

Notes from our 'Open Space' Workshop on Informal Community Facilities / Meeting Places

David Randall, Coordinator, Vital Kingston

Table 12 debated the question 'What can we do to make sure that our community has enough places to go for informal interaction and to generate community spirit'? There were five of us in Table 12; Maria, Caroline, Marilyn, David F (Fleming) and David R (me).

Marilyn introduced us to the successful work of the 'Kingston Market House Festival' held in April 2008 (see <http://e-voice.org.uk/markethousefestival/>) and to the work of Anu van Warmelo who won an 'Unltd' award for the 'Blitz Café' (a meeting place for the community and an information service for environmental issues, along with a library for gardening and ecological references).

David R explained the concept of Third Places as developed in the writings of urban sociologists such as Ray Oldenburg, i.e. not home, not office, but someplace *else*, out in the community where regular interaction can occur. David said that there were a number of perspectives on this, economic, cultural, historical and international.

Maria spoke of her interpretation of Third Place as an artist, as a space that allows for creativity as well as a café culture. She also referred to 'non-places', a term coined by Anthropologist, Marc Augé. Augé's "non-places", an aspect of *supermodernity*, are places of transience that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as "places". Examples of a non-place would be a motorway, a hotel room, an airport or a supermarket.

Marilyn recalled that when she commuted to work her commuter train became a Third Place. People came to know each other and they would converse and enjoy a travellers' camaraderie. Marilyn also recommended Kate Fox's book *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* for the insights that it could bring.

Caroline said that, unfortunately she no longer felt safe travelling with strangers, she wouldn't deliberately look for travelling companions to converse with.

David F remarked that it was impossible to consider the issue of interaction and community spirit without considering Robert Putnam's concerns about the decline of civil engagement, as written about in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000), and about the importance of social capital. Social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. The book also explores the consequences of a decline in social capital and the benefits enjoyed by those communities with a substantial stock of it.

David F and Marilyn debated the unifying and organising role of women in strong communities, David deploring the reduced influence of women since the late 19th/early 20th centuries and Marilyn agreeing that in her personal experience there has been little evidence of that.

Exploring opportunities to create and protect informal meeting places in Kingston, Table 12 also discussed the following:

- open spaces with school playgrounds,
 - making a proposal to Kingston First about the use of the Market House, possibly including an art gallery,
 - providing better signage about events going on in the town,
 - campaigning against the closure of local amenities like post offices,
 - loyalty card schemes to encourage independent local business,
 - providing alternatives to consuming alcohol as the reason for going out and thereby combating binge drinking,
- and,
- encouraging people to invest in community places as their vested interest works in favour of sustainability.