

# Coffee Shops: The Piazza and the Commons in DUMBO, NYC

## Introduction:

Humans have long organized themselves in physical space in ways that reflect their values and principles. Scholars examining these patterns have taught us much about ourselves as a society: race relations in urban planning (Elizabeth Birmingham), loss of social capital in gentrification (Jane Jacobs), and the intelligence of crowding (Edward Glaeser). Our physical environment is built in the image of our needs, but in turn it also shapes us.

No longer solely purveyors of coffee – coffee shops have become major nodes in the lives of many. Their expanded uses – as workplace, rest stop, and meeting point, among others - reflect our daily needs, and considering what this means raises a compelling question: what function do coffee shops serve in our communities? In the exploratory study that follows, I will compare the roles of two coffee shops in the DUMBO neighborhood of Brooklyn: a Starbucks and a Brooklyn Roasting Company. Though they are both usually bustling with activity, and serve coffee and other beverages at comparable price points, they are also undeniably different from both a corporate and cultural perspective. Starbucks is an international chain attempting to blend into communities across the globe, while the Brooklyn Roasting Company has two locations, and is designed to be the quintessential local Brooklyn coffee shop. A more important distinction, however, lies in the ways that Starbucks is enacted as a “Commons” and the Brooklyn Roasting Company is enacted as a “Piazza”.

In the proceeding sections I will elaborate on the definitions of the Commons and the Piazza, and present evidence in support of these two analogies. This data was collected through interviews, in situ observation, and the analysis of online resources over the course of weeks. Understanding how and why these two shops serve these functions can provide substantial insight on how to evaluate and design these functional spaces into other communities. More importantly, this study raises additional questions about what it means to build community and community sustainability.

### Research Setting & Methods

The analysis that follows is based on observation and interviews with patrons of a Starbucks and a Brooklyn Roasting Company (BRC) shop in the DUMBO neighborhood of Brooklyn between September and October 2014. Self-reported reviews of these coffee shops from the website Yelp.com were also used in analysis, in addition to various articles and blog posts written and posted online. In situ data were collected at the Starbucks located at 67 Front St. and the Brooklyn Roasting Company (BRC) located at 25 Jay St. (both in Brooklyn, NY). Figure 1 demonstrates their locations relative to each other.



Figure 1 DUMBO neighborhood, highlighted.

A search on Google for “coffee shops near DUMBO, Brooklyn” yielded four other coffee shops, however these included shops that were either located in other businesses, or were also restaurants or delis.

*Starbucks*. Starbucks is an international coffeehouse chain with 20,519 stores in 63 countries (Starbucks, 2014). The present store is located at the intersection of two main streets in the business center<sup>1</sup> of DUMBO. Though its corporate website emphasizes that each Starbucks is unique:

<sup>1</sup> That is, between the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges.

<sup>2</sup> The sole interview in which I did not disclose my role as a researcher occurred when I happened to run in to a friend and his girlfriend while conducting observation at the BRC. In interviews in which I did not know the people I disclosed my role to gain their confidence. In this instance I did not feel that it was necessary.

“[Stores are designed to] reflect the unique character of the neighborhoods they serve...Starbucks design studios are located around the globe so that our designers can fully understand the communities they serve. The mission of each designer is to create a spectacular Starbucks café experience that is steeped in the local culture and designed to reflect the unique characteristics of each neighborhood.” (Starbucks)

The Starbucks branding is very strong, and anyone who has been in a Starbucks will immediately recognize the aesthetic – it resembles any number of other ones around the country. The space is relatively small and the layout is L-shaped around the coffee bar. It accommodates 4 (2 seat) tables and bar seating facing the front window along one side of the shop. On the other side of the bar there is a single larger common table as well as a “nook” with two large, over-stuffed chairs. It has music playing on speakers and there is a moderate level of noise from both patrons and the coffee equipment. Please see Appendix A for photos of this shop.

