distraction outside of work hours, his empirical fieldwork focuses on male bonding, much of which involves mocking their wives. It is unclear, however, if he just claims that no women were present in his study site or if he ignored female subjects in the neighborhood taverns or bars. In his more recent work (2001; 2009), Oldenburg does include female customers in his study of a laundromat, a study that looks at both men and women. However, whenever he talks about bars, or less housework or household supply-related spaces, he rarely mentions women as participants. But inasmuch as all spaces are "gendered spaces" (Spain 1996: 30), and their spatial arrangements reinforce gender-related status differences, the presence of differently gendered customers and staff likely create different atmospheres or "moods," that may also show different degrees of openness.

In the mid to late 20th century, some women did not enter eateries and taverns or bars, particularly during evening or night hours, without male accompaniment, or more precisely, without being the "accompanying decoration" of male customers or guests (cf. Starzinger 2000). Even if there ever were or are no formal rules that prevent women from entering these establishments without male accompaniment, many businesses still prevent women from entering or socializing by means of unwritten but socially enacted laws. Women who don't follow these rules are often considered dishonorable and provocative (Starzinger 2000: 49 f.). The gastronomic businesses along Karl-Marx-Straße do have female customers in the evening and night hours, but compared to the daytime, their number decreases significantly as soon as the sun has set.

Certainly, even today many bars in Neukölln (as well as the rest of Berlin and even Germany) are "male spaces," with drinking customs, counter topics, conver-

sational forms and modes of behavior that take an explicitly masculine (and thus excluding) form (Starzinger 2000: 39 f). Most local bars, in particular, still work as places of exclusion and internal cohesion by means of physical (e.g. not taking the chair next to her until all other chairs are occupied) and conversational (e.g. mocking, complaining) distancing practices from the women present. The women are often left outside, socially excluded, or remain somewhere else (e.g., at home). Even as bartenders or owners, women are often perceived differently than their male counterparts. On Karl-Marx-Straße, customers often approach female bartenders with different interactional expectations with regard to conversational form and content. Their interactions with women are often less playful than in Oldenburg's elaborations on "male" third places. However, sometimes the behavior is even more playful, but this occurs only when they have developed a long-term relationship with a female member of staff.



Fig. 45 Waitress cleaning the table and making a joke to the customer in the main café

Still, women in gastronomic businesses are more often found working *behind* the counter rather than drinking and sitting *at* the counter. This was definitely the case for Karl-Marx-Straße, where far more women work in the local gastronomic businesses rather than the number who enjoy a drink or a meal therein. As service providers, and particularly in bars and cafés that stay open until late, where there

is an increased demand for counselling during the late hours (as mentioned by one waitress), women seem to take over a rather traditional role as caretakers—or as one waitress put it, *carer of souls (Seelsorge)*.

The owner of the examined **bar** recounted that during the time her husband was alive, she had to work more in the back of house and in the kitchen (which she enjoyed), while her husband played the entertaining host up front. But when a customer had a broken heart, for instance, her husband would send them over to her rather than listening to their sorrows at the counter. During my observations in 2012, cross-gender interaction is very common, also because it is the bar owner who sets widely the tone, even if she's not involved in the conversations.

In all businesses, women are still more commonly employed as waitresses and sales personal in the more visible and “serving” functions, while men usually work the “physically harder” (as described by the owner of the main café) jobs at the back of the house. This pattern was typical for the butcher, the bars and eateries, and the fruit and vegetable store – even in those cases when the business was owned by a woman.

The **organic** and **flower stores** – as daytime businesses that sell household products – have slightly more female than male customers, and the conversations observed therein focus mainly on household supply, environmental and family issues. Conversations seem to be stimulated by the shop’s products. As the organic shop owner mentions, “young Turkish girls shop for decorative cosmetics” (l. 269), husbands send their wives to shop for allergy-free products (l. 236), elderly women come for local organic products from their childhood; and for Karl-Marx-Straße, “it is still very uncommon that a business is operated by two women” (l. 146.). At the butcher, slightly more men than women are customers, and conversations either remain at the small talk level, or they include casual jokes and the discussion of local politics. The regular customers also discuss more private family and work-life issues, but the butcher thinks this occurs less than in the stores with predominantly women customers. Hence, the observations confirm rather traditional shopping roles and conversational topics, often linked to the businesses’ offers.

