



Covering Communities

a site for journalists / educators / students / citizen journalists

A Project of

- The William Allen White School of Journalism & Mass Communications
- The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Layers of Civic Life

Type of space	1. Official	2. Quasi-Official	3. Third Places	4. Incidental	5. Private
Description	Designated as an official place and time to discuss issues. Public officials usually in charge.	Professionalization of citizen input. Leadership clearly identified. Formal meetings and events are held.	Rooted in daily life. Comfortable public gathering places where people choose to spend their free time. Usually no formal leader, but certain people are catalysts.	Random, everyday encounters between friends and acquaintances (not in Third Places).	Inside the home.
What usually happens	Can be divisive, partisan. Goal is usually to win for your side and often to cut down the other. Problem solving can be hard.	Often productive but can slide into public meeting syndrome. Usually a planned agenda.	Not expressly political, but talk about common challenges is frequent. People talk informally to understand concerns and test ideas. Can lead to quasi-official spaces.	People “visit,” tell stories, gossip, chitchat. Occasionally connect private concerns to community or public issues. A key information sources for most citizens.	Talk centers on the private life of the household. Public issues discussed in context of private concerns or beliefs.
Who’s involved	Public officials, organized interests, vocal citizens, often with an axe to grind.	“Professional citizens,” officials often visit.	Community catalysts, citizens with something in common (neighborhood, ethnicity, parenthood, work).	Immediate neighbors, people who already know each other.	Family and close friends.
Examples	City council sessions, citizen planning meetings, “town meetings”	Neighborhood associations, civic groups, non-profit grassroots organizations.	Barbershops, churches, playgrounds, donut shops, bars, bookstores, cafes, recreation centers.	Immediate neighbors, people who already know each other.	Family and close friends.
Public perceptions	People are often turned off by these spaces – seen as cynical, divisive, politics-as-usual.	Seen as more authentic than regular “politics” – but few people are involved. Politically “active” citizens dominate.	Savvy citizens and some civic leaders know these are key community spaces. Thriving third places are becoming rare in many areas.	Much broader participation than first three layers. Not thought of as political but as a natural part of life.	Personal, private.
News media’s role	Already covered extensively. Good place to get the “official story” and opinions of	Reporters usually welcome. Those involved would like more coverage of their work (but	Reports may enter and cover under certain conditions. Reporters need to be careful not to change the nature of the	Dispersed, difficult to cover. Reporters need to be careful not to change the nature of the space.	Can be covered in human interest stories – but intervening layers of public

organized interest groups.

are sensitive to criticism)

space.

life are missing.