

Where can young people meet?

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In this podcast, I spoke with Thomas Murphy, my son and the videographer and editor behind this channel, about something that matters to his generation: where can young people actually go to meet each other?

Pubs and restaurants are available, but they cost money and often assume that drinking or consuming something is part of socialising. Coffee shops close early. Youth clubs have disappeared. Schools and other community buildings have become expensive to hire. Hobby shops and other informal meeting places are struggling or have vanished altogether.

The result is the loss of what sociologist Ray Oldenburg called the “third place”: somewhere that is neither home nor work, where people can meet, talk, pursue interests and simply spend time alongside other people.

That matters when loneliness is becoming an increasing concern, particularly among younger people. Telling someone to “get a hobby” is not much use if there is nowhere affordable for that hobby to happen.

Tom and I discuss how online gaming has not filled this gap, why physical meeting places still matter, and whether vacant high-street shops could become community spaces with support from local and national government.

This is ultimately about more than young people. We need places where generations can mix, friendships can form, and communities can develop without everyone being required to spend money simply to be there.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgBTN9ACPmQ?si=9CB5ClqHGo7fWgml>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=2jpdt-1b3fc4a-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

There is no Debate Ammunition for this video.

There is no transcript for this podcast, but this is my summary:

In this podcast, I spoke with Thomas Murphy, my son and the videographer and editor behind my YouTube channel, about a problem that is increasingly important to him and, I believe, to many people of his generation, which is the disappearance of places where young people can meet, socialise and pursue hobbies without having to drink alcohol or spend heavily.

Tom explained that, as he has grown older and become more independent, finding places where he can pursue his hobbies and meet other people has become increasingly important. Yet in towns such as Ely, there are remarkably few places where young adults can simply meet without going to a pub, restaurant or somewhere else where spending money is expected.

That matters because many young people drink less alcohol than previous generations. Tom does not particularly enjoy pubs and does not want alcohol to be the necessary backdrop to seeing friends. I noted that 31 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds in the UK do not now drink. Others might drink occasionally but still do not want to spend their social lives surrounded by alcohol or intoxicated people.

Ely illustrates the problem. Despite being a tourist destination with many cafés and restaurants, there are no coffee shops in the centre open after six in the evening. For anyone finishing work at five, that effectively rules them out. By the time they have travelled home and are ready to meet friends, the cafés have closed. Their practical choices are often reduced to home, work or the pub.

I think that matters because coffee shops offer something more than coffee. They provide places to work, talk or simply coexist with other people. Sometimes social connection means no more than recognising familiar faces, exchanging greetings or sitting comfortably in the presence of others. We need places where that can happen.

The problem extends to hobbies. Tom described how clubs increasingly struggle to find suitable and affordable premises. Rising rents, insurance costs and concerns about liability make venues reluctant to accommodate some activities. His own armour-based

combat group has found it difficult to secure training spaces because the mention of swords immediately creates concern. Even when suitable facilities can be found, the rents can be difficult for clubs to afford.

Less physical hobbies face similar problems. Tom recalled spending considerable time as a teenager in Games Workshop stores, where people could paint models, build them and talk to others who shared their interests. Those shops were hobby spaces as well as retail outlets. Tom believes that having somewhere to spend time with like-minded people played an important part in his development.

That model has changed since Covid. Games Workshop stores have become much more conventional retail spaces, while independent hobby shops have also struggled. Ely lost a gaming model shop, which served people from across the Fens but could not survive the combination of high rents and competition from online retailers. Another community space disappeared as a result.

I linked this to the wider loss of community infrastructure. More than 4,500 youth clubs were lost between 2010 and 2024. Schools have also become less available as community venues. Where schools once commonly let rooms to clubs and societies, academy structures and commercial pressures mean that many now charge high fees. From our own experience of looking for venues, schools can sometimes cost more than hotels.

Cost creates another barrier. Tom cited research from Young Scot suggesting that 48 per cent of young people have been prevented from pursuing hobbies because of the costs involved. Equipment, membership, venue hire and transport all matter. Even supposedly cheap hobbies are rarely genuinely free, while expensive public transport makes participation harder for young people who do not drive.

This brought us to the idea of the “third place”, developed by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. Home is the first place and work is the second. The third place is somewhere neutral where people can meet regardless of status, wealth or background. It might be a café, library, park or pub. What matters is that people can be there without having to justify their presence through substantial spending or participation in a narrowly defined activity.

We considered whether changes on the high street might create an opportunity. With some major charities reducing their retail presence, vacant shops could become community hubs. Tom suggested government support, perhaps through business-rate relief or assistance with rents, to make some of these premises available for social and hobby activities.

Gaming demonstrates why such spaces are needed. Tom accepted that online gaming creates genuine friendships and communities, but he does not think it solves the underlying problem. Instead, it at best fills a void. If someone comes home from work

and nowhere is open, joining friends online may be the easiest available form of social contact. Gaming can therefore become a kind of third place inside people's homes because society has failed to provide one outside them.

I am particularly concerned about loneliness. People in their twenties should have opportunities for intense social contact, friendship and discovery, yet many now say they are lonely. Telling them simply to “get a hobby” misses the point when hobbies themselves lack affordable places in which to happen.

My own experience shows how important such places can be. When I was 13, the late Jack Ray introduced me to model railways in what was effectively a safe third place. That encounter changed my life. Model railways led me into railway history, then company history, social history and social anthropology, and eventually towards economics and accounting. It was also Jack who told me that if I wanted to change the world, I should write. The rest is history.

None of those consequences could have been predicted from what appeared to be happening at the time, which was a teenager being given somewhere safe to pursue an interest. The intergenerational relationship mattered as much as the hobby itself. I was 13, and Jack was about 54 when we met, but the impact he had on my life was enormous.

Tom and I concluded that government, particularly local government, has a role to play. Planning policy, business-rate support and assistance with rents could help create accessible community spaces. Vacant high-street premises offer an obvious opportunity.

I also argued that this should be a cross-party issue. These spaces should not just be for young people. They should allow generations to mix, ideas to be exchanged, and people with common interests to find each other.

Our conversation had a simple conclusion. We need places where people can meet without being required to drink, spend heavily or belong to a particular organisation. At a time when loneliness is increasing and high-street premises are becoming vacant, failing to create those spaces would be a major missed opportunity. Safe third places can provide friendship, community, creativity and purpose. My own experience shows that we can never know just how significant their consequences might be.

Poll

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