As stated, while the gastronomic businesses do have slightly more men than women, the gender compositions therein depend also on the different time of the day.²⁰³ However, traditional gender lines do also blur—even if only partially—in

203 Since men still have higher incomes than women, they are also able to eat and drink out more often than women. While women still spend more on clothing and household wares, for groceries and leisure time shopping, gender differences in spending habits has decreased significantly over the last years. Hence, behavioral norms for women in gastronomic businesses also depend on the general higher spending abilities of male customers. For women’s consumption poverty and spending habits in Germany, see

the sampled businesses. For instance, cross-gender interaction is very common in the **bar**, where the majority of the customers are male, but is owned by a woman. It is the owner who widely sets the tone for the business, even if she's not involved in the conversations. She also includes other female customers into the discussions at the counter and thus succeeds in giving the bar a more open and inclusive atmosphere. While Oldenburg did not examine the role of owners and staff for the tone and mood of the businesses, for the sampled businesses, it was clear that staff managed to include men and women both in conversations; staff often initiated chats and conversations between the genders, setting the tone and atmosphere for the stores in a more explicit way than customers.

In addition to the gender composition in the businesses, the degree to which owners, staff, and customers know each other also affects the playfulness and the intimacy of conversational topics and physical interaction. Furthermore, as described in the section on the customers (Subchapter 6.5.), the businesses have different "moods" at different times of day. Atmospheres also shift within a business: along the counter and the cashier line of the **main café**, the spirit of the social exchanges is primarily humorous, talkative, or grumpy; those at the hidden table in the back of a café are often intimate, humorous, or serious. A chat during the quick lunch break at a standing table at the butcher's shop differs from the tone and atmosphere during the coffee parties at the flower shop. In the additional cafés, the owners name teasing and joking as common for regular-staff- and regular-regular-interaction ("they are pulling my leg quite often" owner of café I, l. 233; "I'm just kidding!" customer in café I, l. 734; "we had a funny experience with our customers", "customers laugh, customers drink" organic shop owner, l. 338, 955). Different still is the tone in which the pharmacist chats discreetly with a sick customer in the back of her business. As this last examples also indicates, the different moods depend on the type of conversation occurring and the subject under discussion, which in turn is affected by the reason for which the customers came to the business. For instance, most of the observed social interactions also include the exchange of serious information, debates, and discussions on a huge variety of topics, ranging from superficial chats to political or family issues, or explaining to the adjacent person how to repair something. Hence, these conversations give the businesses a rather functional or serious atmosphere.

Hence, light conversation that often involves "playful" conversational elements is most common for staff-customer interaction as long as they do not know each other well. Certainly the owners, as good business people, need to get along with

everybody in order not to risk to losing potential customers; they also must train their staff in a similar way. The owners consider this kind playful small talk as a means of binding customers to the place as well as a way of supporting their sense of well-being during their stay. They see small talk as a first step to the development of a further relationship. Hence, cultivating a playful or light mood is a business practice and business skill necessary for operating a business successfully. For this, owners and staff need to watch what they say, avoid certain critical issues and be careful to maintain a balance between socializing and professionally serving the customers. Even though these light conversations maintain and foster the customers' status as "familiars," they remain "familiar strangers" (Milgram 1992; see also Massey 2005; Lofland 1973; 1998) or only categorically known people (Lofland 1989; Bahrndt 1969). Indeed teasing and joking and light conversation on general but common topics such as the weather, parking situation, the visible reconstruction of the street outside of the businesses provide a smooth starting point for conversation and relaxed atmosphere. These light social exchanges do invite for more social interaction, once a certain degree of mutual knowledge and familiarity is reached. But only if they are repeated these light conversations weave stronger ties (Granovetter 1973) or relationships, that then support the discussion of more serious topics and more supportive social exchanges.

My observations reinforce Oldenburg's argument that playful conversations are at the core of third places: This type of social exchange is most common for interaction among strangers that (have to) share the same (limited) space. When parties have an interest in maintaining a polite and comfortable atmosphere without intruding on one other's privacy, playful conversations help bridge and ease physical proximity. With only a partial mutual knowledge or incomplete integration (Bahrndt 2013 [1961]: 86) in a public setting with others present, customers and staff have to be careful when sharing personal information in order to not turning (the) customers off or decrease customer loyalty and frequency.

