The Function and Design of Cafés

Throughout Time

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An Introduction to the World of Cafés

Cafés have been established as staples of society in industrialized nations throughout the world. While many may overlook the impact of the café on society, there is no doubt that its contributions have been large. Patrons frequent coffee shops, making a stop at the local Starbucks part of their daily routine. Cafés offer a pick-me-up before work, a reward after a long day, a stimulating environment for creativity and thought, or simply a place to relax and spend time with friends. An investigation of this salient place type offers insight into how and why cafés have become what they are today. An exploration of the goals and successes of coffee shops provide guidelines for the optimal functioning of future cafés.

How Cafés Came to Be: Emergence and Evolution

History:

Coffee houses emerged at different times throughout the world, extending from their origins in the Middle East. The first coffee houses, traced back to nearly 500 years ago, are believed to be Arabian (Oldenburg, 193). Through trade, Europe adopted this place type soon after. The original English cafés appeared during the 17th century and were deemed Penny Houses, reflecting the cost of coffee during this time. Penny Houses developed as an alternative to pubs, offering a partial solution to the harms of the pub environment. This novel establishment spread rapidly throughout Europe: "By the end of the century, any man in London could easily find a coffee house. He needed only to follow his nose down the nearest street" (185). Coffee shops began as mere improvised stalls scattered throughout Europe. Over time, they have increasingly become urban institutions (Grafe et al., 39). There have been setbacks in the growth of the café culture in Europe, primarily as a result of World War II. However, European cafés have regained importance and continue to be prevalent throughout the continent (41).

Centuries later, cafés were introduced to America. The creation of Starbucks accounts for the establishment of a café culture in the United States. Having observed the workings of coffee shops in Europe, Gordon Bowker, Zev Siegl, and Jerry Baldwin brought the concept back to Seattle. Frustrated by the difficulty in obtaining a decent cup of coffee, they hoped to provide the community with easier access to this good. Their humble beginnings consisted of a small shop that was opened for business in 1971 (Clark, 40-42). It did not take long for this venture to

expand. In 1989, only 585 coffee shops existed in the nation. Gaining support rapidly, Starbucks went public in 1992. By 2007, the number of coffee shops had grown to over 25,000 (9-10). The introduction of Starbucks to American society sparked a trend that has only grown since.

Social History:

The success of cafés throughout time can be accounted for by their profound social and cultural value. The English Penny Houses began as an intellectual gathering place where members of the community could discuss important matters and foster social ties. During this time, hierarchies and social class were emphasized; however, Penny Houses offered a space that demanded equality among individuals. A set of Rules and Order established social codes that served to regulate behavior (Oldenburg, 184-186). Patrons were treated with respect regardless of their social status. These organized spaces allowed customers to feel comfortable and safe. The first European coffee shops offered society a gathering place for community, politics, art, and equality.

While cafés in modern times are less structured, the 17th century Penny Houses laid the foundation for the sociocultural function of coffee shops today. People use these spaces to spend time with good friends or to meet new ones. Some rely on their daily stop at the coffee shop to get them through a tough day, while others find their inspiration in the bustle of the environment. One need not look further than the service counter at a Starbucks to observe the lasting societal benefits of cafés. The employees greet customers with a smile on their face and engage them in conversation, welcoming them into the café culture experience. Cafés have evolved to serve a variety of social functions in society.

Distinguishing Amongst Types of Cafés: Typologies & Sub-Types

Cafés serve a wide range of populations across the world. As a result, various types have emerged. Several factors must be taken into account when distinguishing between them. The location of the shop plays a significant role in this process. Another distinction lies in the desired complexity of the drinks. For example, Starbucks is known primarily for its specialty drinks. The potential seasonality of the area where the café is located plays a role as well, determining whether it will be partially outdoors, as seen in the case of sidewalk cafés, or entirely indoors. Finally, the intended target market influences the preferred type of café, differentiating primarily between traditional and modern types (BusinessRoute, 1-2).