This Starbucks’ patrons seem to represent a broad cross-section of the population. Young parents with infants in strollers, young creative professionals, elderly men and women, students, construction workers, tourists, and white-collar office workers were all observed in this shop. Furthermore, these patrons were engaged in a broad range of activities, from collaborative professional work, to playing with children, to tutoring, to meeting friends, to studying maps of New York City, to eating and drinking. Customers were also observed sitting at tables, using outlets, using the bathrooms, and taking the newspapers left by other patrons.

*Brooklyn Roasting Company.* The Brooklyn Roasting Company is a local coffee shop with one other location at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. This BRC is located somewhat out of the way from the business center of DUMBO and occupies a large converted industrial space on the waterfront north of the Manhattan Bridge.

The company is managed by former Brooklyn Brewery partners Jim Munson, Michel Pollack, and Rob Herschenfeld. These men have contributed substantially to the “Brooklyn Renaissance” of the last 25 years (Brooklyn Brewery) by advocating for, and building, Brooklyn based business such as the Brooklyn Brewery and Brooklyn Roasting Company. In an article, Jim Munson says about the BRC: “We think that NYC deserves its own great coffee company...with a twist. We have a distinct Brooklyn personality and we like to think that we're pursuing the same kind of stratospheric excellence while maintaining a down-to-earth attitude” (Casey, 2011).

The space is a large converted industrial building with two separate coffee bars at which coffee beans are roasted and ground, and coffee is made. Many of the furnishings were constructed by the shop’s carpenter from various other salvaged objects and the overall aesthetic of the shop is strong, it looks like what you would expect a local Brooklyn coffee shop *to look like*. A review of the BRC written by Lindsey Hook on her blog *Hook’d On A Bite* captures this well:

“The first thing I noticed as soon as I walked in was the inviting and artsy atmosphere around me. Scattered with heavy wood, vintage decor, and reclaimed materials, it's the neighborhood coffee shop that everyone wants. There are all kinds of people around. From poetry fanatics chatting on the comfy couches, to young sketching artists, to moms with strollers and dads with docs, you'll find all types of Brooklyn locals here” (Hook, 2014)

A large coffee bar occupies the center of the shop, while a smaller coffee bar is off to one side. A large section of the front of the store is occupied by couches in a circle around a coffee table. There are also three large communal tables and a number of seats at a bar along a windowsill facing the street. Various other communal tables and “nooks” with over-stuffed chairs are found throughout the rest of the shop, and there are two 2-

seat tables in front of the second, minor coffee bar at the far side of the shop. See Appendix B for photos from the BRC>

The clientele at the BRC is fairly homogenous: young (i.e. 20s and 30s), trendy (i.e. wearing clothes and hairstyles that are contemporaneously fashionable), and working in the technical and creative industries. Many were observed working in Adobe Creative Suite, building code, or visiting Github or Twitter on their Macbooks. Interviewees referenced ample outlets, the WiFi, the height of the desks, and the variety of nooks as conducive to work. One young freelance copywriter suggested that many people working in the BRC were also freelancers like her, who did not have the space to meet with clients and team members in their home or co-working offices (of which there are two in the immediate neighborhood the DUMBO Startup Lab and the NYU-Poly Business Incubator). On very rare occasions parents with children and white-collar office workers were seen in the shop, but no blue-collar workers were observed.

### Data Collection

*Observation:* The 14 observation sessions reflect a random sampling of times and days, including weekends, mornings, afternoons, and evenings. Each observation session lasted between one and two hours. During periods of observation I kept copious “stream of consciousness” notes in which I recorded facts such as who was in the shop and what they were doing, as well as impressions. Frequent and repeated observation allowed me to recognize and to appreciate patterns in behavior.