As discussed, objects in the stores such as jukeboxes, cell phones, background music, TVs, news, or bar games are conversation starters and contribute to the light mood. They do not distract from conversation but rather invite further interaction. For instance, in the **flower store**, radio news often invited discussions and jokes about the news, and in the **main café**, two customers got to know one another by watching the "badly and dilettante produced music videos," as they called them. Watching the videos, they caught each other shaking their heads with disgust, which resulted in laughter, an exchange of opinion, and a short discussion of contemporary pop music. Hence, the presence of the TV and the social practice of watching music videos while eating or drinking a cup of tea bound the two customers together for the length of their stay. Hence, the playful friendly tone is not only maintained to

provide a comfortable and relaxed shopping and consumption atmosphere for the customers, but also for staff and owners.

A good mood also helps the people working in the businesses to endure their long working hours, tough business situations, boring work routines, and to get along with picky customers, competing colleagues, or strict bosses. Above all, playfulness helps increase sales and customer loyalty and thus also increases the functionality of the places just as much as it helps build an intimate atmosphere.

From this it follows that it is the commonly shared social practices, the personalities of the owner (and to a lesser extent of employees and customers) and the respective behavioral codes and norms that create a socio-spatial setting where “joy and acceptance reign over anxiety and alienation” (Oldenburg 1999: p. 38). Humorous regulars alone cannot create this atmosphere. The owners and staff’s main goal of nurturing this kind of mood or atmosphere maintains the business as an open, civilized, welcoming, and inclusive place. The businesses are places where community is practiced in the sense as they invite play and recreation as well as quietude or reflection. But the ethnographic work also reveals that the gender of the owners, staff, and customers affect the social order and conversational topics as well as how social interactions are initiated, continued, and ended. However, within one business, different atmospheres can be found, depending on the conversational partners’ location within the business, the people involved, their degree of familiarity, and the content of their conversations.

6.8 *Home away from home? A Synthesis of the Community Practices in and the Third Place Features of the Businesses*

Based on my ethnographic work, this chapter has explored the distinct features and characteristics of the businesses that affect how – and with whom – people in the Karl-Marx-Straße businesses develop social relationships. I have also looked at how senses of home and belonging develop in and around their everyday shopping patterns. The data shows that these shops are not third places in Oldenburg’s sense, but that they share many third place characteristics. Karl-Marx-Straße’s retailers and gastronomic facilities also generate and allow for the kind of sociability and communal social processes that Oldenburg attributes to his neighborhood taverns and restaurants. But Oldenburg needs to expand his definition of third places to include other typologies. Due to the higher diversity of customers, staff, products, and uses, not to mention the businesses’ overall socio-spatial settings, the businesses

function differently as third places. Nonetheless Oldenburg's assumptions about the potential benefits of spending time in third places as well as his descriptions of the eight qualities found therein provided an initial conceptual lens through which the Karl-Marx-Straße businesses' socio-spatial features, social order, behavioral norms, and social processes could be researched. My research diverges from Oldenburg's findings, showing new and notable ways in which social interaction is fostered in the stores primarily due to the blurring of public and private spaces therein. My work also highlights the importance of the materials or artifacts (Reckwitz 2002; 2003) involved in these interactions. And the findings further reveal new dimensions of the third-place qualities in regard to the manifold ways in which the businesses' socio-spatial setting and design allows customers to identify with the places, developing attachments to businesses that in many cases evolve into a sense of belonging and inclusion.

As most of the observed people use the businesses regularly and in the course of their everyday lives, these social micro-processes and particularly the social interactions in the stores deserve more sociological attention (more than Oldenburg payed to them). Furthermore, more conceptual emphasis needs to be placed on the physical features of these ordinary places' and how they shape interactions and connect people in the course of everyday shopping and consumption. The data analysis reinforces the sociological relevance of researching everyday life at the micro-level and of researching businesses as places that facilitate and build the spatial basis for local social life. Most significantly, without local low-threshold places to meet, urban dwellers with limited mobility, such as the disabled, the elderly, or the impoverished, risk further deprivation, isolation, and social exclusion.