User wants and needs have led to the creation of various sub-types of cafés. Some, such as the English Penny House, have been phased out; however, others have persisted despite the continuous creation of new categories. In Europe, cafés diverge into two main paths: the sidewalk café and the coffeehouse. These two are differentiated based on physical features, design, and how customers use the spaces. The sidewalk café emerged earlier and remains as a tie to the past. It maintains the culture and atmosphere of old cafés. Its structures are modest and traditional as most of the action in these establishments occurs on the street (Oldenburg, 145-47). Sidewalk cafés appeal primarily to traditional Europeans but are still prevalent in various countries today. Their allure lies in the fact that customers are able to engage in the community while having a seat with a group of friends and enjoying a cup of coffee.

Coffeehouses, on the other hand, persist through a more realistic approach. Rather than maintain a traditional outlook, the success of these establishments relies on their ability to

change with the times. Catering to present-day needs, the coffeehouse offers a variety of specialty drinks as well as environmental stimulation in the form of art and music. It is somewhat less social, allowing for privacy if customers desire it by employing a more dynamic layout with varying seating options. The creators of these spaces aim to maintain some semblance of cafés from the past. However, many criticize the European coffeehouse for becoming "Americanized," as evidenced through its modern design. Coffee houses today make use of bright colors, chrome fixtures, and mirrors, design elements unknown to the traditional café (Oldenburg, 196-99). Both sidewalk cafés and coffeehouses have remained fixtures in society, one through its insistence on remaining traditional and the other through its adaptation to the times.

Aside from these two, a number of other types of cafés have emerged in industrialized countries around the world. Increasingly specialized, they are differentiated on the basis of target audiences and intended functions. Additionally, these sub-types are representative of different time periods throughout history.

Espresso bars emerged as early as 1930 in Europe. At the time, they served as indicators of the modernity of industrialized nations, employing novel design elements such as stainless steel surfaces, marble countertops, and walls made of glass or mirrors. Espresso bars quickly became fashionable, attracting youth, businessmen, tourists, and intellectuals alike. Eventually, these spaces spread to neighborhoods in New York City (Grafe et al., 16).

Following World War II, coffee lounges emerged, serving as a symbol of the counter-cultures of this time. Initially, these establishments attracted artists and intellectuals through their delicate mix of the characteristics of traditional European coffeehouses and more modern designs. Common design elements include a spatial arrangement of lounge chairs, comfortable furniture, and bars. Additionally, large glass windows are common. Specialty drinks, including

lattes and cappuccinos, originated in coffee lounges (Grafe et al., 41). Although this sub-type developed to serve a particular target population, coffee lounges have become the inspiration for modern-day chains such as Starbucks. The coffee lounge is the most popular sub-type of cafés today.

The prime example of modernity of cafés rests in the cybercafé. This sub-type is useful to those living in a fast-paced, technological society. Drinks are prepared and served in an almost robotic fashion, matching the hurried lifestyle of the user while simultaneously making the experience less social. Customers typically frequent these cafés for work purposes, settling down at an individual table in front of a computer screen. This level of modernity has its drawbacks: "The screen-conveyed communication necessarily leads to an atomization of any feeling of community" (Grafe et al., 44). The only factor that cybercafés share in common with cafés of the past is its service of coffee. A price has been paid for adaptation to modern, technological times. While surely a symbol of the world's advancement and innovation, cybercafés lack the sense of community that has drawn customers to cafés throughout history.

Sub-types of cafés can be distinguished primarily upon the basis of user needs. While numerous categories exist, this section focused on the most salient differentiations. From its humble beginnings centuries ago, cafés have evolved with the times. Despite variations in target populations and design elements, cafés can be successful if they maintain the integrity of the shop. A sense of community and belongingness are crucial to the café culture experience.

The Desired Functions of Cafés: Intended Goals

Despite the wide range of sub-types of cafés, they share similar goals. As with any business, cost is a concern. Maximizing profits and minimizing costs is the ultimate goal. This desired outcome influences the construction and design of each store as well as the price of goods (Clark, 110).

