

OUT OF THE BOX

Caffeine and Everyone: Coffee Shops of Lafayette and West Lafayette

Student researcher:
Bridget Curry

The romanticized image of the coffee shop depicts a space academic in nature and democratic in value. A space in which anyone—regardless of class, race, or social standing—may come together and share in ideas. A space of both intellectual innovation and social stimulation. Are these ideals historically rooted? Finding their origin in Constantinople in 1594, coffee shops came to the forefront of intellectual space because of the drug they touted: caffeine (Oldenburg, 1989). In contrast to alcoholic beverages traditionally consumed at every meal because drinking water was reliably unsafe, caffeine promoted faster, more contemplative thought. Beer and wine at every meal resulted in many individuals living life in a drunken state; constant consumption of depressants did not positively contribute to intellectual thought in the way that caffeinated tea and coffee did (Johnson, 2010).

Coffee shops found relevancy in the Lafayette–West Lafayette area because “we needed it,” Sarah told me simply one afternoon in the lower level of the coffee shop she owns, Java Roaster (personal communication, November 2016). The third owner of the shop confidently said that her business is the oldest coffee shop in the area, having been opened twenty-five years ago. She said that coffee was not “super popular” in the area until the 1990s when Java Roaster first opened its doors. Until this time, bars and taverns originally served as a social gathering place for adults in the area. Robert Johnson owned a bar located on Second Street and Ferry Street that served as a “favorite stopping place for travelers, land-hunters, and those seeking a good hotel accommodation” (*Journal & Courier*, 1880–1915). In the late 1980s, the Checkerboard Tavern, previously known as the Green Lantern during the Prohibition Era, was a popular establishment in the Lafayette area, coming to be known as “a friendly place” with good food (*Journal & Courier*, 1988). While hosting a different atmosphere, bars and taverns served the role of social gathering place until coffee shops stepped in to share this responsibility.

If this archetype of the academic and democratic coffee shop is rooted in history, does it still exist today? It is certainly prevailing in our contemporary culture. Who utilizes these spaces, and to what ends? How do these spaces inform our knowledge about the place and community that we call the Lafayette area?

Third Street Starbucks

Starbucks has come to dominate the coffee market, its branded empire carefully crafted, easily recognizable, and expanding across the country ubiquitously. They establish themselves quickly, mass produced. Every Starbucks looks vaguely similar, and the Starbucks on Third Street, in the heart of Purdue University’s residential campus, is no different. Unlike many of the coffee shops in the area, it is a space without history, a mere extension of a brand. The shop on Third Street melds industrial and natural elements together: exposed pipes and vent systems are whitewashed to serve as the ceiling. As you look toward the bar, it is topped with wood, as are the tabletops, which have been stamped with a seal declaring that the material has been reclaimed, saved from waste. Metal chairs sit along the tables and window bars, serving the purpose of not letting you get too comfortable as you work. Leather couches and fabric armchairs sit along the back windows, more comfortable options for those who are meeting with friends and just chatting. Iron-framed lights with exposed bulbs are suspended from the ceiling. Ambient music plays from speakers tucked up in corners of the space.

Starbucks is no doubt designed intentionally, but in what ways does that affect the efficacy of the space? What considerations are important? “The top five characteristics of the ideal coffee shop included cleanliness, aroma, adequate lighting, comfortable furniture, and a view to the outside,” Dr. Lisa Waxman (2006) says. For Grace, a student studying in the morning, Starbucks is ideal because it “smells good,” and there’s enough noise that the space is not eerily quiet like a library (personal communication, October 2016). Emmy, a barista, observes customers interacting on the comfortable leather couches, positioned just in front of large, floor-to-ceiling windows that look upon the Wiley Dining Court and Co-Rec area. The design is strategic and intentional; it facilitates social interaction for some, while maintaining an academic space for others.

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When she goes out to wipe down tables, Emmy, a student and part-time barista at the Third Street Starbucks, might have to be careful navigating around people's homework spread out on the long wooden tables. Emmy sees a lot of students studying in the space. "People come here every day. It's a part of their study routine," she explained (personal communication, October 2016). She feels that Starbucks serves as a place for people to "meet and get to know each other." A lot of student organizations and sororities will meet in this Starbucks, and Emmy said it's good to "have something to hold on to," like a cup of coffee, when meeting someone new—a lifeline, of sorts, to ease the anxious tension. What is the value of the coffee cup in these scenarios?