*Interviews.* In situ interviews with patrons were also conducted, however interviews were unstructured and generally conversational. Patrons from different demographic groups were approached specifically to provide a more comprehensive picture of the clientele and their perceptions of the shops. In particular I asked questions that elicited information about their habits, reasons for coming, and impressions of the shop. My role as the researcher was made explicit in all but one interview<sup>2</sup>. Interviews were not recorded verbatim, but I recorded main quotes as well as general notes and impressions during and immediately following each interview.

*Analysis of Online Resources.* Online resources were analyzed to complement to observation and interviews. The coffee shops' corporate websites<sup>3</sup> (and mission statements in particular) were used to understand the culture and values espoused by the businesses. Yelp reviews<sup>4</sup> submitted by patrons of each shop (26 for the Starbucks, 160 for the BRC) were also analyzed to bolster data collected in-person on patrons' perceptions of, and experiences in, the coffee shops. These reviews provided a valuable juxtaposition to the observed actions and behaviors in coffee shops.

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<sup>3</sup> Starbucks corporate website: [www.starbucks.com](http://www.starbucks.com)  
BRC corporate website: [www.brooklynroasting.com](http://www.brooklynroasting.com)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.yelp.com/biz/starbucks-brooklyn-21> ; <http://www.yelp.com/biz/brooklyn-roasting-company-brooklyn-2>

## Data Analysis

Field notes from observation sessions and interview notes served as primary data sources. Notes were read, coded, and analyzed. Emergent themes were noted. Online resources were then considered in the process of developing and refining these emergent themes. Initial analysis of observation and interview notes highlighted important distinctions in the perception of social norms at each coffee shop. At this level of analysis, differing social norms also implicated distinct notions of utility/frivolity, space/place, and public/private. Multiple readings and coding exercises led to the development of the categories, presented here, that incorporated those themes.

## Results

In the section that follows, I will elaborate on the analogies of the Brooklyn Roasting Company to the Piazza and the Starbucks to the Commons, followed by a discussion on the implications for future studies.

*The Piazza.* The traditional notion of the Piazza refers to an open urban space – frequently exterior and centralized, though not necessarily designed – that functions “...as ritual center, public meeting ground, marketplace, or political center” (Fusch, 1994, p. 425). It is a vibrant stage around which economic, social, and cultural life is enacted through the activities the space supports.

On the surface, the location and function of the Brooklyn Roasting Company allow its patrons to behave in the BRC much as they would have in an Italian piazza. The BRC centralizes the amenities necessary<sup>5</sup> for the types of creative and technical mobile workers found at the BRC to “set up shop”, establishing it as a significant node in the

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<sup>5</sup> That is, WiFi, desks, conference space, outlets, bathrooms, etc.



local digital industry. At one point during an interview with an old college classmate who happened to be at the BRC I expressed surprise at running in to him there. He corrected me, pointing out that we are both in the technology sector so it makes sense that we would run in to each other in a “tech hub” like DUMBO, and at one of the only coffee shops at that. This telling exchange demonstrates the extent to which the BRC is embedded as an institution in this tech community.

The Piazza may have traditionally acted as a platform for the production and exchange of tangible goods, but the Digital Era<sup>6</sup> has elevated the importance of intangible digital goods and substantially changed the sites of industrial production as well as the face of the “marketplace”. The BRC seems to be a thriving platform for this form of contemporary work.

The mobile-workers who “set up shop” at the BRC are in turn woven into the performance – or the “form” (Fusch, 1994) - of the Brooklyn Roasting Company. What follows from the interaction between location, form, and function is a characteristic ritual of the Piazza: the *passeggiata*. The traditional *passeggiata* is a daily walk through the Piazza, in which community members effectively perform for each other. Participants go to the Piazza to see and be seen, displaying their values in the “aesthetic” of bodily practice, including fashion, posture, and actions (Del Negro, 2004). Finally, this dynamic performance “create[s] a sense of place and perspective, fitting together like polychromatic pieces of a puzzle to create a total character unique to any specific city section and to the city as a whole” (Fusch, 1994, p. 424).

