

THIRDSPACE AS TOOL FOR GROUNDING AT-RISK YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace can be applied as a conceptual tool to rethink institutional environments for at-risk youth. While Firstspace views spaces solely as physical structures, such as walls and doors and Secondspace conceptualizes spaces through planning and design, Thirdspace emphasizes the way spaces are experienced, felt, and lived. Using the lens of Thirdspace theory, institutional environments are revealed as non-neutral spaces, shaped by lived experiences and power structures - often perceived by at-risk youth through control, trauma, and exclusion (Soja, 1996). By employing Thirdspace theory as a conceptual framework within institutional settings, such as detention centres for at-risk youth, it becomes possible to reimagine these environments not merely as sites of control, but rather as spaces fostering emotional safety, identity development, and social inclusion (Soja, 1996).

KEYWORDS

Thirdspace theory; Edward Soja; spatial experience; institutional environments; emotional safety; at-risk youth, social justice; juvenile delinquency

1. FOREWORD

In many institutional settings - such as schools, youth centres, or governmental care systems - spaces intended to ensure safety, care and protection frequently reflect patterns of control, hierarchy, surveillance, and separation. In severe cases, these environments are based on punitive systems rather than supportive ones. This article explores how such environments are conceptually designed. Instead of focusing solely on functional architectural planning, architects and planners should ground their spatial approach in the lived and symbolic experiences of space. To support this shift, the article applies Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace, offering a spatial framework that moves beyond the purely physical structures of Firstspace and the planned environments of Secondspace toward an understanding of space as lived, felt, and experienced.

Thirdspace theory challenges the notion that architecture can be reduced merely to walls, circulation paths, or zoning diagrams. Instead, it emphasizes how space is negotiated through memory, identity, and social interactions. Applying this theory to institutional environments suggests that spatial configurations can serve as platforms fostering safety, trust-building and trauma recovery rather than functioning as instruments of control.

One of the key reasons Thirdspace theory is valuable as a tool for enhancing safety is - its fundamental rejection of binary thinking. Instead of viewing institutional environments strictly as spaces defined by the opposition between control and freedom, Thirdspace theory encourages understanding these environments as layered, dynamic, and shaped by lived experiences. As Soja (1996) argues, even regulated or structured spaces can foster empowerment, identity and care when designed with sensitivity to lived experience.

For at-risk youth whose relationships with authority and stability are often marked by prior trauma, institutional spaces should offer more than mere safety achieved through surveillance. These environments should support not only

structured activities but also informal interactions, personal expression, and emotional connection. Here, Thirdspace theory becomes not only a theoretical lens but also a practical design tool, prioritizing spatial justice, emotional safety, and user engagement. By emphasizing lived experience, this article advocates for institutional architecture that transcends rigid programming, adopting spatial approaches that position young people as co-creators of the environments in which they live and engage.

2. WHAT IS THIRDSPACE?

Architectural environments are never experienced solely as physical structures.

they are perceived and lived through emotions, memories, and identities (Soja, 1996).

Edward Soja introduced the theory of Thirdspace in his seminal work, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), offering a conceptual framework that captures layered spatial experiences. Building upon Henri Lefebvre's (1974) theoretical work on the Social Production of Space, Soja proposes a trialectical model that transcends the binary opposition between material form and abstract representation by incorporating lived experience as a third dimension of spatial understanding (Soja, 1996).

Soja describes three interconnected ways of understanding space. Firstspace refers to the measurable, material environment - what can be mapped, seen and constructed. Secondspace relates to the imagined and conceptual framing - how individuals or institutions perceive and interpret space. These two models dominate most architectural and institutional planning. However, Thirdspace introduces the lived, emotional, and symbolically layered dimension of space - space as it is experienced and shaped by those who inhabit it (Soja, 1996).

