



BLOGS & STORIES

The Fourth Place

by *Richard Florida*

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More and more workers are plugging in and taking meetings at places, like Starbucks, that aren't home or the office. Richard Florida on why this trend will change our business world.

Starting July 1, Starbucks is offering free, one-click WiFi to its customers. "We offer many of the comforts you'd find at home," its announcement proclaims. "So is it any surprise we offer free Internet access, too? It's just part of being neighborly." Starbucks aspires to be our home away from home, our next door neighbor, and even a remote office. And why not? It's clear that we need such places.



Ted S. Warren / AP Photo

The emergence of the Fourth Place marks a return to a denser, more stimulating way of life.

It used to be that we knew when we were on and when we were off the clock, even if we didn't punch in and out at the factory door. Work happened at, well, work. The Internet, cellphones, and BlackBerries—and the widespread adoption of a laid-back work-style that started in Silicon Valley—have changed that forever. Many of us, especially those of us whose most important work product comes out of our heads, no longer wear business attire or even show up at the office every day. Nevertheless, we are on the job 24/7.

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The sociologist Ray Oldenburg famously wrote about the need for "third places" where we could take refuge from both "the cabin fever of married life" and the pressures of work. He was talking about places that give a neighborhood its stability and coherence, where we can see familiar faces and decompress. But as home and work converge, Third Places have taken on a hybrid quality as well. Today, "the place on the corner" is less likely to be a saloon, a Moose Lodge, or a beauty parlor than the Starbucks that we drop into during the day—not to escape from work but to do some: to check our email or post a tweet, to grab an impromptu meeting while we enjoy our coffee.

For many in the growing legions of the self-employed, the neighborhood café is the closest thing they have to a formal place of business. Free wireless is an overhead reduction that will go right to their bottom lines. People who have regular jobs work remotely at least some of the time as well—as many as 17 million of them, [according to WorldatWork Trendlines 2009](#). Tens of millions more could and almost certainly will forsake their offices at least some of the time in the not distant future. It's ironic but true: It's hard to get any real work done in an office. And working at home can get awfully lonely.

"Factories used to be arranged in a straight line," [Seth Godin wrote in his blog](#) not too long ago. "The office needed to be right next to this building, so management could monitor what was going on. One hundred and fifty years later," he asks, "why go to work in an office?"

When you need to have a meeting, have a meeting. When you need to collaborate, collaborate. The rest of the time,

do the work, wherever you like. The gain in speed, productivity and happiness is massive. What's missing is... someplace to go. Once someone figures that part out, the office is dead.

Starbucks is fine for chatting with a colleague, but would you want to pitch a project to an investment banker there—while distracting conversations are going on all around you and big-eared competitors and rivals are sipping their own cappuccinos a few feet away?

Entrepreneurs and real-estate providers are increasingly recognizing the need for what I call Fourth Places—places where we can informally connect and engage and dialogue, but also where we can work. Places that freelancers or startups can use on an as-needed basis, or where travelers can set up shop temporarily.

In Toronto, where I live, [the Spoke Club](#) provides its members with a setting where they can eat, drink, and network, but also with a conference room complete with an Internet-ready plasma screen TV and other state-of-the-art office services. [MaRS](#), where I work, is a public-private partnership that houses and nurtures innovative, entrepreneurial, technology-based businesses. It has a comfortable lobby, a food court, and a restaurant, as well as meeting rooms and offices that can be rented on a daily basis.

Our cities are filled with under-utilized spaces that with a little initiative could become Fourth Places—amenities that everyone can profit from, not just their landlords. Factories are busy around the clock; why should universities lock up their classrooms and lounges and common areas at the end of the day? The way we live and work has changed; so should the way we use our spaces.

The emergence of the Fourth Place marks a return to a denser, more stimulating way of life. If we enjoy less privacy, we are less lonely, too; if we are increasingly forfeiting the security of the nine to five treadmill, we are also escaping its deadening routine—and becoming more innovative, productive, and empowered in the process.

Richard Florida is director of the [University of Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute](#) and author of [The Great Reset](#), recently published by Harper Collins.

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