Nervous habits can range from nail biting to leg twitching, a myriad of ways to combat anxious energy. Energy and stress build in these situations, begging to be released in some way or another. Commonly, as Emmy observed, individuals fidget, maybe with clothing or other objects like a coffee cup, to release this anxious stress. "If 'nervous habits' are performed merely to discharge tension or 'surplus energy,' then high levels of activity would be expected," Williams (1973) describes. Having that lifeline opens a channel through which energy can flow and more natural conversation can continue.

Taylor went to Starbucks for refuge. She was locked out of her room and at the mercy of her roommate's schedule. Taylor liked to hang out with her friends in coffee shops at home in Indianapolis, but she said that this Starbucks had a different atmosphere from those coffee shops at home or off campus. "It's chill, but there's this underlying stress tension because everyone is studying and it's college" (personal communication, October 2016). Taylor's sentiment was echoed by Emmy, who said that this Starbucks served "fun, young people, but there's also that college stress." Taylor said the atmosphere probably depends on time of day as well. In the morning and during the day, students might drop by Starbucks to study in between classes, but later in the afternoon, once people are done with class, the space serves as a home to a social hour of sorts, a break from class and thinking.

Sitting in the large leather sofa in Starbucks, you feel exposed. Large, plate glass windows allow natural light to stream in, but you can also be seen by those walking outside. In fact, there is no remote or private place in the small seating area. Shifting over to

the smaller fabric chairs, a certain level of intimacy is lost to a lack of proximity: the chairs are spaced widely and a long table with several metal chairs is only three or four steps in front of you. This is not the place for quiet conversations or academic discussions, especially in the midst of the 10 a.m. rush. The space feels like retail, not like home. It has been designed to be successful, but falls flat in truly creating an area conducive to social interaction. Such is the nature of a fluid space with no doors and walls made of glass.

The Third Street Starbucks is central to the residence halls, serving an overwhelmingly student population. Drinks may be paid for through dining plans, placing a value on the coffee as an equivalent to that of swipes into the dining court for dinner. What does this mean for the space and community? Whether it is the coffee itself, the lifeline of having a cup to hold when on a first date or meeting a new group of people, or having a casual place to study, students value the coffee shop so much that it has been given a place of centrality physically in their living space at Purdue and in their meal plans. The space was corporately designed, the unmistakable feeling of retail that comes with the character of a large chain sits in the air—a feeling of comfortable familiarity, as it likely looks quite similar to the one at home.

Because of its corporatization, Starbucks is not quirky. It does not host live musicians, nor does it have a community board covered in flyers. In fact, its community board is bare, save for a carefully written message from the staff or maybe a lonely flyer. Student organizations can post there, but their flyers must be screened and approved by a manager. Starbucks is a brand, a type. Not just anything can be posted or advertised; it must remain within the norm of the corporation. From appearances, it seems most organizations either forget or choose not to use this option for advertisement. It serves the community in the sense that it gives students a neutral space, but the shop itself does not attempt to facilitate any social or civic involvement. The sense of community is narrowed by its breadth of business.

In between bites of a bagel, Lauren, a student, casually told me, "everyone comes here," when I asked her about the type of people sitting around her (personal communication, October 2016). Later, I wondered, who is everyone? On Lauren's backpack were a number of buttons from a Greek organization, in addition to the letters on her T-shirt, a common appearance in that Starbucks

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as it is stereotyped as the place for sorority girls to congregate. I wondered, could Lauren be so entrenched in her social circle that she does not see anyone else? This sentiment seems to go back on the romantic ideal of the coffee shop as an inclusive, democratic, and academic space: students spend time with headphones in their ears, isolating themselves from the social ecosystem around them. Purdue is a predominantly white institution, and different racial groups or national and international students do not interact frequently. This separation and lack of diversity is played out at an institutional level, but also in Starbucks. This coffee shop, at the very least, does not seem to reflect the archetypal ideal we hold in such high esteem, and, so it seems, may be symbolic of the University as a whole. Students are still young and learning how to appreciate and acknowledge the diversity around them. It is a space in which a clique has become the community, unaware of the diversity of its surroundings.

Java Roaster

Other establishments came and went, but Java Roaster has persisted throughout the years. It is markedly different from the other coffee shops in the area. It serves coffee in large Styrofoam cups rather than the sleekly designed paper cups of Starbucks or ceramic mugs of Greyhouse and Star City, and the idea of latte art seems absurd in this place. Why has this coffee shop endured when others have not? Something about Java Roaster feels different than other coffee shops; it is relatable. It also lacks the pretension that is generally associated with many coffee shops. The drinks are simple to order, easy to carry out, and cheap. The space is inviting to a myriad of individuals in the community. Java Roaster was established “because we needed it,” and it has continued to serve that need for over two decades.