The goals of cafés primarily revolve around the customer. Coffee shops would not be successful without meeting user needs and subsequently establishing a customer base. Satisfaction surveys found that customers place more emphasis on having a good experience rather than enjoying a good cup of coffee (Agrawal, 254). As a result, "experience selling" emerged as a priority in creating cafés. Many patrons spend considerable amounts of time in the establishment during their visit. As a result, comfort is key. Because customers have a range of individual preferences, it is essential to provide a neutral public space, which satisfies a number of needs (256). Designers must account for the fact that some customers hope to gather in groups while others desire personal space. Regardless, customers expect a certain level of privacy. Therefore, another goal of cafés is to create a sense of both personal space and privacy (Grafe et al., 95). The goals of cafés are centered primarily around the customer. They aim to establish a balance between meeting the universal desires of patrons, such as comfort and privacy, and accounting for individual differences in user needs, such as independent workspaces.

Specific design choices support cafés' ultimate goal of customer satisfaction. Atmosphere is of central concern. Depending on location and the target population, color, lighting, and music are manipulated (Agrawal, 254). As customers desire comfort when settling down in cafés, the
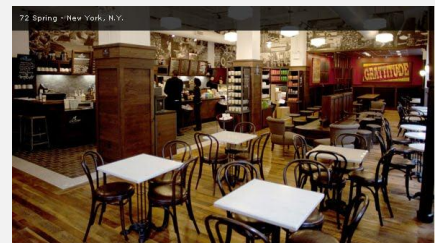
implementation of lounge chairs is beneficial. On the other hand, some prefer more rigid seating as they intend to focus on work. Therefore, a mix of furniture that can accommodate for different customers' wants and needs proves most successful. To account for privacy, the visual accessibility and acoustics of the space should be considered (Grafe et al., 94-95). Finally, designers can meet the goal of creating a sense of community and belongingness by taking into account the elements of homeyness and stimulation. The goals of cafés can most easily be met through detailed design layouts.

The Relationship Between Users and the Space: HER-Processes & Cafés

Human-Environment Relations (HER) processes play an important role in distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful cafés. Taking these factors into consideration allows designers to optimize customer satisfaction. Investigations of café functioning reveal four salient HER processes: homeyness, environmental stimulation, crowding, and privacy.

Homeyness:

Homeyness represents the latent, or symbolic, functions of a space. Elements of homeyness include being diminutive, variable, embracing, engaging, and aesthetic, as well as displaying mnemonics (Evans, January 26, 2011). While primarily emphasized in the home setting, homeyness should be displayed in cafés as it makes individuals feel more comfortable in their environment.

Customers spend a good deal of time in coffee shops and thus desire a sense of comfort and belongingness. In order to tap into the needs and wants of customers, Starbucks employees conducted surveys. The corporation was surprised by their findings: "The interviewees talked very little about the coffee itself, but quite a bit about feelings and atmosphere . . . they crave a sense of relaxation, warmth, and luxury" (Clark, 91-92). Additionally, in my own observations, characteristics of homeyness were evident in two successful cafés, Starbucks and the Maté Factor. In both of these establishments, a notable rapport existed between the employees and customers. An aesthetic feel was accomplished through the use of wooden furniture. These cafés were immediately welcoming, creating a sense of that the customers had just returned to a comforting and familiar setting.

Successful cafés have achieved homeyness through various design elements. Subdued colors, such as earth tones and pastels, and furniture made of natural materials create a calming

effect. A particularly innovative touch, closely resembling the home environment, involved ensuring that the shop smells of coffee being brewed (Clark, 103-04). The warm, domestic feel of a café contributes to its expression of homeyness.

Environmental Stimulation:

Environmental, or sensory, stimulation is an HER process associated with activating any of the five senses. It is important to provide a balance between sensory stimulation, which encourages cognition, and stimulus overload, which occurs when the amount of stimulation exceeds an individual's ability to deal with it (Evans, January 26, 2011). With such a fine line between the two, designers must consider this factor.