The businesses are social anchors in the district and attract people to them as secondary diversity (Jacobs 1961: 150 f.). The customers and owners also describe their businesses as "anchors" (e.g. butcher, l. 278, 301, 324), using the term as a metaphor for being at home, for a place that doesn't change, a neighborhood center. Hence, the final benefit of spending time in the businesses along Karl-Marx-Straße – the last constituent of the sociality that comes with shopping or eating/drinking out – is the use of the place as a "home away from home" (Oldenburg 1999: 22 f.; Oldenburg 2001: 160). But in order to analyze how the sampled businesses do or do not function as homes, it is important to first consider the term more precisely: Homes are not literally open to the public, but rather, a host invites and allows certain people to enter. In contrast, the businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße aim to maintain and increase a wide client base in order to survive or expand economically. And how people make themselves at home in the businesses varies: The observations of Oldenburg's third place features for Karl-Marx-Straße's businesses show people relaxing, socializing, and recovering similar to at home. However, this is done with

the freedom that comes from not actually being at home, where one might have to act as a host or fulfill the social roles of being at home (e.g. as a parent, partner, housekeeper and the like) (cf. Oldenburg 1999; 2001), yet under the behavioral rules and norms of the respective business.

Moreover, the businesses actually are semi-public spaces with an audience of strangers, only categorically-known, or familiar people (Kusenbach 2006; Lofland 1998; Goffman 1963). This means that the businesses show certain features of a private place and evoke particular social practices assigned to private spaces, while still remaining places where public behavior is most common. Throughout the observations, the depicted micro-interactions can be conceptualized with Goffman's (1959; 1963) three main principles for public behavior: civil inattention, audience role prominence, and civility towards diversity structure. Oldenburg's "playful mood" and "light conversation" also serve to maintain this kind of inattention and civility on the one hand and performances in front of an only partially or fully unknown audience on the other hand. The more the space is used as private space, the more intimate and serious the interactions were in the businesses.

On Karl-Marx-Straße, these micro-interactions reveal different senses of inclusion and exclusion. The respectively encountered interactions in the frequented business thus widely affects how people will further interact in the stores; however, as has been shown in the previous subchapters, the layout and physical features, and the behavioral norms set by owners, staff and other customers, also structure the behavior therein and determine how the spaces are used. In other words, whereas the last subsections (6.6. and 6.7.) examine how the "playful" mood and conversations are used to maintain this civility towards diversity as well as civil inattention, it seems that customers and staff also sometimes forget that there is an (eventually unknown) audience witnessing all social practices within the business. This is when "home-practices" appear in the Karl-Marx-Straße' businesses; however, these are not necessarily inclusive practices.

Therefore, this last subchapter also focuses on the socio-spatial features of the businesses in an effort to bring together the previous (explanatory) descriptions of the ways each discussed feature contributes to the sense of community that the businesses manage to offer and thus make the places significant localities for local social life.

For the socio-spatial qualities of the businesses on Karl-Marx-Straße, the businesses provide customers, staff, and owners with a low threshold place for interaction, facilitated by the feeling of being at home²⁰⁴ (Oldenburg 2001: 160).

204 My conceptual and contextual understanding of the concept of home transcends the material characteristics of domestic space, and is left rather vague and open for the cus-