Java Roaster is full of exposed bricking; quirky local art hangs on the walls. Sometimes, on nicer days, the front door will be propped open with a flowerpot. Its newest owner, Sarah, began a community doodle board with colorful construction paper attached to the walls and little jars full of markers and crayons on the tables in the lower level. The wall has been used for couples to write their initials on, as advertising for local businesses, for inspirational or biblical quotations, and for quick doodles while waiting for your coffee or food. Sarah said the wall even came to be the battlefield of a passive aggressive war between colleagues at one of the offices in the area around the courthouse. Colorful paper chains are draped around the bookcases on the upper and lower floors. Upstairs, tables with mismatched

furniture and little lamps are lined up along the wall, in addition to a little reading area with comfortable lounge chairs and a small wall mural of a tree with several quotations around it, including one from Bob Marley. Art created by local high school students decorate the walls, available for purchase.

Laurie received her PhD from Purdue, and she and her husband, Jonathan, and their son, Henry, were back in the area visiting. During her time as a student, she and Jonathan spent a fair amount of time in Java Roaster, using the space to study and work. She fell in love with this particular coffee shop because of the environment: “It feels warm. There’s no stark lighting, it doesn’t feel sterile like other places” (personal communication, November 2016). She liked the mismatched lamps and furniture. She also liked the bookshelves full of board games and even a basket of toys that her son can play with as they are visiting. The space felt inviting.

When Java Roaster first opened, a coffee bean roaster was placed in the front of the store, and the owner would roast his own beans in-house. He liked to burn the beans, however, and all of downtown Lafayette would “reek,” Sarah recounted, laughing. Eventually, the tradition was discontinued, but Java Roaster continues to distinguish itself from other local coffee shops in the area.

Sarah described her customers as “collective,” and Java Roaster as “a hub of a color swatch of people.” In the mornings, judges and business people stop by for a quick cup of coffee on the way to work, graduate and undergraduate students will use the space to study, and sometimes regulars will just sit and chat with customers who filter in and out of the shop. Wayne, a part-time cook, will have unofficial meetings for his other job held in Java Roaster. He feels that because of the expanse of clientele, Java Roaster provides a place to socialize, where you are exposed to people that you would not normally meet (personal communication, November 2016). Sarah sees people from different social classes walking through Java Roaster’s doors, all looking for the same thing. She takes some comfort in it, a sign that “we’re not completely different,” a sentiment that is the essence of a coffee shop: a democratic space where everyone, regardless of differing backgrounds, can commune together.

Coffee shops are third places: not home or work, but neutral ground. Certain qualities of third spaces make them successful, including their significance as levelers. Levelers are inclusive, disregarding

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class and race; they are democratic. As Ray Oldenburg (1989) describes, “Third places counter the tendency to be restrictive in the enjoyment of others by being open to all and by laying emphasis on qualities not confined to status distinctions current in the society.” While I have not visited a coffee shop that is perfectly inclusive, the romanticized idea still permeates our image of the coffeehouse. Because they are communal and all embracing, they allow for a greater range of possibilities and conversations, a place where new ideas can grow and develop with others. Java Roaster has come to embrace this leveler ideal, creating a space where all members of the community can engage with each other in a neutral third space.

Star City

Star City is the home of the “hipster local,” according to faculty members Cara and Erin (personal communication, November 2016). Indie alternative music plays softly from the speakers near the ceiling. The space itself is elongated, and the back of the room seems to crave some sort of natural light, tucked far away from the front windows. The walls are finished with raw wood accents, dark-stained, shallow bookshelves hang just above the heads of those sitting and studying along the wall. The back walls are painted with stenciled designs, floral patterns, and a symbol for organic ingredients. The space is bookended by shades of grey: the floor is sealed concrete, and the ceiling is grey-washed venting and pipes.

Jordan and Emily are both former students who have come to work full time at Star City. They see a lot of graduate students come through the doors, using the space to study and work. Business people from local offices also pass by to grab a morning cup of coffee on the way to work, or will possibly stop by during the day for a casual meeting with colleagues. Star City serves many different types of drinks, including a variety of pour overs, to customers who are looking for “something of a higher quality than Starbucks or something” (personal communication, November 2016). While the coffee may be a draw for some of the patrons of Star City, it is also populated by individuals looking for space when they cannot be accommodated in other popular local coffee shops.