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<sup>6</sup> Refers to the transition from an economy based on industrialization to an economy based on information. (Castells, 2011)

As discussed in earlier sections, the entire aesthetic of the BRC was designed to deliberately showcase a Brooklyn ethos as defined by the company's founders. Without speculating on what an objective "Booklyn aesthetic" looks like, the ethos promoted by the founders manifests as an alternative industrial / chic style<sup>7</sup> with a focus on sustainability<sup>8</sup>. The BRC's core clientele (that is, the people who frequently work at the BRC) reflect this aesthetic in their own style, they "dress the part" (to play their part) of the creative Brooklynite working in the trendy cafe. Customers observed were by and large on-trend in their clothing, hair, and jewelry in a certain "hipster" style<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, one young software developer interviewed (who had the least creative job, by his own admission) pointed out that other patrons in the BRC were young and "creative looking – all working on Macbooks" (he was in fact the only person ever observed *not* working on a Mac.)

This "staging" of Brooklyn that happens at the BRC draws people from across New York City as well as from across the United States for the experience. Regular patrons come from as far as Morningside Heights in Manhattan (as in the case of one Columbia student interviewed), and visitors from across the United States reported visiting the BRC on Yelp. The authors of many of the Yelp reviews on the BRC *were not* from Brooklyn. Indeed, only approximately a third of the 160 Yelp reviewers claimed to live in Brooklyn (on their profiles), and only one explicitly said that they were located in DUMBO. The remaining two thirds of reviewers were from other parts of New York and the U.S. The BRC acts as a central and monumental feature in the

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix B

<sup>8</sup> See the "coffeelosophy" at [brooklynroasting.com](http://brooklynroasting.com) for an explanation of sustainability practices.

<sup>9</sup> See: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/02/fashion/williamsburg.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/02/fashion/williamsburg.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) for further explanation of the "Brooklyn hipster".

Brooklyn landscape, much as the Piazza does in traditional urban planning, and attracts people accordingly. On Yelp, Reviewers described their visits as if they had gone to the Statue of Liberty or Rockefeller Center (that is, monumental destinations in the traditional sense.): “heard about this place from my two guy friends from California, and finally got to try it today”, “I’d been dying to try this highly talked about gem...I decided to finally try it out for myself”, “when I have family or friends in town visiting this is a for sure stop along the route of visiting the city”.

Like the Piazza, people are drawn to the BRC in part due to its vibrancy. This sense of atmosphere is hard to describe, but people are compelled to participate in the passeggiata, to share in the creation of this experience, unique to the culture it is situated in. People largely enjoyed this experience: Yelp reviews use extremely positive language (e.g. “outstanding”, “perfect”, “love”, “fantastic”, “awesome”, “best”) to describe this intangible “environment”, “atmosphere”, and “feel” of the BRC.

*The Commons.* The terms “Commons” refers to common land, a shared property resource whose use is not limited to a particular group of people. The enduring image of a Commons comes from the economist Garrett Hardin’s “...a pasture open to all” (Hardin, 1968, p. 1244) for grazing privately owned animals. Traditionally, rhetoric around the concept of the Commons was most often associated with its abuse, and in particular, the economic theory of the *tragedy of the commons*. This theory postulates that given a communal resource, users will act rationally in their own self-interest, and thus deplete the resource and detriment the communal interest (Hardin, 1968). This phenomenon is well known, found even in the observations of Aristotle: “what is common to the greatest

number of people has the least care bestowed upon it. Everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest” (Aristotle, 350 BC).

