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Exploring university third places: The Aškerc Street university campus in Ljubljana (Slovenia)

This article examines the potential of multifunctional university public spaces, or "third places", with a particular focus on their role as catalysts for social interaction and urban development in the academic environment. It studies the University of Ljubljana's Aškerc Street campus, which is undergoing complete urban regeneration. After identifying all the specific third places, the article shows why third places are important for various stakeholders (students and professors) and presents their suggestions on how to improve the third places on the campus. The findings show that, although university spaces are essential for academic and social activities, they have significant design and use limitations. It shows that students and faculty members frequently make use of third places on and off campus to study, work, relax, and socialize, and for other informal gatherings, and that there is a clear need to provide more flexible, accessible, and non-commercial spaces on the campus.

Keywords: university campus, public spaces, third places, multifunctional spaces, urban development, Ljubljana

1   Introduction

In urban planning, the long-standing model of zoning cities by specific functions is increasingly regarded as outdated. The concept of a mixed-use approach is gaining prominence (Mlinar, 2005: 32). Mixed-use planning involves creating multifunctional spaces that serve a variety of purposes simultaneously. These spaces facilitate local social interactions and act as urban habitats that support diverse forms of social organization (Brandt & Vejre, 2004). In the context of universities, these multifunctional spaces align closely with evolving educational paradigms that emphasize collaborative learning, interdisciplinary research, and community outreach (Harkavy & Puckett, 1994; Jang, 2020). Consequently, university campuses are intended to integrate a multitude of functions, including educational (Shepherd et al., 2017), social (Fernandez-Esquinas & Pinto, 2014), recreational (Green & Gonsoulin, 1997), sustainable (Tudorie et al., 2020), and even commercial (Smith, 2004). Today, there is growing recognition of the need for spaces that are adaptive and flexible, as well as capable of meeting the diverse needs of the urban and academic community (den Heijer & Magdaniel, 2018). At the core of the shift is the understanding that the physical and social infrastructure of cities and universities is inseparable (Zupančič-Strojan, 1998: 75). This requires multifunctional spaces that can seamlessly accommodate a mix of activities, interactions, and services. Such spaces act as an interface between the university and the city, where flows (human, material, and information) converge, and they must be designed to integrate the university environment seamlessly into the city's overall design (Dong et al., 2023).

In line with the concept of university multifunctional spaces, several researchers (e.g., Whitchurch, 2018; Smith et al., 2021; Veles, 2022) have adopted Soja's (1996) notion of "thirdspace" to describe the evolving work, roles, and interaction spaces in the university context. These third spaces facilitate transformative change in academic practices, supporting openness, critical exchange, and diverse perspectives (Soja, 1996; Veles, 2024). However, many researchers investigate the socio-spatial dynamics of universities through the lens of Oldenburg's concept of "third places". These are distinct from the private spaces of one's home and the professional environment of the workplace. They are public spaces for social interaction and engagement. Oldenburg (1997) posits that third places, such as coffee shops, enhance quality of life by offering rest, social interaction, and emotional relief. Similarly, university third places have been shown to benefit students and staff psychologically (Lee & Houston, 2024).

This article examines the transformative role of university third places in urban environments, investigating how these hybrid spaces facilitate community engagement. These spaces are critical connectors between academia and the city, serving to bridge social and spatial divides and thereby influencing both educational outcomes and urban vitality. This study focuses on the campus on Aškerc Street (Sln. *Aškerčeva cesta*) in Ljubljana and investigates the influence of strategic spatial design on social and academic interaction. It offers both empirical and theoretical insights to illustrate how well-integrated academic and community spaces contribute to the creation of a more cohesive and resilient urban landscape (Healey, 2008). Furthermore, this research offers actionable recommendations for university administrators, urban planners, and policymakers seeking to foster inclusive and adaptive campuses.

2   Theoretical background

In reimagining how spaces serve communities, Harvey (2001) argues that an alternative spatial paradigm must be rooted in a deep understanding of how social structures shape and are shaped by collective consciousness. Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space extends this by showing how different social systems, including academic communities, produce different spatial forms. He establishes the dialectical relationship between urban spaces and social relations (Lefebvre, 1996), framing urban spaces not as passive backdrops but as dynamic participants in social processes that both shape and are shaped by the interactions within them (Lefebvre, 1991). His concept of place is deeply tied to lived experience, encapsulated in the notion of "lived space", which encompasses the personal, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of space. This aligns with the broader understanding of place as space imbued with meaning through human experience.

Soja builds upon Lefebvre's concept of lived space with his notion of thirdspace, which integrates the tangible and experiential dimensions of social existence. Soja's concept of thirdspace transcends the traditional boundaries between public and private, and between work and leisure, creating hybrid spaces that facilitate dynamic interactions (Soja, 1996). This concept is particularly pertinent in the context of multifunctional spaces in contemporary urban environments, where universities are integrated into the fabric of the city to foster the growth of vibrant urban centres (Bugarič, 2009). Such integrated spaces, accessible to both the academic community and the public, foster a sense of belonging and collaboration by hosting a diverse range of activities. By blending university spaces with community spaces, these areas facilitate active exchange of ideas and community engagement, thereby enriching both academic and urban life (Healey, 2008).

Soja's (1996) conceptions of thirdspace and other notions of multifunctional spaces or hybrid spaces present dynamics of sharing and engagement between people from diverse professions, qualifications, and experiences that are similar to Oldenburg's (1989) concept of third places. Oldenburg describes third places as "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (1989: 16). He outlines the functions that third places serve: a place to bring a community together, to welcome newcomers, to find individuals similar to oneself, to assemble, where individuals become familiar, for community diversity, for fun and entertainment, for intellectual discussions (Oldenburg, 1997), and often to use as an office (Waxman et al., 2007).

Moreover, Oldenburg outlines the importance of third places on university campuses, which in his opinion should "find a way to increase learning around and outside the classrooms" (1997: 90). In his view, campus planners, deans, and faculty members should understand the critical importance of the specialness of "college places", which are or should be places to hang out, and good places to meet, talk, and linger. "Colleges should pay greater attention to places for talk: residence hall suites with a common room, student lounges, dining halls and snack bars, bookstores, local taverns and pizza parlors, outdoor cafes, conversation nooks, and gardens outdoors on the campus grounds and indoors too, student centers, generous lobbies in all classroom buildings, the faculty club, conversation pits in the library, benches in the classroom halls and along outdoor walkways, fraternity and sorority houses, television rooms, and games rooms for Ping-Pong, billiards, and card-playing" (Oldenburg, 1997: 93–94). For a successful third place on campus, Oldenburg sets three parameters: they should be easy to get to, provide food and drink, and have a design that invites students in and allows them to linger.