Hot drinks are served in sky blue ceramic mugs, cold drinks in Mason jars. The foam on the lattes is carefully poured into a leaf shape. Star City makes Java Roaster look like a dive. Star City is the aesthetic, the cliché, of the coffee shop. It is exactly what you expect

a locally owned coffee shop to look like, sound like, and smell like. Appearances suggest that this place is the model, the ideal coffee shop—and yet, it falls short in achieving the social ideal.

The space is not democratic in the way that coffee shops are often romanticized to be. It does not openly invite everyone in, partially because the drinks are so expensive, appealing to a “classier” clientele searching for higher quality coffee, as Jordan explained. In a town like Lafayette—where many claim diversity, inclusion, and democracy—spaces like Star City are an indication that there are still systemic inequities and institutional barriers that keep these ideals at bay; we are not as perfectly diverse and inclusive as we think.

Greyhouse

Greyhouse is consistently packed, easily one of the most popular coffee shops among Purdue students. Plush chairs and wooden tables dot the seating area, with a long bar and stools set against storefront windows, looking out onto the Chauncey area of downtown West Lafayette. Oriental carpets lay over wooden floors, and iron-framed light fixtures hang from the ceiling, providing a dim light, warm in the evenings and overwhelmed by the natural light during the day. Art hangs on the walls of exposed brick. Unique decorations and knickknacks are placed on little shelves: stacks of books, jars of toy soldiers, metal Slinkys, typewriters. Old library card catalogues are used to organize sugar packets, next to a shelf holding bottles of honey.

“I started working here eight years ago when we first opened,” Assistant Manager Ali explained. Greyhouse was opened by the religious organization Campus House eight years ago as a way to reach out to the community, Ali told me as she described the shop’s history. She said Campus House understood that “if you don’t go to the church, you won’t just hang out there,” so the idea of a coffee shop came up as a way to engage with the larger Purdue Community (personal communication, October 2016). This endeavor has come to be rather successful.

When I asked Ali about the kinds of people that populate Greyhouse’s busy seating area, she responded with a single word: “diverse.” Many are affiliated with Purdue, and many international students come to study together in the space. Sometimes local professionals will use the conference room for meeting, or stop by for a casual lunch break.

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Ali described an older couple who have been coming to Greyhouse every Saturday since it opened. She said they especially like to sit outside and “watch the show” of Breakfast Clubbers on Saturday mornings before home football games. A group of individuals who started as strangers built a friendship around a shared love of reading, instituting their own Greyhouse book club that meets in the same space where they first met. Greyhouse has many regulars; some are college students, and others are community members and churchgoers who have been there since the beginning.

The planning process for opening the coffee shop took many years, Ali told me. One major decision that had to be made was a name appropriate for the space they wanted to create. Ultimately, a two-part name was chosen. “Grey” was chosen because the space was developed to be neutral. Anyone is welcome, and anyone can share. “The people color the space,” as Ali says. “House” was chosen because its creators wanted to build a homelike environment where everyone feels cared for and comfortable. Embracing the romantic idea of an egalitarian space where all are welcome to sit and share, Greyhouse was named and established.

Maddie likes to study in Greyhouse with friends when they are able to find space. She likes the space because it is “atypical and cozy” (personal communication, October 2016). She explained that because there are so many things to look at, whether it is the art on the wall or the little toy soldiers placed on shelves, the environment encourages you to slow down and take a minute, to be more aware of your surroundings. This idea of slowing down is not limited to the environment; Ali explained that the baristas try to make customers feel cared for as individuals and create a homelike atmosphere. They may do this by asking customers’ names and being familiar with their order if they are regulars, or maybe by making many drinks from scratch in-house and serving them in porcelain mugs.

Why does Greyhouse have so many regulars? What brings people back? Individuals return to a place for a variety of reasons, such as design considerations or the social climate of a place. “Themes include the opportunity to linger; ownership and territoriality; trust; respect and anonymity; productivity and personal growth; social beings and familiar strangers; and support,” Waxman (2006) says when discussing important social aspects of coffee shops. Greyhouse works to create an environment where people can find trust and respect, and social interaction and productivity. This is in contrast

to a larger chain like Starbucks, where, in Ali’s opinion, there is little individualization or quality interaction with new people. Greyhouse was conceived and named for the purpose of giving the community a home.