Visual and auditory stimulation have been associated with a number of cognitive and psychological benefits. Cafés began as intellectual gathering places (Oldenburg, 184). Consequently, customers may wish that coffee shops provide an environment that fosters mental stimulation. Stimulation in cafés can be achieved through the obvious senses of sight, hearing, and taste. However, Starbucks found a way to incorporate touch as well: "Customers could thrust their limbs into the product (coffee beans) and feel the same kinesthetic ecstasy. . ." (Clark, 103). This novel idea allows customers to learn about the product they are buying. Additionally, coffee aromas permeate the air. Starbucks even changes the music in order to reflect the natural progression of customers' moods throughout the day (104). Artwork was displayed on the walls of the Starbucks I observed, offering another opportunity for cognition.

A delicate balance exists between sensory deprivation and stimulus overload. A lack of stimulation can prove detrimental to well-being, while overload fosters stress and a feeling of

loss of control in the environment (Evans, January 26, 2011). Although customers may not be aware of the benefits of sensory stimulation in the café environment, the optimal amount of environmental stimulation increases customer satisfaction and well-being.

Crowding:

The HER process of crowding involves a subjective measure of feeling psychologically crowded. Perceived crowding affects mental health, physical health, and performance. Of the more serious consequences are stress, a feeling of loss of control, and social withdrawal (Evans, February 28, 2011). If customers are to enjoy their experience at a café, crowding must remain under control.

Yildirim and Akalin-Baskaya conducted a study in order to investigate the relationship between perceived crowding and satisfaction in a café setting. The researchers administered questionnaires to subjects in one of two conditions: high-density, consisting of 84 seats in the café, and low-density, consisting of 54 seats in the same space. The questionnaire tapped into customers' perceptions of the space, including items such as pleasant/depressing, uncrowded/crowded, and well-planned/poorly-planned (Yildirim & Akalin-Baskaya, 3413). Customers in the low-density condition reported a more positive perception of the café as measured by atmospheric attribute ratings (3415). This finding suggests that individuals show greater satisfaction with a café when the environment is less crowded.
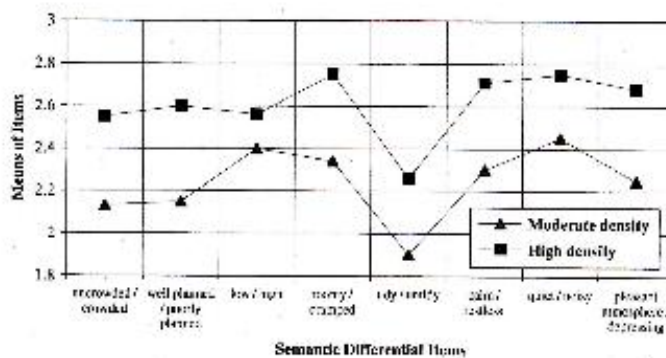

Fig. 2 Effect of seating densities on atmospheric attributes.

A major source of crowding in cafés is the location of the order line relative to the pick-up counter. An observation of Collegetown Bagels revealed the discomfort experienced by customers in response to crowding. Many individuals showed signs of social withdrawal, and some even left as a result of being too overwhelmed. One way to minimize crowding is by separating the lines where customers order and where they pick up their drinks (Clark, 100). Crowding in the café environment has detrimental impacts on customers, causing discomfort and stress. Reducing the amount of crowding enhances the customer's experience at a café.

Privacy:

Privacy depends on obtaining a balance between one's desired social interaction and his or her achieved interaction. Privacy functions to allow individuals to regulate social interaction and to isolate themselves (Evans, February 9, 2011). As noted during my observations, customers' primary activities include focusing on work and having personal conversations. As a result, customers expect a certain level of privacy in order to feel comfortable in these spaces.

Several design choices can increase privacy. The use of partitions and fewer entrances decreases permeability, allowing for greater privacy. Additionally, including a greater number of small tables and playing music in the shop meets privacy needs as well (Grafe et al., 18-20). Customers at cafés require a good deal of privacy, both auditory and visual. Ensuring these needs are met through design choices allows patrons to feel more secure in their environment.