Rather than being a fixed or clearly bounded zone, Thirdspace is hybrid, fluid and open to interpretation. Soja describes it as "a strategic location from which to encompass, understand and potentially transform all spaces simultaneously," emphasizing its "radical

openness" and its capacity to function as "the space of social struggle." Thirdspace does not emerge from programming or policy, but from everyday use, negotiation and relational dynamics. Crucially, it encompasses the power relations embedded in spatial structures—how environments include or exclude, support or surveil, empower or oppress.

This article argues that space is experienced not only physically, but also socially and politically. In this context, Soja's emphasis on spatial justice reinforces the understanding that space can either support inclusion or reproduce exclusion (Soja, 2010). Through the lens of Thirdspace, marginalized groups gain theoretical grounding to reclaim spatial agency- using space to meet personal needs and engage in emotional inhabitation as acts of resistance and identity construction. This is particularly relevant for young people navigating institutional environments that were not originally designed to support their expression, healing or autonomy.

In conclusion, Thirdspace offers more than a theory of space - it provides a way to reinterpret environments through the lens of lived experience. It equips architects and spatial planners with a vocabulary for addressing inclusion, affect, and agency, particularly in settings historically dominated by control, formality and standardization. By shifting attention toward the users perspective, Thirdspace promotes a form of spatial thinking that is empathetic, pluralistic and open to reinterpretation. This conceptual foundation reinforces the central argument that institutional systems for at-risk youth can be transformed not only by altering their physical form, but by designing with a deep sensitivity to lived experience.

3. RETHINKING INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN THROUGH THIRDSPACE.

Institutional architecture has historically prioritized control, order and surveillance - particularly in environments such as youth detention centres, psychiatric institutions and care facilities. These spaces are often designed

according to Firstspace and Secondspace logics, focusing on material containment and administrative functionality. While such priorities are frequently justified in terms of safety, they tend to produce environments that are emotionally sterile, spatially rigid and socially disempowering. When applied to youth populations - especially those already affected by trauma, marginalization or systemic exclusion - this form of institutional spatial design risks deepening alienation rather than fostering integration (Soja, 1996).

Soja's theoretical concept of Thirdspace offers a distinct perspective through which to critique and reimagine institutional settings. By shifting the focus from architecture as a fixed product to space as lived experience, Thirdspace encourages spatial designers to engage with space from emotional and symbolic standpoints. Soja describes Thirdspace as "a space for lived experience, simultaneously real and imagined, formal and informal, personal and political" (Soja, 1996). In this sense, institutional spaces are not merely constructed - they are continuously interpreted, negotiated and at times resisted by those who inhabit them.

3.1 FROM CONTROL TO CO-CREATING

In traditional institutional environments, power is embedded in architectural form - through long corridors, locked doors, surveillance points and rigid circulation routes used to manage behaviour. While such measures may be necessary in certain contexts, this approach leaves little room for personalization, flexibility or emotional comfort. Thirdspace, however, advocates for more participatory and appropriable environments - spaces that invite users to engage with and adapt their surroundings (Soja, 1996).

Soja's later work, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, extends the political potential of Thirdspace. He argues that space is never neutral - it is often structured by systems of exclusion and control (Soja, 2010). From this perspective, institutional environments are not only products of injustice but also mechanisms that perpetuate it. For young people placed in detention centers or care

settings, this often means inhabiting spaces that were not designed with their needs in mind - or worse, deliberately designed to suppress their autonomy (Soja, 2010).

This concern is particularly relevant in the Latvian context, where institutional architecture for youth has historically followed outdated planning models and systems that emphasize control, rigidity and surveillance (UNICEF, 2019). Reimagining these environments through the lens of Thirdspace theory requires more than mere renovation - it demands a fundamental shift in values. Participatory design methods offer a powerful opportunity in this regard. Involving young people in shaping their environments - through co-design workshops, feedback loops, or temporary spatial interventions - can help transform institutions from spaces of imposition into spaces of meaningful impact, fostering identity, trust and belonging within otherwise rigid systems (Closslett, 2024).

