

**The Café as Third Place: Why Coffee Shops Surpass Libraries in Sound,
Sociability, and Design**

Yuechen An, The High School Affiliated to Beijing Normal University'27

Abstract

The concept of the “third place”—a social environment separate from home and work—has become increasingly important in modern urban life. Libraries have long been regarded as typical public third spaces, yet they often prioritize quiet study over comfort and interaction. In contrast, cafes have gradually emerged as more popular and functional third places for contemporary people. Cafes are among the most representative and accessible third places that provide affordable, inclusive, and supportive environments for people of all backgrounds (Finlay et al., 2019, p. 2). This paper argues that cafes are superior to libraries as third spaces due to three key advantages. First, the soothing background music in cafes creates a relaxed atmosphere that reduces mental pressure. Second, cafes encourage casual social interaction, fostering connection among individuals. Third, cafes pay greater attention to interior design and artistic ambiance, enhancing the overall spatial experience. By analyzing these environmental and social features, this study aims to demonstrate why cafes better satisfy modern demands for comfort, communication, and aesthetic experience in public life.

Introduction

The concept of the “third place”—a social environment separate from home and work—has become increasingly important in modern urban life. Libraries have long been regarded as typical public third spaces, yet they often prioritize quiet study over comfort and interaction. In contrast, cafes have gradually emerged as more popular and functional third places for contemporary people. Cafes are among the most representative and accessible third places that provide affordable, inclusive, and supportive environments for people of all backgrounds (Finlay et al., 2019, p. 2). This paper argues that cafes are superior to libraries as third spaces due to three key advantages. First, the soothing background music in cafes creates a relaxed atmosphere that reduces mental pressure. Second, cafes encourage casual social interaction, fostering connection among individuals. Third, cafes pay greater attention to interior design and artistic ambiance, enhancing the overall spatial experience. By analyzing these environmental and social features, this study aims to demonstrate why cafes better satisfy modern demands for comfort, communication, and aesthetic experience in public life.

Sounds and music

The sound environment of a coffee shop is a carefully designed “emotion regulator”. Music can elicit distinct emotions and influence prosocial decision-making through affective pathways, independent of lyrical content. Mode rather than tempo primarily affects mood and subsequent helping behavior (Wu et al., 2025). Most coffee shops play soothing background music, ranging from soft jazz and classical piano to lazy folk music and Lo-fi. The volume of this music is strictly controlled within the range of “background sound”: it will not drown out conversations, and at the same time forms a “sound barrier” that isolates outside noise and the faint chatter of

neighboring tables, creating a comfortable “semi-private” atmosphere.

For people who need to work or study, the acoustic environment of a coffee shop is far better than that of a library. Compared with silence, soft and rhythmic background music encourages longer stays, deeper relaxation, and more social interaction (Sbai et al., 2023, p. 13). The absolute silence in a library amplifies individuals’ anxiety: sounds of page-turning or keyboard tapping are regarded as “abnormal noises”, making people constantly feel the tension of being “watched”, so they can hardly enter a state of concentration. In contrast, the background noise in a coffee shop creates exactly the “optimal environment for concentration”: research shows that mild white noise at around 70 decibels can boost the cognitive activity of the brain and help people enter the “flow state”, without interfering with thinking. More importantly, there are no strict rules restraining people in the acoustic environment of a coffee shop: you can take a quiet phone call, discuss issues with your companions, and even let out a soft sigh when you are tired, without having to constantly worry about whether your noise “breaks the rules”. This stress-free sound atmosphere turns coffee shops into “workspaces that allow relaxation”, while libraries can only be “learning spaces where you have to stay tense all the time”.

In addition, the music in cafes also carries the cultural attributes and emotional value of the space. Appropriate background noise and gentle music help maintain concentration and relaxation, making cafes more suitable for working and studying than overly silent spaces (Peng & Fang, 2025, p. 294). Different styles of cafes use music to shape a unique spatial temperament: community cafes use retro jazz to create a neighborhood-like warmth, specialty coffee shops use minimalist electronic music to build an urban vibe, and independent cafes use indie music to convey a literary atmosphere. This integration of music and space makes cafes no longer just a

“place for drinking”, but an “emotional container” that can meet people’s emotional needs: when you are tired, soft piano music can calm your emotions; when you suffer from creative block, brisk jazz can stimulate your creativity; when you socialize, laid-back folk music can bring people closer. In contrast, the sound environment of a library is always a single, cold “emotionless” state. It cannot provide any emotional value for users, and can only meet the most basic function of “studying”. Today, modern people’s demand for space has long gone beyond “function” and turned to “emotional healing”. The advantages of cafes’ sound and music are unmatched by libraries.

Communication

Compared with functional spaces such as libraries, cafes better integrate social interaction, activity diversity, and psychological comfort, making them superior third places (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 13). In libraries, socializing is "forbidden": the core rule is "no talking," and any behavior that might lead to interaction is seen as disruptive to the order of the space. In libraries, interpersonal interaction is minimized to the extreme: even making eye contact requires caution, let alone casual conversations, sharing life experiences, or discussing ideas. In contrast, cafés have served as "containers of social interaction" since their inception. Cafés provide both solitude and social opportunities, making them flexible enough for individual work, casual chats, and group gatherings (Makhathini & Kanosvamhira, 2026, p. 5). The very design of a café encourages social engagement: open seating, cozy couches, tables suited for group gatherings, and even solo barstools—all facilitate diverse forms of interaction. You can meet friends at a café, chatting over coffee to strengthen bonds; colleagues can hold meetings there, sparking creativity in a relaxed atmosphere; you might even sit alone at the counter, exchanging a few

words with the barista or striking up a chance conversation with a stranger nearby. This kind of "low-pressure socializing" is something libraries simply cannot offer.