Gaining Inspiration from Successful Cafés: Published Examples

When considering the redesign of Libe Café, investigating those cafés that have been particularly successful proves helpful. An exploration of the various sub-types of cafés led to the selection of two examples: MAK Café and Starbucks. By identifying the characteristics that have gained these coffee shops recognition, informed recommendations can be made in order to optimize the functioning of Libe Café.

MAK Café:

MAK Café, located in Vienna, Austria, was created in 1993 as an addition to the Museum fur Angewandle Kunst. MAK Café serves as an example of an optimally functioning coffeehouse. It has adapted appropriately to the changing times and to its surrounding environment. The café is known for providing a balance between Austrian tradition and modernity. MAK Café incorporates a number of successful design elements including high ceilings and windows that look out onto a garden. The windows provide environmental stimulation through views of nature. Additionally, design elements that would allow for

flexibility throughout the day were implemented. Moveable partitions allow the café to be divided into separate areas based on the location of the two bars. This element is typically used to differentiate between the formal and informal parts of the café. The modern, specialized furniture allows for further flexibility. The chairs offer an aesthetic quality as they are made of wood. They are also capable of being reclined based on the preference of the customer and are virtually weightless, permitting customers to move them easily (Grafe et al., 196-98). MAK Café proves to be a success through its balance between maintaining tradition and adapting to modern times.

Starbucks:

Starbucks, the world's largest coffee corporation, is the best example of a successful café. The creation of Starbucks significantly altered the café culture in the United States. From its humble beginnings as a small, privately-owned business in Seattle, the chain has grown exponentially throughout the nation and has spread internationally as well (Clark, 9-10). The creators of Starbucks borrowed elements from cafés in Europe. However, today Starbucks serves a model for coffee shops around the world.

Over time, Starbucks has made design changes that have increased its success. The mellow music that plays throughout the day is loud enough to mask the private conversations of customers but not loud enough to be overwhelming. Additionally, studies of customers led to the creation of a natural progression of the music to match varying moods at different times of the day (Clark, 104). The aesthetic feel serves as an application of homeyness, involving neutral earth tones and furniture made of natural materials. Environmental stimulation in the form of sight, sound, and smell are offered in Starbucks through displays of artwork on the walls, the sounds of specialty drinks being prepared, and the aroma of coffee. Starbucks allows for flexibility in the environment, meeting a range of customer needs. This is best seen in the variety of seating options. Customers are provided with the choice between small tables with wooden chairs, optimal for independent work, or comfortable lounge chairs placed around coffee tables, catering to those who wish to relax with their friends (103-06). Starbucks, the world's largest coffee corporation, serves as the model of a successful café, accounting for numerous HER processes through its deliberate design.

The Redesign of Libe Café: Recommendations

Libe Café is frequented by members of the Cornell community. Centrally located, the café becomes crowded between classes. Although it is among the more popular spots on campus, Libe Café presents a number of problems in its design. Redesigning this space would increase customer satisfaction and allow for the optimal functioning of the users of the space.

The HER process of crowding applies to Libe Café. There is typically a high-density of individuals throughout the day, but crowding grows to an unmanageable extent at certain times. As has been discussed, crowding is associated with numerous detrimental effects, such as increased stress as well as decreased well-being and task performance. Crowding is a serious problem in the order and drink service lines.

Privacy issues arise when considering the seating design. The couch area forces a great amount of social interaction, likely unwanted, upon customers. Each seat is directly beside another, and some are back-to-back. This design denies customers auditory and visual privacy. In order to alleviate these problems, I have made four recommendations:

1. **Change the shape and location of the order and pick-up counter –** By creating an L-shaped counter, customers can take the path they are used to, but reach the counter faster and more directly. Additionally, this will free up space by the pick-up counter, allowing those who have already purchased their goods to avoid running into the crowd waiting for their drinks.