Several studies have focused on third places on university campuses and expanded Oldenburg's (1997) findings. For instance, Banning et al. (2010) examined students' perspectives on third places. They analysed the users of these places, their location and typology, and frequency of visits. Most student activities in third places were associated with social interaction (socializing, conversing, eating and drinking, reading, and studying). Interestingly, the study showed that the vast majority of the students found a third place off campus, especially at various nearby cafés. The study further revealed that third places are important for students because they stimulate social interaction and discourse, and at the same time they contribute to student satisfaction, student development, stress reduction, and institutional growth.

Similarly, a study by Waxman et al. (2007) showed that the great majority of students indicated that their favourite third place was off campus (especially coffee shops and restaurants). The main reasons for visiting their third places were socializing, hanging out, relaxation, eating and drinking, "getting away", and working or studying. The atmosphere, location, and opportunity for socialization were listed as important features when students chose a third place. Moreover, it was possible to create a list of third places with regard to students' preferences: number one was coffee shops (the most popular), second restaurants, and then bookstores, the student union building, recreational centres, and the student services centre.

In literature, the most frequently studied third places on campuses were libraries and coffee shops. The university library is the core of the campus and functions as a community foundation as well as a third place (Lawsen, 2004). Traditional university libraries are usually open long hours and are easily accessible to all university stakeholders. They are multi-functional facilities where every member of the community is welcome, and they have most features of Oldenburg's third place. The idea of students relaxing and socializing between classes challenges some views of the role of a more traditional library, which should be a quiet place with no food or drinks allowed. (Future) designers should aim to include "louder" library coffee shops or common spaces in their library plans but at the same time provide quiet library areas (Waxman et al., 2007).

In addition, coffee shops were indicated as a preferred place to rest and for leisure time. A study by Lee (2022) also identified places to eat and drink as the most preferred among the various university third places. Similarly, a study by Banning et al. (2006) indicated that coffee shops are students' most popular third place. Modern cafés do not primarily support interactions between strangers but offer space for relaxing, working, and conversation, including through digital interfaces. Conversation is still the main activity, but many customers use their electronic devices together with face-to-face discussions. People's connection to physical spaces has transformed because of the internet, online conversations, and social media. Therefore, Oldenburg's original characteristics of third places have changed because modern culture is interwoven with communication technology (Lukito & Xenia, 2017).

3 Research aims and methodology

Using Oldenburg's (1989) concept of third places as a theoretical framework, and the expanded categories of third places in the university campuses environment (Oldenburg, 1997), this study investigated and explored third places on the Aškerc Street campus. The research questions were: 1) Which are
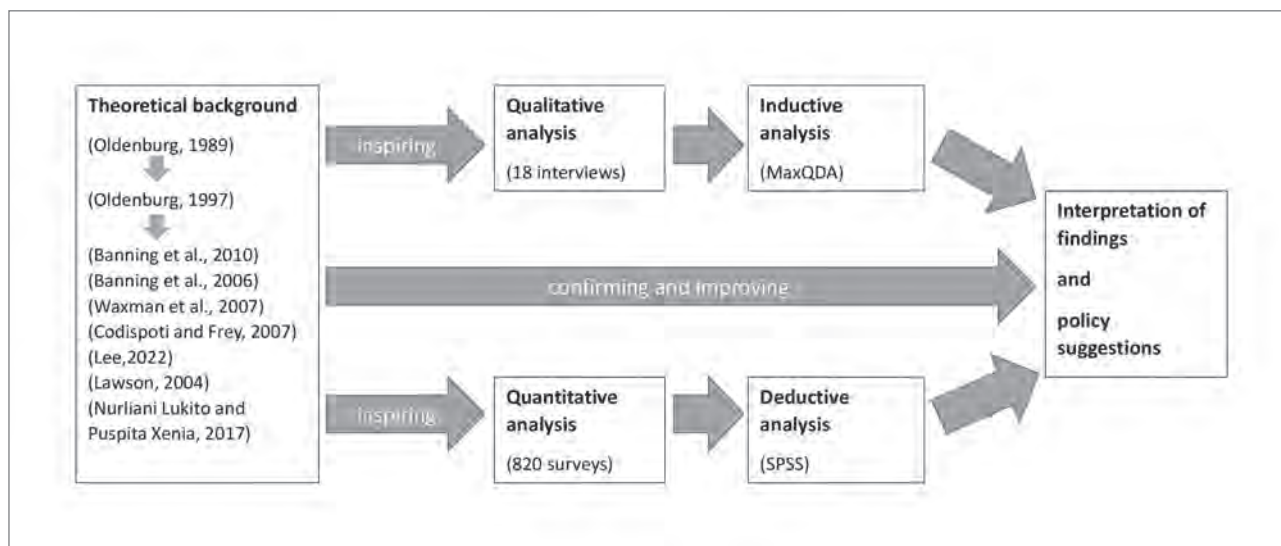
Figure 1: Methodological processes (illustration: authors).

the third places of stakeholders (students and professors) on the campus and where are they located (social mapping)? 2) Why are third places important for various stakeholders? 3) What are the stakeholders' suggestions for improving these third places?

The research aim was to verify whether Oldenburg's (1997) findings regarding third places at universities, which were further developed by Banning et al. (2010), Waxman et al. (2007), and other researchers (see Figure 1), have been manifested (and how) on the campus. An analysis of the results made it possible to provide an overview of third places on the campus, acknowledge their impact, and offer some policy suggestions for future (and current) university campuses.

This study's data were collected as part of the project Concept for Sustainable Spatial Development of the University of Ljubljana (ULTRA 2022–25). The study employs a mixed methods research approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods. The use of mixed methods is appropriate for this study because it allows the integration of diverse perspectives and data types, thereby enhancing the depth and breadth of the analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

For the qualitative part, data were obtained through eighteen interviews; eight with students and ten with professors at faculties on the campus. The analysis of the interviews incorporated additional raw data interpretations to identify and understand the nature of third places.