For instance, in the beginning of a business day in the **main café**, the distinction between front stage and backstage is quite recognizable: customers enter and occupy the front; staff work in the back. Customers are an “audience” waiting to be entertained, or served. Salespeople, as “actors,” need to follow both the rules of the front stage as well as the backstage and are constantly switching between the two (cf. Goffman 1963). At this point, the café’s small social life world consists of socio-spatial relations of consumption (Crang 1994: 677), and is not a place with high levels of sociability. People are not interacting in a comparatively intimate way, characteristic of third places in Oldenburg’s terms. The behavior of both customers and salespeople is guided by the rules of the work in the business space: The café’s micro-geography defines who moves where and how, permitting the use of certain spaces and forbidding the use of others. For instance, the entrance, lines, and bathroom lines delineate a spatial order, becoming cornerstones for bodily movements in the space of the business. As customers increase, the “dance” in the café speeds up. Around midday, when the neighboring schools let out, local employees as well as students come over for a quick lunch or to grab a take-away. As their bodies stream through the entrance and into the business space, the dance reaches its peak: due to the crowds and noise, people in the café have to shout in order to place orders or to carry on their conversations. Most often, their behaviors make customers and salespeople laugh among one another. Waitresses and customers intermingle in a way that front and back stages, work and consumption spaces, public and private spaces, merge – creating an atmosphere of public familiarity. And it is most often during the afternoons that customers start to use the café as a more home-like place. Observations note participating in the afore mentioned behaviors of putting off shoes and jackets, distributing them around their table, taking out newspapers, pencils, cosmetics and the like. Customers relax as if at home, often forgetting that they are surrounded by a crowd or audience of strangers or only categorically known people. Other customers pull out work material, such as laptops, smartphones, homework, or reading material and shut off the background noise and audience – even if both

tomers and staff’s relationship to the businesses. For a more theoretical underpinning of “home,” it is an abstract signifier of a wide set of associations and meanings (Moore 2000: 208). I leave the definition of home as belonging to the individual person and as encompassing an affective bond between a place and a person. Home has a subjectively defined meaning and scale. The main urban studies theory in use in relation to home is probably place attachment (Altman/ Low 1992). Place attachment is viewed as an affective measure and identifies the types of bonds with home places, and emphasizes the process by which people and home places develop relationships (Moore 2000; Altman/ Low 1992). The more theoretical definitions and conceptual ideas of sense of belonging, including place, home, and attachment are discussed in Chapter 3..

helps some to focus on their work, as one customer told me. Another home-like behavior I observed was snoozing on chairs; customers were sometimes audibly snoring, but were rarely getting disturbed by employees or neighboring customers. During the interview date with the **pharmacist** – as another ethnographic example how business spaces are used for practices that are assigned to more private spaces (Lofland 1998; Goffman 1963), a senior customer took a nap on the chair in the salesroom, while the business operations busily went on. Other (familiar) customers also entered the pharmacy just to take a break from the crowded and busy shopping street, sitting down on the few chairs or the bench, noticeably relieved to leave the street and sidewalk life for a moment.

When business is slow or when employees take a break, they convert the business' front and back stages into their "own," more private, and thus home-like spaces: The following picture (46) depicts a saleswoman enjoying the sun at the entrance door during her break. She is playing on her phone; the owner of the adjacent kiosk snoozes on a plastic chair in front of his business; another salesman watches on, enjoying a cigarette with a customer in front of his furniture store.²⁰⁵



Fig. 46 Staff taking a break

²⁰⁵ However, this behavior might also prevent new customers from entering the business or from feeling welcomed in the stores.

Inside the **main café**, the front and back behavior (Goffman 1959) of the salespeople is recognizable by the way saleswomen come from the kitchen to the counter or salesroom: they straighten up, smooth their clothes and their hair, and smile. When moving to the back, they often loosen their clothes, shake and rearrange their hair, put their feet up on one of the few stools, sometimes even taking their shoes off when they take a break. Here, their bodies loosen and relax; they sometimes tease and pinch or massage each other. However, sometimes they also conduct these practices in the front rooms: for instance, waitresses sit down with customers and chat with them and in doing so, loosen their aprons, shoes, and relax their overall posture. They also take breaks in the salesroom, playing with their cell phones, pulling off their shoes, and closing the eyes for a minute on the bench.

Hence, by displaying private behavior in (still) public settings, the practices of staff and customers creates a rather informal and familial setting. This is where the work in the café with its division into front and back stages, or, more precisely the interaction of bodies, material, social practices and the space culminate. This turns the café into an “extended living room,” or “home away from home” (Oldenburg 2001: 160) for some of the customers (cf. Erickson 2007: 19). This means that sometimes customers also infringe the implicit rules and socio-spatial orders of the business. If salespeople don’t know or don’t feel comfortable with customers entering “their” space, they will tell them so.²⁰⁶

