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## Connecting at the "Third Place"

by Barry Koren, AIA, PhD



**A conversation I had** with a couple of people has stayed with me. It took place at the recent SMPS Holiday Party. One of the two other people in that conversation owns an engineering firm. He told me that he had come to the party to learn how to be a better networker. When we crossed paths later, he was chatting with a woman. I said to the engineer that she was one of the great SMPS networkers.

Surprised, she said that all she does is love to talk and to be with people. She said when she's at a SMPS networking party she doesn't give a damn about her work.

Like the engineer, I own my own firm, and like the woman, I enjoy myself most when I am able to throw thoughts of my firm overboard and really be with the people I happen to meet. It feels good and opens my heart and mind to others.

Before the Holiday Party, I knew

that the initial step of getting connected, say by chit-chatting, was needed before doing business-related work. It's the second step -- connecting more deeply and talking with people about things that are meaningful to both of us -- that opens new possibilities for me. There are lots of potential topics to venture into at a networking event. Here are a couple of possibilities that come to mind:

- The energy level amongst the people in the room. I might say it feels flat, high, low, edgy, calm, good, bad, etc.
- What I want...about, say, an everyday concern like parking in my neighborhood, or child care, or my career, or the huge federal deficit, or Iraq.

If a number of us connect regularly, we could create a core group of regulars at something called a "third place."\* Historically, people have needed family, work, and this third place. It helps us have a healthy, balanced social identity. Traditionally, people have had a third place in a church, a local bar, or a club.

For those of us who might be enriched by having this third place at SMPS, it's a place where rank is forgotten and conversation with everyone (rather than, say, music or drink) is the main source of entertainment. "Cheers" portrayed this scene on television. It's open and inclusive instead of cliquish -- and it provides novelty,

perspective on life, and a "spiritual tonic."

Having connections such as the ones I just described has been important at SMPS Chicago, probably since the Chapter's inception, but has recently taken on added significance. Building connections amongst members is now one of the three pillars that supports the Chapter's theme -- Advancing the Profession, Building a Better World.

So as we start this new year, I, for one, resolve to deepen my connections with people at SMPS. Because I'm more introverted than extroverted, I hope you'll join me and help me keep this resolution. Maybe we can even create a third place for ourselves.

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## References:

Richard T. Pascale and others, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, (NY: Three Rivers Press, 2000), p. 267.

Also see, Ray Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*.

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