All the interviewees were asked the same semi-structured and open-ended questions. The interviews were analysed using MaxQDA 2020 software. Coding was performed using the code–category–theme analytical approach for qualitative data analysis. Data were assembled and organized with particular main themes and sub-themes in three procedural steps: 1) open coding, 2) axial coding, and 3) selective coding. The first step used open coding because a priori coding was not adequate due to the restrictiveness of predefined codes. The analysis was performed as an inductive open coding process, starting with identifying relevant conceptions and initiating the first step of code relation and structure categories. In the second step (axial coding), similar codes were further grouped into categories, and sets of categories were assigned to major themes. The themes referred to certain prototypes of categories of third places. In the third phase (selective coding), the analysis reshaped the acknowledged categories by examining coherent patterns. The categories were redefined, and the meaning and connection between them was reformulated. Subsequently it was possible to analyse and (eventually) confirm the typology of third places, and at the same time add new third places and create new categories (e.g., suggestions for improving third places).

The quantitative part was based on a survey of 820 students attending the three faculties on Aškerc Street: the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering, and the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film, and Television. The survey investigated the habits and needs of students in the area to facilitate future architectural and spatial planning. The survey mostly contained close-ended questions with some options for open-ended suggestions. SPSS software was used for the analysis and statistical processing. The data will be available in the Social Science Data Archive, ensuring transparency and supporting future research.
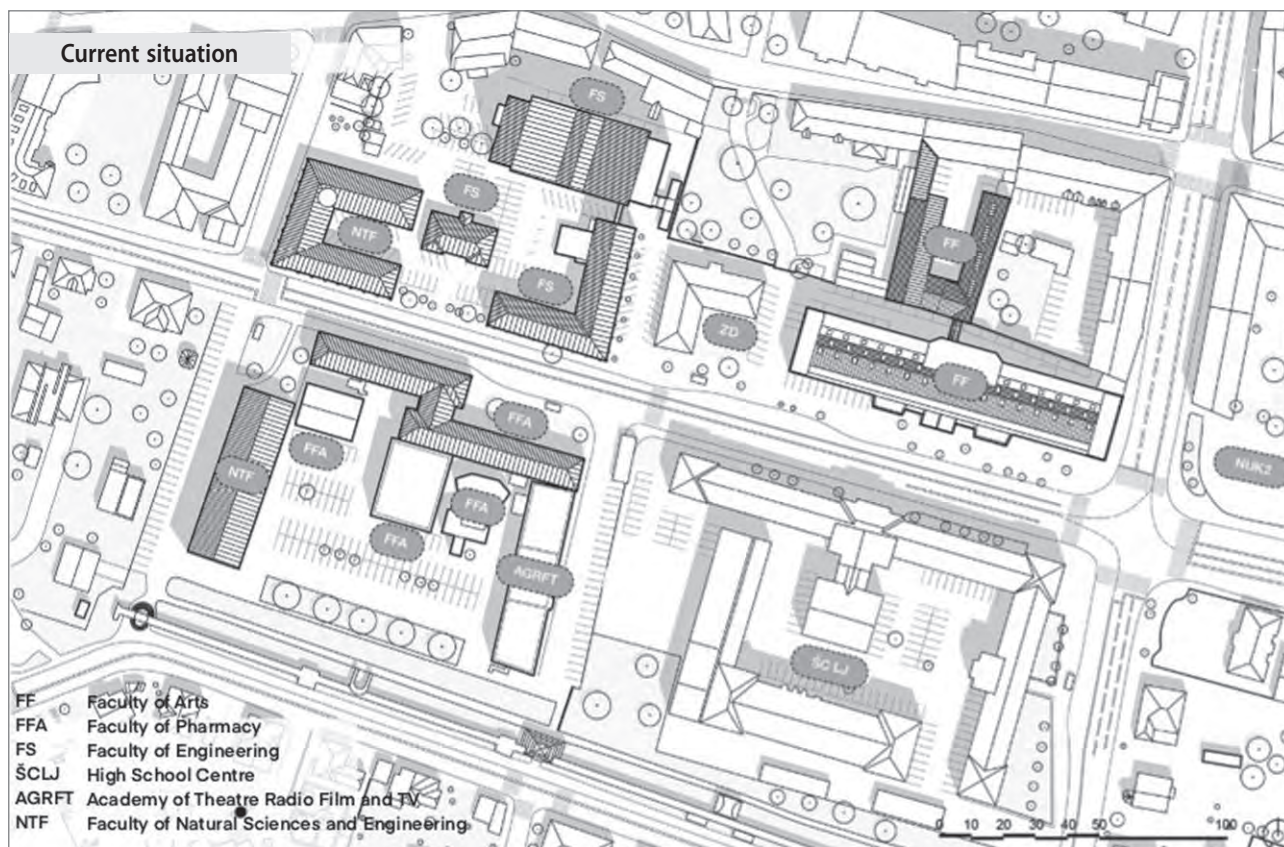
Current situation

FF	Faculty of Arts
FFA	Faculty of Pharmacy
FS	Faculty of Engineering
ŠCLJ	High School Centre
AGRFT	Academy of Theatre Radio Film and TV
NTF	Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering

Figure 2: Current layout of the area (source: Sadar et al., 2024).

4 Case study

4.1 The campus

The University of Ljubljana is engaged in an ambitious project to redevelop the Aškerc Street area, designated as Campus Centre. This project is one of the university's largest, and it includes relocating the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and the Faculty of Pharmacy to new modern facilities.

Relocations are expected to finish by 2027, allowing for the transformation and renovation of existing university buildings. Furthermore, the renovation will encompass the establishment of a central technical library, which will also include all the departmental libraries that are now part of the central humanities library at the Faculty of Arts (University of Ljubljana, 2024). This will result in the creation of a shared space that will facilitate enhanced study and research conditions, while also fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between the various faculties. The location, in an urban area between Foerster Park and the Roman Wall, has the potential to be enhanced. The outdoor spaces are currently neglected; the green pockets are untidy and the area is largely dominated by cars. The redevelopment plan includes creating green spaces and traffic-calming measures, which will enhance accessibility and quality of life in this area of the city.

The Campus Centre project has broader objectives than merely addressing the university's space issues. It is about creating a flexible and open academic space that will be connected to the city through public space and shared programmes. This includes sustainable construction with a zero-carbon footprint, renewable energy, and improved accessibility and mobility. In this way, the redevelopment will make a significant contribution to a better cityscape and quality of life in Ljubljana's city centre (University of Ljubljana, 2024).