While a coffee shop like Starbucks is designed to be effective, a place like Greyhouse is more successful in creating an atmosphere conducive to sociality. Where is the disparity? In part, this is achieved by the strategic layout of tables and chairs at Greyhouse: large plush chairs are grouped together around a small table; larger wooden tables can seat up to six people studying or working on a project together; aisles between the rows of chairs are narrow. As opposed to the space between seats in Starbucks, seating options in Greyhouse are meant to encourage one-on-one conversations. Individuals are never far away from each other, and even if you are sitting in your own plush chair, you are still sharing a table with whoever is sitting across from you.

Greyhouse, like Java Roaster, also features exposed brick walls. In contrast to Starbucks, a space that lacks intimacy and places to hide given its glass walls, brick walls offer enclosure, a secure space that offers some privacy, where conversations can blossom and individuals can feel secluded. It offers the anonymity that Waxman describes. These walls are inclusive, a way of bringing the outside in. They become representatives of the archetype that anyone is welcome and can contribute to the space.

In the window next to the front counter where customers place their orders, a metal stand with disposable cups sits. A sign hangs above it saying, “Leave a gift cup for a friend.” The idea behind the initiative is for friends to buy a cup for someone, write a special message on the cup, and then tell them a surprise is waiting for them. The individual comes in, finds their cup, and gets a drink paid for by someone who cares about them. In part, this seems to take the place of a traditional community board. It is more personal than a board full of advertisements, and it allows individuals to give back to each other. Another corkboard located farther back in the shop sets aside slips of paper and thumbtacks for individuals to write notes and pin up. This board functions similarly to the construction paper wall in Java Roaster: business cards and callout advertisements are pinned up, in addition to little quotes and doodles written while waiting for a cup of coffee.

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While at the Bauer Community Center in Lafayette, Asia, age 9, wrote about her life as an adult in Lafayette when given a creative writing prompt (“In the future, when I’m an adult,” 2016): buying an incredibly expensive latte at Starbucks, but not being able to pay for it because she spent all her money the week before. “This man paid for my \$12 latte and said thank you that was nice of you, you didn’t have to do that. I don’t know how to thank you. ‘Nah, that’s ok. Would you like to sit?’ he said.” The two go on to talk about her career as a chemist and professional soccer player.

Asia’s story is reminiscent of the depictions of coffee shops in entertainment media: a place where a kind stranger may buy your coffee, sit with you, chat, and become your friend. The way Asia’s story plays out does not feel too different from that of the romanticized depictions of coffee shops, a space where a strong community is built and strangers offer support, another theme of Waxman’s.

Why does it seem like Asia’s story is a scenario that could play out within the walls of Greyhouse, as opposed to any other coffee shop? Friends already buy each other coffee in the form of gift cups, so it is not out of the realm of possibilities that a stranger may buy your coffee for you if you need it. Greyhouse fosters this sense of community and family-like caring and comradery. It embraces what spaces like Starbucks and Star City lack: the ideal that everyone can belong, not just a certain type or image. Greyhouse is a space that radiates warmth, similar to the feeling that Laurie felt within the walls of Java Roaster. It is representative of the diversity and inclusion in which the Greater Lafayette community takes pride.

Afterword

I have started sitting in coffee shops more frequently, even after I completed this project. I spilled some coffee on a printed copy of my rough draft, which felt like a rite of passage that any academic paper must go through to become validated: to fulfill the sense of scholarly struggle and effort that goes into completing a paper. Reflecting on the knowledge I gained about coffee shops in the Lafayette area, the place, and the community, I thought about the people who discuss

with pride the diversity and inclusivity of Lafayette, but I consider the incredulity of these words that have so many meanings to so many different people, places, and communities.

I think about what inclusivity means for a coffee shop. In Star City, where the space seems so perfect yet is so undemocratic, despite speaking out against injustice and social shortcomings, the liberal people inside reinforce the system of division against which they are fighting. In Java Roaster, with its colorful streamers and construction paper community wall, a space has been established in which it does not matter where you come from, only that you are there.

I think about what inclusivity means as a campus. In a place like Starbucks, where cliques have come to dominate the space and serve as the singular community, a lack of awareness for diversity, as well as the essential ideals on which coffee shops were founded, has taken hold. On a campus where posters are hung, and where a president shrugs, acting as if we are above race struggles, avoiding comment, we are not as inclusive as we think. Inclusivity is an action, a presentation of self and place. We try, we mean well, but as a university, a city, a series of coffee shops, a community—we still have strides to be made.

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