Moreover, the social environment of a café is "diverse and inclusive," catering to a full spectrum of needs—from "low-intensity" to "high-intensity" social interaction. For introverts or those with social anxiety, cafés provide a "safe space for mild engagement": you can sit alone in a corner, enjoying solitude while surrounded by the gentle hum of life, free from the pressure to socialize yet still feeling a sense of "communal presence." For those who thrive on social energy, cafés become a "stage for vibrant interaction"—whether it's catching up with friends, conducting business discussions, or hosting club activities, all can unfold comfortably within a café setting. Meanwhile, the underlying logic of a library's space strictly opposes any form of social exchange: regardless of whether you're shy or outgoing, everyone must abide by the "zero-socializing" rule, leaving no room for fulfilling social needs.

Additionally, the social nature of cafés helps alleviate the "loneliness" so prevalent in modern urban life. Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023, p. 20). Coffee shops have never been mere buildings within which proprietors and staff take money in exchange for refreshments. They represent places where individuals can not only experience public familiarity, but can develop ties to people and place, and potentially develop a sense of community (Ferreira et al., 2021, p. 2). In cities dominated by concrete and steel, living alone or working remotely has become increasingly common, making loneliness a widespread social issue. The absolute silence of a library can intensify this feeling: being surrounded by people yet completely isolated only deepens one's sense of disconnection. Meanwhile, the warm, socially vibrant ambiance of a café offers solace:

even sitting alone while hearing the murmur of conversations and feeling the warmth of the space can evoke a sense of "connection with the world," helping to ease feelings of solitude. For many today, this "option to engage socially" holds greater value than "obligatory quiet study"—and that is one of the key advantages that make cafés surpass libraries as meaningful third places.

Design and beauty

Attractive spatial experience—including interior design, lighting, layout, and ambiance—strongly encourages social interaction and prolongs users' stay in cafes (Nadizti et al., 2021, p. 135). People's expectations for public spaces have evolved beyond mere functionality to genuine enjoyment: such spaces must not only serve practical purposes but also offer aesthetic pleasure, becoming "sensory havens" that nourish both body and mind. The gap between cafés and libraries in terms of spatial design and aesthetic appeal is similarly vast. Library design prioritizes pragmatism: maximizing space efficiency, shelving capacity, and seating arrangements are its primary goals. Their aesthetic tends to be monotonous, uniform, and impersonal: plain white walls, standardized metal shelves, rigid plastic chairs, and uninspired lighting—all tailored strictly to "learning functionality," while overlooking human sensory and aesthetic needs. Libraries are utilitarian rather than human-centered, offering little aesthetic enjoyment and fulfilling only the most basic function of "study."

In contrast, café design focuses on "user-centric" immersive aesthetics. Every detail—from spatial layout and interior decor to lighting and greenery—is meticulously crafted to create a comfortable, visually pleasing, and warm environment. Cafés thoughtfully design diverse settings to suit various needs: window-side solo seats for quiet work, cozy sofa areas for gatherings, communal tables for group activities, and even outdoor seating to connect with

nature. This flexible layout caters to different preferences, allowing everyone to find their own "personal space."

When it comes to decor and aesthetic style, cafés showcase boundless creativity and possibility. Each café cultivates a distinct ambiance: industrial-style spaces with exposed brick and vintage lamps evoke an urban ruggedness; Japanese minimalist cafés use wooden furnishings and open spaces to convey serene Zen-like tranquility; retro-themed spots charm with antique furniture and nostalgic posters; artistic cafés create poetic atmospheres with paintings, plants, and flowers. Every café becomes a unique aesthetic experience, offering fresh sensory delight. Meanwhile, libraries remain uniformly standardized, lacking personality or the ability to inspire.

Additionally, cafés often incorporate natural and artistic elements to enhance the sensory experience. Artistic design that prioritizes mood, conception, and emotional expression creates a more immersive and human-centered spatial experience (Feng, 2023, p. 59). Plants, flowers, and water features bring vitality and calm, reducing stress and uplifting spirits. Artworks, handmade decorations, and independent publications turn cafés into venues of cultural enrichment, while the aromas of coffee and baked goods create a soothing, sensory ambiance. These thoughtful touches make cafés "immersive spaces for all five senses"—sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste are all engaged. Libraries, by comparison, remain "single-sensory," limited to visual contact with books and lighting, devoid of holistic enjoyment.

For modern urbanites, public spaces are no longer just venues for work or study but extensions of lifestyle. People visit cafés not only for coffee but to enjoy a comfortable, beautiful, and welcoming environment that offers both relaxation and aesthetic fulfillment. Libraries,

however, remain purely functional tools for learning, unable to meet these evolving lifestyle needs. As aesthetic expectations continue to rise, the design and sensory advantages of cafés make them superior "third spaces"—a gap libraries struggle to close.

Conclusion

In conclusion, coffee shops excel over libraries in three key aspects: sound atmosphere, social attributes, and space design. They perfectly meet the core demands of modern urbanites for the third space. Calming music and white noise alleviate mental stress, an inclusive social environment builds emotional connections, and exquisite space design provides an immersive aesthetic experience. This makes coffee shops the core carrier of modern public life that combines emotional value, social value, and aesthetic value. In contrast, libraries, with their core space logic of quiet study, are unable to meet the diverse needs of modern people for comfort, communication, and aesthetics. Therefore, coffee shops are undoubtedly the more suitable choice for contemporary people as the third space.

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