4.2 Qualitative analysis

Through the qualitative analysis of interviews with students and professors, it was possible to identify and analyse various third places and explore their essence and significance. This section presents the most popular third places as identified by students and professors.

4.2.1 Cafés and restaurants

The interviews indicate that cafés and restaurants are the most important and most popular third places for university stu-
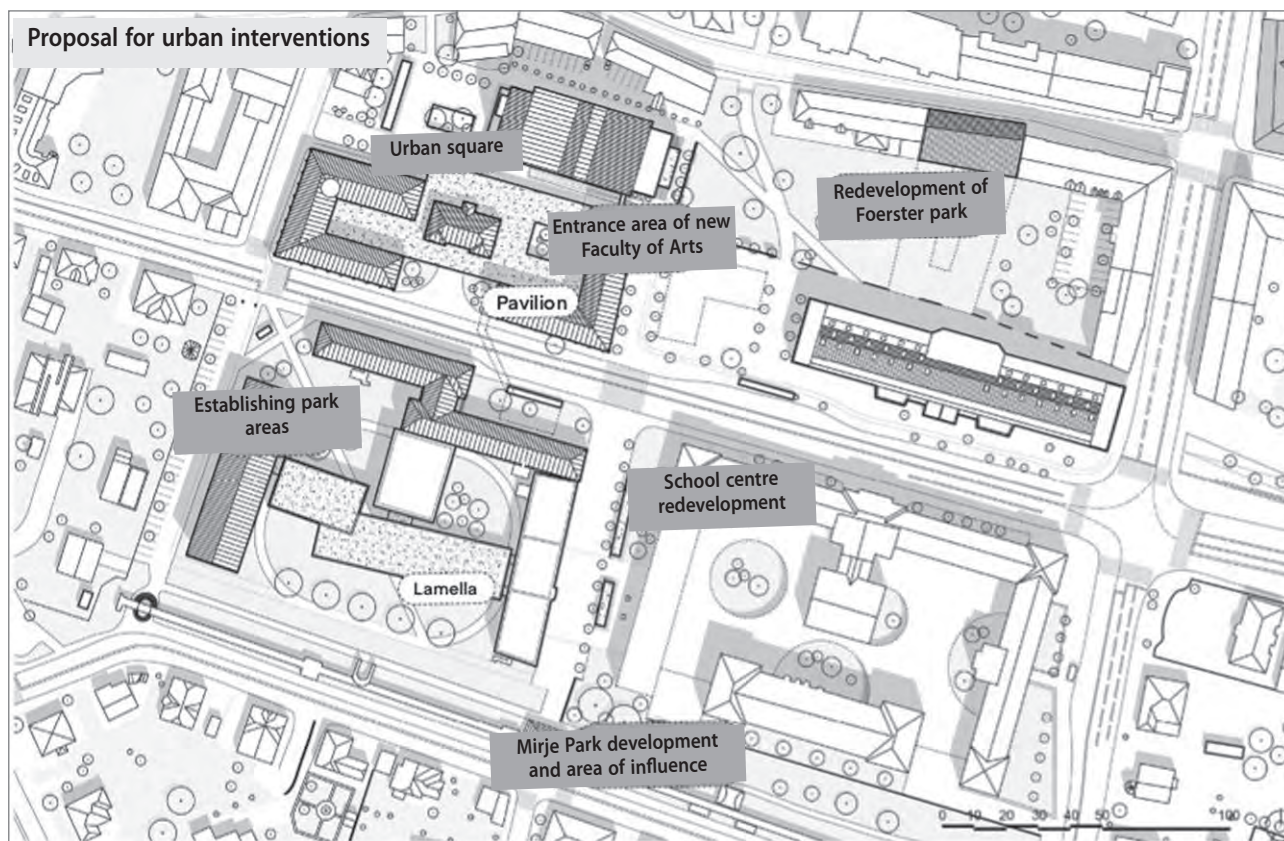
Figure 3: Desired state of buildings and grounds in the area (source: Sadar et al., 2024).

dents and professors. They see them as true social hubs of the campus, although they are mostly located off campus. Students and academic staff meet in cafés and restaurants for various reasons beyond eating and drinking; for example:

- Spending free-time between various lessons or appointments: "you have big gaps in between and then you either hang out in cafés or go eat" (Student 1).
- Working and studying: "sometimes . . . you go to a café to write your papers or somewhere similar" (Student 1); "If I'm doing some group work we use these cafés I mentioned; Semafor, Living Room, Foerster" (Student 2); "We usually go to some cafés for meetings and we don't stay in other faculties" (Professor 1).
- Meeting friends and colleagues, and socializing: "Employees and students also meet a lot in cafés where they offer coffee or lunch. I find that this is quite popular" (Professor 2); "As for socializing: the cafés behind the Faculty of Arts are very popular" (Professor 1).

Both students and professors noticed that the university cafeteria K16 is somewhat more frequented by professors: "I know some professors go to K16. I'm certain they do" (Student 3); "Then you can have some time in between to go for a coffee, and that's in our local café that we have inside the faculty. . . . So I personally don't go outside the faculty" (Professor 3); "We use our café K16 quite a lot for socializing or short meetings" (Professor 3); "I often go to K16 for a coffee" (Professor 4).

The interviewees noticed that during peak hours there is an acute problem of accessibility to all cafés and restaurants because they are very busy: "It's crowded then and you have to go to three different places to find a place to eat" (Student 3); "the surrounding cafés are so busy that you can't get a place" (Student 2).

4.2.2 Libraries

Libraries also proved to be important third places for university students. They use libraries for working or studying: "I prefer home . . . because there's no space at the faculty and, if not at home, at the library. Not at the faculty" (Student 4); "As far as I know, most people who go to study don't go to study at the faculty, they go to the Central Technical Library because there's no space at the faculty" (Student 3).

They strongly feel the lack of a "not silent" working/studying/meeting room at the library for group work: "at least there are these reading rooms and libraries, but you have to be quiet there" (Student 6); "and it's happened to me many times that I've been looking in vain for a place at Faculty of Arts, . . .

where I can sit down with my classmates, and we can study together, and we can talk because there's just no place where that can happen" (Student 6).