In the **butcher’s shop**, customers appropriate the tiled salesroom with their lively, loud, but nonetheless intimate conversations. In doing so, the regular customers enliven the chilly butcher’s shop and turn it into a private living room or neighborhood bar setting that makes the formal and legal ownership secondary. The men, as “lunch friends” (as mentioned by a saleswoman and a lunch regular), perceive the shop as a stable anchor of their weekday working routines, but moreover, of their local social lives. As mentioned by several customers throughout my visits, the butcher’s shop is one of the significant places in the community, a place where “nothing changes” (also mentioned by staff and the butcher, l. 306) in an ever-changing neighborhood. The fact that their common meeting place is a butcher’s salesroom, where strangers enter and leave the business, where meat and sausages are sold, and where visiting is governed by opening hours and a lack of seating facilities, fades into the background during lunch time. Similar practices – as customer-led placemaking – were seen across all businesses. Regardless

²⁰⁶ However, only three times during my fieldwork were customers corrected or guided back to the “formal” rooms; in one occasion, it was a lost elderly lady who was looking for the restrooms but ended up in the kitchen. Yet, this example also highlights that “formal” and “legal” place ownership is still on the employees and owners’ side.

of the formal ownership, customers – and regulars in particular – make the place their private places, so long as they feel welcomed and comfortable there. These interactional practices might involve other people (including staff), as in the case of the butcher's or flower store, whereas in the gastronomic businesses customers use the space for more explicit private or work purposes, often without paying attention to anyone else present.

So it is first and foremost the social practices in the businesses that contribute to a sense of home and enact community. The manifold social practices of the customers in the stores and the purposes for which they seem to frequent them synthesize with the types of interactions between the people that work in the businesses and those who use them for consumption and shopping. The practices thus explain what makes these places socially and physically a place where community is practiced in terms of fostering senses of home or belonging, or, in Oldenburg's terms, a "home away from home." Oldenburg's work simply states that third-place neighborhood bars and restaurants "provide customers with a feeling as if at home" (1999), whereas my research reveals much more complicated and nuanced relations, particularly one of regeneration, between home and third places. For instance, one of the lunch customers that frequents the butcher's shop regularly identifies this business as a place to both satisfy his consumption need, but also refers to the shop as a place where he finds refuge and regeneration during his work days. After watching another customer approach the owner of the main café in his back office in order to shake hands and greet him personally, I asked him why he frequents the café. He responded: "To see people, and because I belong here." My observations thus demonstrate that customers use these spaces for regeneration among people whom feel comfortable with. However, they also maintain social relationships in these businesses. In doing so they transform the businesses as places of consumption and leisure into places of social significance, into a "home away from home."

Legally, owners own places. However, people practice and perceive ownership in different ways. The observations and interviews show that what is used and thus considered as "private" spaces for some employees and customers is still perceived as public spaces by others. In these cases, more public behavior is displayed than in private homes (e.g. social practices as performances towards or in dependence to an audience, awareness of strangers, behavioral norms, house rules etc.). This applies to the fruit and vegetable store, the organic store, the pharmacy as well as the new café. But in terms of practiced ownership, the observations show that some customers appropriate and occupy the space or parts of the salesrooms as if they "own" these corners, tables, or spaces – also physically with their private belongings, such as jackets, computers or work material, or newspapers. While customers call their regular bars, cafés, and shops on Karl-Marx-Straße "my" shop, "my bar,"

and “my butcher,” and call themselves “belonging” to the “lunch round,” or to the “morning customers,” (or even “belong to the café”), the businesses also “belong” to the owners and remain legally solely their private spaces, even though they are open to any potential customer²⁰⁷. Nevertheless, the businesses are not “home” to anyone. The customers need to acknowledge the formal ownership, and thus become aware that they remain “visitors,” but, as discussed, are simultaneously allowed to appropriate and use the space as if it were their own—so long as their practices have the consent of employees and owners.

Hence, a business does not inherently work as a “home away from home,” but is *made* a home and a place where community is practiced by certain customers and for a certain period of time and only in accordance with staff. As well, customers probably have highly varying understandings of “home. The observed practices along with the interview statements do reveal that the businesses are used for practices that are usually ascribed to home spaces, or at least, spaces where people have a sense of ownership, familiarity and belonging.²⁰⁸ Hence, home activities are transferred to and practiced in these places, resulting in a sense of ownership or belonging, but the place still belongs to the business owner and is open to the public and thus not a home away from home in the real sense. These places offer more than “a home away from home” and carry a less exclusive notion than the home.