It is this sense of entitlement, alluded to by Aristotle, that was observed in the customers of the Starbucks. Though the infrastructural amenities at the Starbucks did not differ significantly from those provided by the BRC – WiFi, desks, toilet, space, etc. – patrons’ approach to these resources were significantly more possessive at the Starbucks. Individuals were observed entering the shop exclusively to use the bathroom or charge their electronic devices. Groups that entered were exceedingly loud and rambunctious (inappropriately so for a coffee shop) and moved the furniture around to accommodate the group. Rarely were people observed *returning* the furniture to its original position. In many instances, people did not even bother to buy anything at the Starbucks, having used its space, bathroom, or condiments for free. Entire tutoring sessions and business meeting were observed in which not a single person had bought a Starbucks beverage. As one Yelp reviewer explained, “This is my neighborhood Starbucks, which I usually abuse for the free WiFi and restroom.” Another DUMBO native on Yelp described the extent of his reliance on Starbucks resources: “For one week I was without WiFi and this particular Starbucks helped me out by being open and having free WiFi.”

This widespread realization of entitlement reflects on the values of the Starbucks customer, convenience and reliability above all. An older man that travelled extensively and worked predominantly from his iPhone related in an interview that he usually goes to Starbucks (“at least 50% of the time”), ... based on geographic proximity and convenience. He described a recent summer spent in London in which Starbucks was *the*

*only place* he could find with free WiFi to do his work. He said that he relies on the consistency of such chain coffee shops on the road. He appreciates small “mom-and-pop coffee shops”, but feels bad spending a long time in them – they are usually smaller and he feels like the owners or baristas are watching him the whole time. At chains like Starbucks, he feels comfortable asking for free-refills while he works, but feels bad asking at local shops where “they’re watching every penny to survive”. He feels as if he is taking from their business. The points made by this gentlemen were reiterated in other interviews and in Yelp reviews. Every customer interviewed cited proximity to their destination (either home or work) as their reason for going to that Starbucks, and they were frequently *filling time* before or between meetings in local offices.

The emergence of this “culture of abuse” seems to be less organic than originally seemed. As Priya Raghubir, a professor of marketing at NYU Stern, said in an interview, “[the goal customer] values the convenience, they value the welcome, they value the fact that they can find Starbucks anywhere...and offerings are uniform” (Raghubir, 2013). From the mission statement<sup>10</sup> posted on the Starbucks corporate website, it becomes evident that fostering this type of familiarity, consistency, and reliability creates reliance in the customer. Indeed, one woman interviewed (a self-professed “creature of habit” that visited Starbucks on a daily basis) related that her brother, a recovering alcoholic, had replaced his addiction for alcohol with an addiction to coffee and then tea, and searches out Starbucks “religiously”. It seems as if Starbucks was able to create this level

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<sup>10</sup> “We’re not just passionate purveyors of coffee, but everything else that goes with a full and rewarding coffeehouse experience...It’s not unusual to see people coming to Starbucks to chat, meet up or even work. We’re a neighborhood gathering place, a part of the daily routine – and we couldn’t be happier about it. Get to know us and you’ll see: we are so much more than what we brew.”

of loyalty by giving the impression of ownership to its customers. Furthermore, these practices are highly embedded and reach as far as the title given employees, “partners”, a term which, used in any other context, implies equitable ownership of a resource.

## Discussion

Analysis and comparison of how the Brooklyn Roasting Company and the Starbucks in the DUMBO neighborhood of Brooklyn are enacted has provided valuable analogies for thinking about the functions of coffee shops in contemporary communities. The role of the Starbucks *cum* Commons and the BRC *cum* Piazza are powerful reflections of our own needs and behaviors and serve as useful case studies for other coffee shops trying to establish different types of communities and relationships with their own customers.

More importantly, the analysis presented here raises questions about the socio-materiality of the spaces where we spend much of our time. The first area of inquiry relates to the sustainability of the Commons as a business strategy and a community model. Though the Starbucks is *enacted* as a traditional Commons, *it is not a Commons*. The true Commons is a *shared* property resource, and the resource is (typically) originally freely available (that is, for example, air, water, land, etc.) The resources that are freely accessible to Starbucks customers cost money to the business: the Starbucks Commons is an illusion. Does the illusion of a Commons, however, constitute a legitimate Commons? Can legitimate communities with shared values, intents, and identities arise from an institution premised on the ability to abused?