On the Aškerc Street campus, there are small department libraries and two main large libraries in the vicinity (within a ten-minute walk): the Central Technical Library and the National and University Library. The main problem, especially for department libraries, is the lack of space: "There is no space in the library at the faculty. There's only one chair in our [department] library" (Student 3); "the Central Technical Library library can be really busy. If our faculty had its own library, you could go there" (Student 3); "in the department libraries there's no space to study" (Student 4); "Libraries and reading rooms have not flourished – this is because of a shortage of space. Students . . . don't spend time there because the libraries are quite small" (Professor 1).

4.2.3 Specific university locations

Several students and professors think the campus has no spaces in the faculties where it would be possible to meet and work together: "There's a lack of public spaces – and spaces in and around the faculty – that would be a good place to meet, either informally or for meetings" (Professor 3); "There's no space for hanging out" (Professor 5). However, there are several limited university-owned indoor and outdoor spaces or locations on the campus that are somehow utilized and perceived as third places.

4.2.3.1 Indoor university locations

Apart from the aforementioned K16 faculty bar, the most popular indoor university third places are the various department corridors with benches, classrooms, coffee machine areas, and an autonomous student area called K17.

- Department corridors: "And the benches on each floor are nice too. You just sit down and eat"; "Then, when the gaps between classes are bigger, we just go and hang out in the hall" (Student 3); "At the faculty we have some tables or areas at the end of the corridor. And sometimes we hang out there with our classmates to work on a project or wait for lectures"; "Then we work at these tables at the faculty" (Student 2); "and we have one of these makeshift benches at the end of the corridors, where students and also some staff members usually gather and get together"; "And then we work at these tables at the faculty" (Professor 5).
- Classrooms and special "reading rooms": "For hanging out, we have two classrooms, which I feel are really rarely used. Theoretically we have a reading room, although I didn't even know that . . . . And I never went in there

because it's in the basement and there's only one classroom" (Student 3); "there was a classroom down in the basement that was like a reading room and you could go in there" (Student 2).
- Coffee machine areas: "Or maybe downstairs at the coffee machine. . . . That's where you mostly meet other people because we don't really have any space for food" (Student 7); "I go for a coffee with my colleagues, and then maybe at the snack vending machine" (Professor 1).
- K17 autonomous student area: "Now the students have some small spaces, which have been arranged for them in recent years, so they can retreat" (Professor 3); "the K17 autonomous student area. . . can accommodate just two groups of friends. But if you see that a group is there, you don't want to bother them with your group or vice versa. If somebody is loud there, you won't go there to study. This place isn't advertised. There's just no chance of hearing about it from anywhere" (Student 3); "we go to K16 and K17 because anyway these are common spaces that are meant for socializing and talking, even though maybe we would like to have more peace" (Student 6).

4.2.3.2 Outdoor university locations

Outdoor areas in the immediate vicinity of the faculties are very important student hubs that serve as third places for students and staff. The interviewees especially highlight the importance of the courtyards, patios, stairs, and benches in front of the faculties: "the main stairs in front of the Faculty of Arts has benches nearby, it seems to me that there is such a gathering place . . . . I think, I would say, probably practical reasons, like the fact that there are benches . . . there is a place sheltered from the rain" (Student 6); "I think these benches in front of the faculty function very well – that's where the students gather, for example" (Professor 1); "as for outside the building, I would say that the most common gathering point is just the stairs of the faculty, which is somehow the most friendly" (Professor 5); "the stairs . . . are also a meeting point, from where paths then separate. I mean we go our own way. It's that last common meeting point, . . . where we can have a quick little chat or something" (Professor 4).

4.2.4 Parks

Parks and green areas near the faculties, even if they are small because of the highly urbanized location, are valuable and attractive third places:

- To meet and "hang out" (a social hub): "The Foerster Garden, where professors and students mostly gather, because there isn't much space inside our faculty" (Student 4); "Looking at this Foerster Garden next to the faculty, it's quite lively in nice weather" (Professor 3).

- For occasional events: "when we have the Liberak book fair in May and then there are lots of different events. So that's one such place the faculty takes advantage of" (Professor 3); "Foerster Park . . . is also a place for such events" (Professor 3).
- For outdoor lectures: "the professors hold some of their seminars outside. Let's say they go out back, where there is a quiet corner. I've had seminars in Špica Park, for example, or in the Botanical Garden . . . . We've had them, it's a little more pleasant environment" (Professor 3).

4.2.5 Proposals for current and future third places

Students and professors suggested several ideas for how to improve working and social life on campus that could eventually create new third places or improve existing ones. They recommend or would like to have places:

- To study, work, or just hang out, when they have "free hours": "When we have free hours, we tend to hang out in our hall, where there aren't many desks . . . . As far as I know, most of the people who go somewhere to study don't go to the faculty, they go to the Central Technical Library because there's no space at the faculty" (Student 3); "to have one big, nice place where you could actually study. It would be nice, yes" (Student 4); "Well, we go to [a café or restaurant], basically also to work on projects . . . . So it would be really good to have something like that closer, for example" (Student 5); "A social hub like that would be nice because then also outside the working spaces people can meet and talk in a more informal way" (Professor 6); "There's a lack of public spaces in and around the faculty, which would be a good place for socializing, or for informal meetings" (Professor 3).
- That should be free to use (not commercial): "I feel like there's a lack of spaces where you don't have to buy coffee or eat. I miss a space to just either hang out or basically to do group work" (Student 1); "Yeah, especially this, this kind of space where you can spend time for free or you can study because in any case you have to go somewhere for coffee, and you have to pay for coffee right away . . . . That's what's missing – in general, a warm space where young people can just stay for free and that you can either study or socialize" (Student 4).
- That are big enough or not crowded: "the surrounding cafés are so busy you can't get a seat. If these cafés are too busy, we mostly go elsewhere" (Student 2); "so there are no big spaces where we can hang out or study, for example, so we definitely don't have enough space" (Student 5).
- That offer a separate space, where it would be possible to talk and work in groups ("not just silent rooms"): "It would be better if the space were laid out without the ob-

ligation that you have to just study silently" (Student 1); "Another interesting question is where I can go if I have a Zoom meeting where I can talk out loud" (Student 3).