Summarized the ethnographic work results in an understanding of home and belonging as praxeological: Home and belonging are practiced relationships to a business and its people, which simultaneously blur the lines between public and private spheres.²⁰⁹ My analysis of Karl-Marx-Straße’s businesses has uncovered the social qualities of the consumption places that are deeply embedded in everyday routines of everyday supply and leisure time activities. This social “more,” including low-threshold help, advice, public sociability, or social exchange, seems to belong today neither to exclusively private spaces, nor to public spaces or to all shopping places in general. More precisely, these social qualities or this social

207 As has been shown with the descriptions of the stores and their customers in Chapter 5 and the above discussion of the ethnographic findings, what makes an entering person a “customer” and thus locally accepted person in the business varies across the cases and owners’ statements. The status of a customer may range from collecting information on certain goods and services, to window-strollers, random customers, to regulars or someone who asks for the restrooms and leaves without any purchase but is believed as a potential future or past customer, and so on.

208 The more theoretical definitions and conceptual ideas of sense of belonging, including place, home, and attachment are discussed in Chapter 3.3.

209 The gathered data did not allow for a full analysis of the customers, owners, and employees’ affective feelings to the respective business as a socio-spatial setting.

“more” also results in expectations of predictability. Customers want to see what is socially to be found in the store and thus the stores serve an anchoring function in an ever-changing surrounding. Furthermore, being recognized and served in a special way enables and ascribes a certain status to the places’ users. And finally, the businesses are places where community is practiced since they include a facilitated possibility of establishing links, ties, and relationships with other locals who might have knowledge and skills that could help in situations of need, or who simply just help ease everyday life. These are weak ties or bridging ties (Granovetter 1973; 1981). As per Granovetter (1973), weak ties, such as acquaintances, tend to promote social integration because they often occur between people with different backgrounds, including different interests and experiences, and thus help to bridge diverse societal groups.²¹⁰ Therefore, place attachment and feelings of belonging²¹¹ can also be seen as “unanticipated gains” (Small 2009) that come with shopping or working in these stores, or as a by-product from spending time in a neighborhood’s (semi-) public spaces. My discussion of the manifold, intermingling private and public behaviors demonstrates how they lead to a sense of relaxation, sociability, and social exchange which in turn fosters feelings of belonging, attachment, and “home.” Hence, to conceptualize the businesses as places whose socio-spatial features allow for the practice of community also allows us to analyze how this as a social “more” is offered, to trace back and work out the processes and mechanisms that lead to this “more,” as an unanticipated or anticipated gains (Small 2009) of frequenting (customers), but also operating (staff) these places.

But furthermore, and as will be argued further in the next chapter, it is the owners and employees with their distinct social practices, who first and foremost generate these social benefits. By caring, asking, networking, teasing, comforting, pleasing their customers, as well as by sharing important knowledge, emotional,

210 For Granovetter, dense clusters of network ties are linked by “local bridges” or more weak ties, but also affect these bridges. His strong ties link good friends and relatives (intimate ties) and weak ties exists with only partly known people. He examined the benefits and weakness that come with both. But he also found that in lower socioeconomic groups, “weak ties are often not bridges, but rather represent friends’ or relatives’ acquaintances; the information they provide would then not constitute a real broadening of opportunity, reflected in the fact that the net effect of using such ties on income is actually negative” (Granovetter 1981: 13). Hence, weak ties do not necessarily represent an opportunity or access to resources. However, for the businesses, the social relationships found between regulars or with selected staff often represent weak ties, linking people with very different backgrounds, transferring knowledge and support that wouldn’t be or hardly be accessible otherwise or through the involved people’s more intimate social networks.

211 See more on the concepts of sense of belonging, attachment and community building in the chapter on the respective sensitizing theoretical concepts (Chapter 3.3.).

social and material support, owners create a setting that conveys not only a more private sense, where the social exchanges cover the economic exchanges, but they also help to ease everyday life (within and beyond the neighborhood) for both customers and staff.



Fig. 47

Karl-Marx-Straße's
sidewalk life

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