Drunk by design: how cities are forcing young people to...

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This article is by James Murphy, based on his recent experience as a young person living in London. It was edited by Richard Murphy.

According to Breast Cancer UK, quoted in *a recent article* in The Independent, one in three people say that they need alcohol to get on the dancefloor. In other words, one in three people cannot walk into a social space without a drink in their hand. This rises to forty per cent amongst people aged 18 to 24, but this is not a quirky statistic about youth culture; it is a direct indictment of our cities, our policies, and our collective priorities.

If alternative hubs of connection existed, whether they be cafes, libraries, or community centres that are all too often invisible after dark, people would not be dependent upon locations where alcohol has to be used as a drug to overcome social fear of interaction. Young people are not choosing to drink; they are being forced into it. And society is quietly letting it happen.

The market has failed: alcohol has become the default social medium

The "night-time economy" has become a euphemism for the alcohol industry. If you are young and want to meet people, your choices are brutally limited: buy a drink or stay at home. Libraries and community centres close early, leaving no civic spaces open when people most need them. Cafes, although popular and incredibly well-used during the day, all seem to close just as the social day begins. They could be the ideal venues for open-mic nights, discussion groups, or late-evening events, but they very rarely are.

The evidence is clear. **Research into conscious clubbing shows that young people want alternatives in the form of music, dance, and community without the haze of alcohol. These are not niche interests; they are the mainstream that is uncatered for in our market economy. Society has simply failed to provide what young people are already asking for.**

The result is that the economics of social life are exclusionary. When every social interaction seems to involve a pub, wine bar, or licensed club of some sort, the art of making connections is reduced to being a monetised commodity. Those who can afford it join in. Those who can't, stay at home. Urban design and market forces have combined to turn social life itself into a privilege.

The cost: isolation, inequality, and ill health

There are real consequences of this.

First, the health impact is immense. Early and habitual dependence on alcohol is not a private vice; it has a social cost. Liver disease, cancer, and addiction strain public health systems already under pressure. When we talk about the "cost of living", we should also talk about the cost of drinking.

Second, the social consequences are corrosive. Without sober spaces, young people withdraw from social interaction. Loneliness, anxiety, and disconnection rise. Community ties weaken. A society that forces its young people to drink to belong is a society in decay.

Third, the inequality is structural. Those who abstain for religious, ethical, or health reasons are excluded from mainstream social life, and those without disposable income are priced out entirely. This is not freedom of choice; it is a form of social coercion, built into the very fabric of our cities.

The alternative: third spaces as civic infrastructure

What we need are **[third spaces](#)**. *These are places separate from home (the first space) and work (the second space) where people can gather, socialise, and build communities, often through informal and spontaneous interactions. Examples include cafes, libraries, parks, bars, and community centres that offer social environments beyond domestic and professional settings. The trouble is, most of these no longer exist. In that case, answers to the problems created by their absence are needed.*

First, we need to stop pretending this is a lifestyle issue. It is an infrastructure failure. Cafes, libraries, and community hubs must be reimagined as late-opening social spaces. They should host open-mic nights, quiz evenings, film screenings, and music sessions that allow young people to connect without the expectation, or the expense, of drinking alcohol, even if coffee and food might be the alternatives.

Second, this requires more than goodwill. The government and local authorities must fund and incentivise these spaces. Tax breaks, grants, and

planning support should make it easy for small venues to stay open late, host community events, and operate without alcohol at the core of their business model. This is social investment, not subsidy.

Third, we must shift culture as well as policy. Alcohol-free events must be mainstream and not for moralistic reasons. A young person should feel just as at home spending an evening at a late-opening café event as they would in a bar. To normalise sober socialising is to democratise social life.

Reclaiming the Night: A Call to Action

The current state of urban social life is not inevitable. It is a policy choice. Cities have chosen to outsource the community to the alcohol industry. They have decided that young people's desire for connection should be monetised, and not met.

This is both a market failure and a moral one.

Investing in late-opening, alcohol-free third spaces is not a luxury; it is a civic necessity. The price of neglect is already visible in the health of our young people, the loneliness of our communities, and the commercialisation of every aspect of social life.

If cities are to be worth living in, they must once again belong to their citizens, not to the market for their drinks.

Third spaces are not just rooms with coffee and chairs. They are the foundations of belonging and collective wellbeing. Without them, we don't just lose our evenings. We lose our society.

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, **[here.](here)**

One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.

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