In addition, students suggest some specific improvements to enhance the campus third place experience. They recommend opening the classrooms when they are not in use: "The fact is that we should not be in the classrooms if we do not have lessons there . . . sometimes the security guards can bust you if you're in a classroom when you shouldn't be or when you don't have classes" (Student 3); "[It's a major limitation] that the classrooms are closed. That we can't access some things freely on the faculty, which are available. You have to make special arrangements" (Student 7).

They also recommend creating a bigger and more relevant student association club where it is possible to meet and to be creative as a student community because the current student hub, K17, is too small and overcrowded: "we don't have any clubs or anything at the Faculty of Arts . . . so yeah, that would be really good, . . . what we have at the faculty, for example, is this autonomous student space, which is basically for doing whatever, but it's so small that most of the time it's completely packed because people are studying there or doing group assignments" (Student 1).

4.3 Quantitative analysis

Table 1 illustrates the distinction between two groups of students: those that visit the faculty premises solely on days when they have obligations and those that visit the premises even when they are not obliged to do so. The results indicate that approximately one-quarter (26.6%) of students visit the faculty when they have no obligations there. This suggests that a relatively high proportion of students move around the faculty's premises out of their own interests and use these spaces as quasi-public spaces that are open to use to its members. Furthermore, the table classifies the responses according to the reasons for using the campus, differentiating between curriculum-based obligations and informal use. This aligns with the concept of third places.

This was followed by manual categorization of the open-ended responses to Question C: "Because you selected the answer 'Even on days when there are no commitments', please indicate the reason for your visit to the premises." This involved exporting the data, categorizing them in a spreadsheet, and re-importing them into SPSS for further analysis. This allowed for a structured analysis of qualitative data with conversion into quantitative categories. The participants were assigned to the following categories on multiple occasions due to the particular nuances of their responses. Most responses (66.67%)

Table 1: Crosstabulation of Questions A and B (%).

		Question A: Please choose the reason that is most important to you for going to your faculty:					
		Lectures	Recitation classes / seminars	Socializing with peers	Research / independent study	Other	Total
Question B: When do you visit the faculty and other facilities (libraries, laboratories, etc.)?	Only when classes are scheduled	25.6	43.3	2.0	1.0	1.4	73.4
	Even on days when there are no commitments	9.5	10.3	1.7	2.5	2.5	26.6
Total (n = 706)		35.1	53.7	3.7	3.5	4.0	100

Source: authors.

Table 2: Question D "How often do you use the common areas at the faculty and the areas near the faculty when you don't have commitments in your schedule?" (%).

Spaces	Frequency				
	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
Study spaces (research rooms, laboratories, seminar rooms)	35.0	19.9	15.2	20.5	9.3
Library and reading rooms	12.8	24.7	28.2	27.0	7.3
Cafés	12.9	11.6	23.4	35.0	17.1
Outdoor spaces close to the faculty (public areas and related outdoor furniture: chairs, benches, tables, etc.)	18.5	19.9	16.2	26.9	18.5

Note: The analysis included only 143 respondents that indicated they visit the faculty even without scheduled commitments. Source: authors.

show that students primarily use university facilities for studying and research, including thesis work and exam preparation. Library use accounts for 37.84%, and only 7.21% of responses reflect attendance at lectures. Group work and projects engage 15.32% of respondents, and socializing accounts for 14.41%, reflecting the role of these spaces in community building. Administrative tasks represent 14.41% of responses, and 9.91% indicate a preference for a study-conducive environment.

The data obtained from Question C suggest that students are highly engaged in academic activities despite the absence of scheduled commitments in their timetables. Consequently, the primary purpose of university facilities remains academic in nature, with a distinct emphasis on learning and research. Libraries occupy a pivotal position, as evidenced by the considerable proportion of students that use them. Although attendance at lectures and classes is a fundamental aspect of the student experience, it is not as dominant in this second data set. The significance of group work and social interaction underscores the necessity for collaborative settings and community-building initiatives at the university. Furthermore, administrative tasks and personal preferences also exert an influence, indicating that the use of university facilities extends beyond the domain of academic pursuits.

Table 2 shows how often students use common areas at the faculty and areas near the faculty when they do not have scheduled commitments. This information is important for understanding the function and use of third places on campus and for the research questions about the significance and characteristics of these spaces.