3.2 THIRDSPACE INSPIRED

INTERVENTIONS

A range of spatial approaches aligned with Thirdspace theory can help reimagine institutional architecture as more than a purely functional object. These interventions offer practical ways to support emotional safety, autonomy and user agency - particularly for at-risk youth in residential or detention settings. While often modest in scale, such approaches challenge institutional norms by integrating the lived, negotiated and relational dimensions of space (Lefebvre, 1991; Cosslett, 2024).

Flexible spatial layouts – Architectural flexibility can be achieved through adaptable floor plans, sliding partitions, or modular and movable furniture systems that allow spaces to shift according to use. For example, a shared activity room might transition between communal dining, art therapy, or group sessions. This adaptability enables young people to modulate their environments, reinforcing a sense of autonomy and allowing spaces to respond to changing emotional needs (Kopeck, 2012).

Soft transitional zones – Rather than relying on

rigid thresholds such as locked doors or institutional corridors, soft spatial buffers create gentle gradations between public and private realms. Design elements like half-height walls, filtered lighting, or semi-open screens support visual permeability and voluntary engagement. These thresholds facilitate informal encounters and promote psychological comfort by allowing users to control their level of exposure and privacy (Ames & Loebach, 2023).

Spaces for personalization and identity expression - Institutional architecture often strips away individuality. Allowing users to personalize their spaces - even in small ways, such as arranging furniture, selecting colour palettes, or using designated areas for personal displays - can support emotional grounding and foster a sense of identity and belonging (Justus & Raghani, 2020).

Quiet and emotional refuge zones - Small niches can serve as spaces of retreat, offering opportunities for self-regulation, solitude and self-reflection. These might include recessed window alcoves, green courtyards, sound-dampened nooks or low-sensory rooms. Such approaches are essential in trauma-sensitive design, providing relief from overstimulation and the constant presence of surveillance embedded in many institutional layouts (Sternberg, 2009).

Co-created and user-authored micro spaces - Thirdspace foregrounds the idea that space becomes meaningful through appropriation and lived interaction. Providing co-creative zones - such as resident-maintained gardens or collaborative spaces for art installations - invites young people to actively shape their environment. These spatial practices go beyond enabling self-expression; they enact spatial justice by positioning users as co-authors of their own surroundings (Soja, 1996).

Taken together, these design approaches reframe institutional environments not as spaces of control, but as negotiated settings where healthy environments and meaningful social life can emerge. Thirdspace encourages architects to move beyond typological prescriptions and instead create environments that accommodate informality, personal interpretation and

emotional resonance. Even within the constraints of regulated institutions, modest architectural interventions can open up new spatial possibilities - ones that support dignity, trust and participation (Soja, 1996).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS.

The article explored Edward Soja's theory as a lens for rethinking institutional architecture, particularly within youth detention and care environments. By shifting the focus from the material and conceptual aspects of space to its lived, emotional and symbolic dimensions, Thirdspace theory invites architects to reconsider conventional design approaches - often rooted in control and hierarchy and instead envision spaces that support autonomy, trust, and most importantly - safety.

Institutions, especially those serving vulnerable populations, are more than functional systems; they are lived environments imbued with meaning, memory and emotion. For at-risk youth navigating trauma and marginalization, the ability to interpret and appropriate space plays a fundamental role in psychological safety, social development and identity formation. Thirdspace allows us to frame these spatial experiences not as incidental, but as central to how institutions either alienate or empower.

Incorporating Thirdspace into institutional design involves recognizing the value of informal and emotionally resonant spaces. Whether through flexible lounges, personalized corners or co-designed common areas, these interventions shift the architectural narrative from one of control and management to one of meaning-making. This approach not only reflects the principles of spatial justice, as described by Soja, but also aligns with broader movements in trauma-informed and inclusive design.

Thirdspace encourages architects and planners to conceive of space not merely as functional, but as an active participant in the lived experience of care. In the context of youth institutions, this theoretical framework offers a different perspective on designing environments that are not only secure, but also socially supportive and responsive.

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