The BRC model, on the other hand, does not speak to these questions because the function of the Piazza is not orthogonal to the function of the Commons. Conceptually

they serve two separate purposes: the Commons is a shared resource requiring cooperation and moderation for sustainment, whereas the Piazza is a platform whose value increases with each individual actions of its community members. Indeed, the participants observed in both of these settings were highly self-selecting and had little crossover. BRC customers reacted with disgust when asked if they ever went to Starbucks, and Starbucks patrons clearly valued qualities in the Starbucks that were not provided by the BRC. This raises questions about the legitimacy of the type of community fostered by the BRC. If its members are highly homogenous, does the establishment of such a micro-community detriment the community at large? The present research was not a true comparative study so we cannot speculate on how these two institutions interact. Future studies should use the categorizations explored here to further understand how communities prioritize and enact their public spaces.

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## Reflection

This project, and class in general, has challenged me to not only develop a new skill set, but to appreciate qualitative skills along side quantitative ones. Beginning as a masters student and now as a PhD student, I feel like my skillset has not been broadening so much as deepening: while I spent time learning theory and statistics, formal qualitative data analysis was not on my radar.

I think that one of the biggest challenges for me at the beginning of the coffee shop project was to let go of structure, to stop looking for categories and counts and trying to fit patterns, and to just “let it flow”. In theory I understood the methodological readings we had for class every week, but this predisposition made it unbelievably difficult to put into practice. Looking back over my notes I realize that I missed a tremendous amount of detail as I was fighting the data collection techniques. This resulted in my needing to recall many things from memory when communicating my findings in this paper. To some degree I think this would have been remedied by using a recorder in interviews, but it was not until I forced myself to sit in the coffee shops and just type and type and type what I was seeing did the process of observation begin to click.

I still feel like the formal process of identifying and developing themes, then using them to create a narrative, is a bit difficult for me. I also think, however, that it will come to me with time. In the last several weeks a quantitative analysis for my own research failed so I conducted a qualitative analysis of reviews written by the some 450 participants using techniques learned in this course to figure out what had happened. Even though it was not purely exploratory (like the coffee shop study), already the

process felt more intuitive. I think this is likely true of writing this type of narrative as well. I am confident that with practice these processes will become valuable tools in my research.

With regards to my findings in particular, I am rather proud of the connections I discovered between the Starbucks and the Commons and the BRC and the Piazza because my observations felt like so many unrelated pieces of information for so long. My academic background is more in thinking about the form and function of artifacts rather than behavior, so the taxonomy that I presented makes sense as a bridge between the two. Knowing what I do now, I would attempt to conceptualize these categories earlier (perhaps at the expense of being robust) so that I could gain experience in testing the taxonomy in a different context.

## Appendix A: Images if the DUMBO Starbucks



Figure 2 View of the front of the coffee bar. Retrieved from <http://s3-media1.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/DPxdnY5FNCiKQHKyajeDQ/1.jpg>

## Appendix B: Images of the Brooklyn Roasting Company



Figure 3 Main coffee bar at the center of the shop. Retrieved from <http://explorebk.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/photo-41.jpg>



Figure 4 Small coffee bar on the side of the shop. Retrieved from <http://aranddee.net/wp-content/uploads/2-ROASTER.jpg>



Figure 5 View of seating. Retrieved from  
[http://damhyul3s75yv.cloudfront.net/photos/9275/original\\_Brooklyn\\_Roasting\\_Company\\_Cafe\\_25\\_Jay\\_Street.jpg](http://damhyul3s75yv.cloudfront.net/photos/9275/original_Brooklyn_Roasting_Company_Cafe_25_Jay_Street.jpg)