Restaurants are used frequently, with 34.5% of students visiting on a weekly basis and 20.6% on a daily basis. This emphasizes the importance of these establishments as social hubs for informal gatherings. Libraries or reading rooms are also of great importance, with significant weekly (27.0%) and monthly (23.4%) usage, although the lower daily use (7.3%) suggests a need for more inviting study environments. It is evident that study spaces such as research rooms and seminar rooms are not used to their full potential. Indeed, 35.0% of students never make use of these facilities without commitments, which suggests that they are perceived as formal rather than flexible spaces. Outdoor spaces are also well used, with 26.9% of students using them on a weekly basis and 18.5% on a daily basis. This reflects their value for relaxation and informal interactions. Cafés are used on a weekly basis by 35% of students and on a daily basis by 17.1%. They are important third places for socializing and studying.
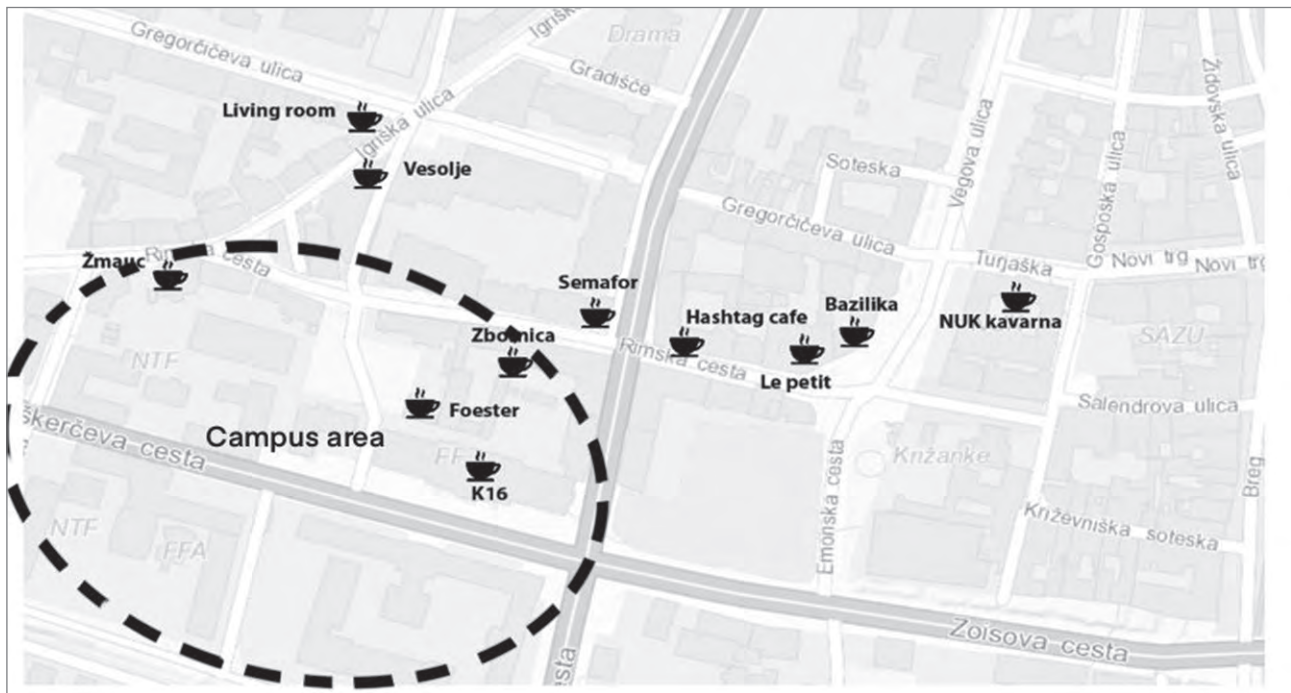
Figure 4: Most frequently visited *cafés* near the campus (illustration: authors).
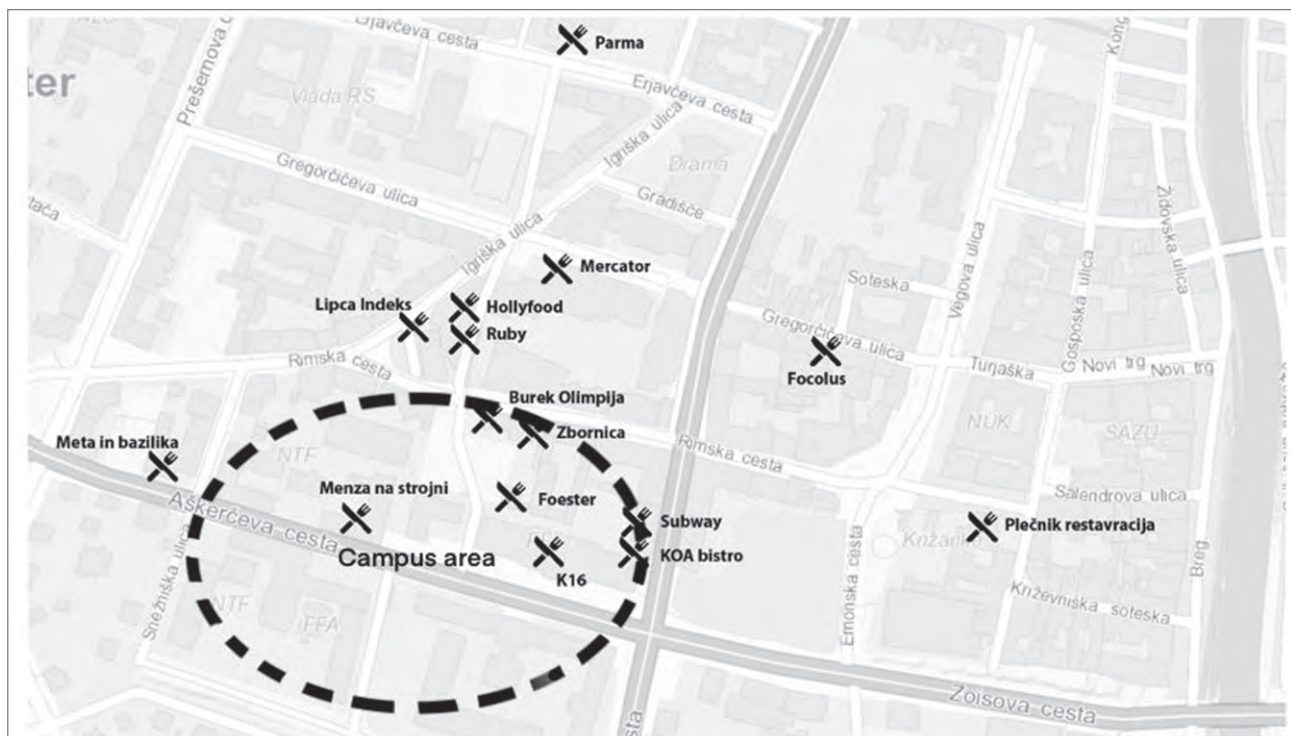

Figure 5: Most frequently visited restaurants near the campus (illustration: authors).

For open-ended Question E "Where do you most often go for a coffee during breaks from lectures or other university commitments?" a comparable manual categorization process (social mapping) was used. The categories were created according to the frequency of each answer, with a minimum of two repetitions. This process yielded eleven distinctive locations, which are shown in Figure 4. All 334 open-ended responses were additionally categorized into three groups to classify spaces by proximity to campus and location specificity. The results showed that 98 respondents (29.3%) preferred nearby cafés, and two hundred respondents (59.9%) fell into the "Other" category, suggesting that many students either lack a specif-

ic coffee venue nearby or favour other venues on or beyond campus. The remaining thirty-six responses (10.8%) indicate a preference for on-campus coffee options, such as vending machines and campus spots such as K16 and K17.

On the other hand, the analysis of lunch location preferences (see Figure 5) among students at the campus reveals a clear tendency toward convenience, affordability, and diversity in dining options. Establishments near the campus and those with student-friendly pricing are especially favoured. In addition, the variety of responses underscores the importance of providing a range of dining choices that cater to different tastes and budgets.

Student lunch locations were classified into categories based on type and characteristics: on-campus dining (student canteens and dining facilities inside campus buildings), near-campus restaurants and cafés (41.8% of students prefer these for convenience and variety), fast food and chains (offering quick options), grocery stores and supermarkets (used by 13.8% for ready-to-eat meals), food brought from home (15.2% of students bring food from home), and miscellaneous and others. The results reveal that students primarily choose nearby cafés and restaurants, valuing accessibility and affordability. On-campus facilities are popular as well (13.5%), and fast-food options (4.9%) offer additional convenience. These choices reflect how students integrate into the surrounding urban landscape, which supports a range of dining needs. The findings suggest that more social spaces on or near campus could enhance students' dining experiences, fostering a stronger link between the university and urban amenities.