2. **Move the fridges and food stands closer to the main entrance –** Currently, there is a considerable amount of wasted space in Libe Café. Rather than place the "employees-

only" table directly next to the main entrance, the fridges can be moved further away from the cash register. This would allow customers more time to consider their options prior to paying. The problem with the fridges emerged because customers have to step out of line momentarily to select a product. Without the turn at the end of this path leading to the cashier, this line will always run parallel to the food and beverages, allowing for greater ease when selecting.

3. **Move the self-serve coffee stand –** The current location of this stand interferes with the pick-up area, leading to greater crowding and less efficiency. There is some open space by the milk and toaster stand. By placing the coffee stand here, there would be less of an overlap between the pick-up and self-serve areas and consequently less crowding. Additionally, the new location of the self-serve area is more cohesive with the location of the rest of the coffee additives, such as milk and sugar.

4. **Change layout of seating –** Lack of both auditory and visual privacy is a problem evident in the couch area of Libe Café. I recommend integrating the table and couch seating to provide more variety. By arranging the couch seats in smaller groups, they can be utilized by groups of people rather than by strangers who are forced to work side-by-side and back-to-back. This change would afford people more privacy.

5. **Implement more aesthetic furniture –** Libe Café lacks a feeling of homeyness. By changing the furniture to tables and chairs made of natural materials, the environment will have a more aesthetic feel. Customers will have a greater feeling of comfort.

The fact that Libe Café is constantly packed suggests that customers may not be aware of the serious downfalls regarding its design. The primary issues regarding this space concern

crowding in the order and pick-up line and lack of privacy in the seating area. While they likely

would not solve all of the problems presented in this establishment, these recommendations

would work to alleviate some of the incongruence in Libe Café.
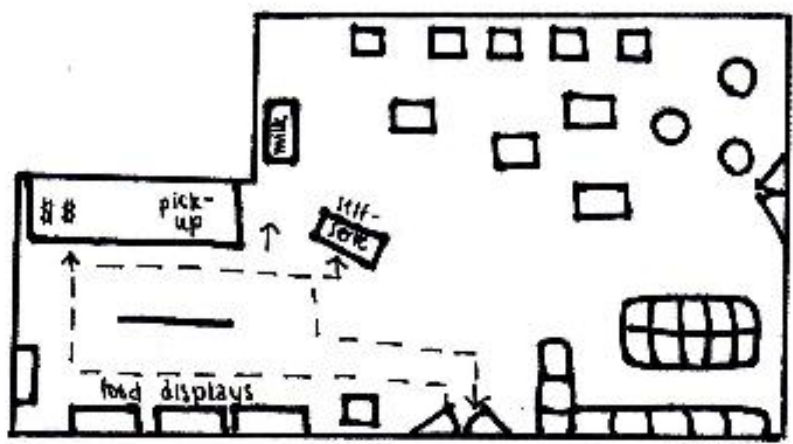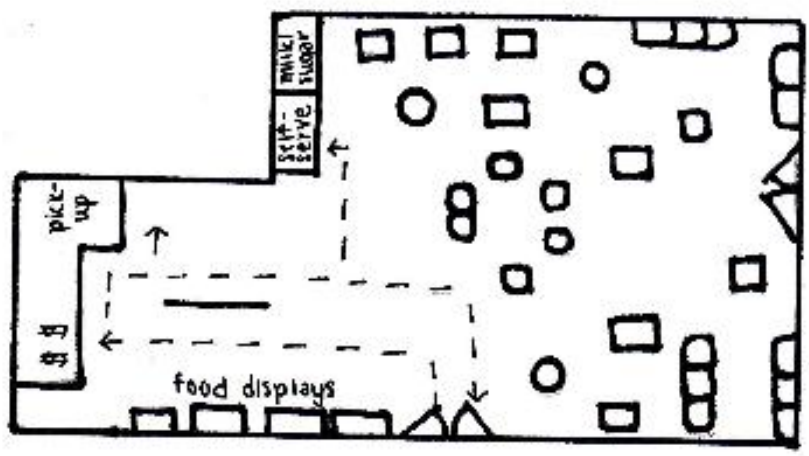
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