5   Discussion and policy recommendations

Universities make a significant contribution to the economic vitality of urban areas, increasingly making cities the "capital of ideas" (Blackwell et al., 2002; Pastor et al., 2013; Melhuish, 2020). However, their impact as economic drivers and cultural hubs depends largely on their ability to attract students and connect meaningfully with the surrounding community. Findings from the quantitative analysis reveal that 26.6% of students visit the campus even on days without scheduled commitments, underscoring the role of campus spaces beyond formal academic requirements. The data also indicate that specific types of spaces, such as study rooms and seminar rooms, are underutilized, with 35.0% of students never utilizing these facilities in the absence of scheduled commitments. This suggests that these spaces are perceived as overly formal and rigid, lacking the flexibility to accommodate the evolving

needs of students and faculty. In contrast, restaurants and cafés are visited frequently by students (55.1% of students visit a restaurant at least once a week, and 52.1% of students visit a café at least once a week). This highlights the role of these spaces as informal social hubs. Furthermore, the findings suggest that outdoor public spaces (45.4%) and libraries (34.3%) near the campus are frequently used, thereby reinforcing the significance of accessible and welcoming third places.

The qualitative interviews offer a better understanding of the specific third places that students and faculty members like. Cafés and restaurants were identified as the most significant third places, frequently functioning as social hubs despite their off-campus locations. These locations are used not only for eating and drinking, but also for activities such as studying, working, and socializing. Libraries also play a crucial role, but the lack of spaces where group discussions and collaborative work can take place without disturbing others is a significant shortcoming. Moreover, specific university locations, such as department corridors and outdoor benches, are also used as informal gathering spaces, although these areas often lack space or comfort. Therefore universities and the spaces they occupy have lost their significance as "havens of learning and research" and are somehow isolated from the surrounding society.

This raises the following question for campus student service programmers and campus planners: Why are campus environments not conducive to third places? The study also indicates that food and drink are key features of third places. Moreover, why would universities not want to provide the social and economic benefits associated with incorporating third places? This study cannot answer these questions, but the data imply that campuses should view the concept of third places as places for both informal learning and potential auxiliary income (Banning et al., 2010). The analysis offers several recommendations for decisionmakers that can be summarized in five core suggestions to improve the social and urban context and the academic experience on the new campus (see Table 3).

The third places at universities, particularly those integrated into urban settings, present a significant opportunity for fostering stronger connections between academic institutions and their surrounding communities. Nevertheless, the question remains why these university spaces, despite their proximity to urban populations, are not more actively used by the broader community (Jang, 2020: 171). This introduces an intriguing element to the discussion. Given the current focus of this research on the academic community, which is a valuable area of study in itself, it would be beneficial to consider the potential for influencing the social structure in the urban environment where this community is located.

Table 3: Policy recommendations.

Policy recommendation	Context	Empirical findings
1. Redesign and expand third places	Invest in redesigning existing spaces to make them more flexible and conducive to both formal and informal interactions. Expanding cafés and libraries to include more areas for group work, discussion, and socializing. Creating new third places that are accessible and welcoming.	Quantitative findings: More than a third of the students view formal study spaces as too rigid. Qualitative findings: Cafés and restaurants are popular social hubs, but there is a lack of accessible and flexible group workspaces on campus.
2. Develop non-commercial social hubs	Establish lounges, communal areas, and multi-use halls that are freely accessible. Addressing the demand for spaces where students and faculty can gather without being expected to make a purchase.	Qualitative findings: Students and faculty expressed a strong desire for non-commercial spaces, particularly for studying and social interaction. The current reliance on off-campus cafés indicates a gap in on-campus facilities that are freely accessible.
3. Promote flexibility and accessibility	Design spaces that accommodate multifunctional uses, including modular furniture, multipurpose rooms, and adaptable outdoor areas. Facilitate the accommodation of a wide range of activities, from individual study to collaborative meetings.	Quantitative findings: Certain campus spaces are underutilized, suggesting that current designs do not meet the diverse needs of the community. Qualitative findings: Students indicated a need for more adaptable spaces, especially for group work and informal meetings.
4. Integrate with the urban fabric	Include actors from the national to local level in the planning process. Ensure that campus spaces integrate seamlessly with urban amenities (public transportation, pedestrian pathways, and nearby public areas). Increase accessibility and enhance the relevance of campus spaces to the broader community.	Qualitative findings: Cafés and outdoor spaces near the campus are important social hubs, suggesting that better integration with the urban environment would enhance their use and accessibility. Quantitative findings: High use of nearby urban amenities by students.
5. Inclusive and participatory design	Design campus spaces with input from a diverse range of stakeholders: students, faculty, and community members.	Qualitative findings: Interviews revealed a strong demand for spaces that cater to diverse needs, including quieter study areas, social hubs, and spaces for group work. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of including a variety of voices in the planning process to ensure these needs are met.

Source: authors.

6   Conclusion

The research presented here has confirmed previous research findings (Oldenburg, 1997; Waxman et al., 2007; Banning et al., 2010) that cafés, restaurants, and libraries are the most relevant third places on campuses, but that other third places, such as student association social hubs, parks, and micro-environments on and off campus (patios, benches, corridors, etc.), are also relevant (research question 1). The analysis showed that universities' third places are crucial public spaces where it is possible to socialize, hang out, relax, spend free time between lectures, and work or study alone and in groups (research question 2). The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data yielded suggestions by students and staff to improve third places; these

suggestions can be summed up in five categories (see Table 3; research question 3). Although these insights offer a foundation for practical improvements, further research is required to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the links between university spaces and the surrounding community, including local residents and service providers. Such an extension of the research could clarify how these third places function in the broader social and urban environment, thereby providing insight into community interaction with campuses in city centres. Therefore, this research contributes to the literature with a new exploration of university third places, with special focus on identifying their specific attributes and highlighting the often undervalued impact that they have on university students and staff. Moreover, the article offers decisionmakers (urban

planners, ministries, university management, etc.) concrete insight into third places and their socio-spatial dynamics.

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