



PAPER ID: 11A04P



SEEKING IDENTITY IN COLLEGE TOWNS THROUGH PUBLIC SPACES: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 August 2019
Received in revised form 25
November 2019
Accepted 06 December 2019
Available online 12 December
2019

Keywords:

College town
landscape; College
town character;
Campus community;
Urban identity; College
town space; Sense of a
place; Public Space;
University gardens;
Cultural identity;
Campus identity;
Businesses in college
towns.

ABSTRACT

Hundreds of USA college towns present a unique type of urban place and different from other cities and towns where the college towns are located. They share many common characters, such as their youthful populations, highly educated workforces, the relative absence of heavy industry, with cultural opportunities more typical of large cities. In addition, the attributes of the institutions located in college towns and the residents breed unusual landscapes and architectural landmarks - the university campus, fraternity rows, the college-oriented shopping districts, and student-oriented housings. In a college town, a higher education institution creates a dominant influence over the characters of the community and mainly contributes to the formation of the town's culture and identity. General urban spaces in college towns are highly used for social interactions and often considered an extension of a university campus. The college town experience has contributed to the town's urban identity formation and played an important role in shaping many citizens' personalities and worldviews. However, limited studies of college towns have been conducted to investigate the unique urban space of college towns. This paper examines the qualities of public spaces in two college towns in the Northwest region of the US: Pullman WA, and Moscow, ID, where the main campus of Washington State University and the University of Idaho is located respectively and investigates how they contribute to the shape of local identity. Employing field observations and interviews, this study focuses on the edges between the university campus and the town center and observes how the urban experience of using these edges supports social interaction and shapes people's unique sense of a place. This study reveals a unique urban pattern of spatial performance and its relationship to people's spatial experience and interpretation. Also, this study suggests the qualities of designing public spaces to promote the sense of place and tactile reality.

Disciplinary: Architecture and Town Planning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

People always attach places to some special meanings. Indeed, the meaning of a place is considerably important for people's spatial perception and determines their behaviors and feelings. Tuan (1977) suggests that the meaning of a place is structured by people's experiences. For people, a place possesses its own discrete cluster of attributes and properties which cause and correspond to people's feelings, behaviors, responses, and perceptions. Then, those feelings, behaviors, responses and perceptions accommodate, assimilate and evaluate place-related information and begin to conceptualize the identity of the place (Breakwell, 1986). For decades, researchers have explored the interaction between the environment and human behaviors to better understand the meaning of place in everyday lives and how those everyday experiences are related to the meaning of place within particular social and cultural contexts. Relph (1976) points out that physical settings, human activities, and place meanings are the three fundamental components of a place. Canter (1977) provides a similar model, in which the meaning of a place is defined by the interaction among actions, conceptions and physical attributes.

Agnew (1987) focuses on the social influence over the meaning of a place, and he demonstrates three fundamental elements: 1) locale, referring to the settings composed of both informal and institutional social relationships; 2) location, the geographical area encompassing the locale; and 3) sense of place, the locally constructed human feelings, and perceptions. Therefore, the meaning of a place is defined by its geographical characteristics, its relationships with the cultural and social surroundings, and people's established subjective territorial identity. Due to the ongoing interactions between the locale and its surroundings, a place is not considered static. Rather, the meaning of a place is the product of the continuous interactions of the three elements and also continuously produces new meanings over a period of time. Massey (1994) argues that the meaning of a place is not essence, but processes. This suggests that a place means different things for each individual and it may acquire new meanings over time.

Researchers have employed the notion of "place identity" to describe the meaning of place (like Proshansky et al., 1983; Korpela, 1989; Lalli, 1992; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996; Zwain and Bahauddin, 2019). Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) stress that two ways directly related to the establishment of place identity. The first is place identification, referring to people's expressed identification with a place, like people from London referring to themselves as Londoners. In this way, social identity and social meanings can be inserted into the place identity. Hence, place identification would express membership of a group of people who are defined by location. The second is the relationship between people's social behaviors and the physical characteristics of a place. This model demonstrates that place identity can be defined by either the characteristics of physical environments, or the human behaviors and management, or both. In short, the meaning of a place can be either place-based or people-based.

College towns are unconventional places with unique physical characteristics and unusual demographics, different from other towns and cities. Unlike their European counterparts in large cities, many American universities and colleges are located in small towns where the higher education institutions clearly dominate the urban lives. In an American college town, a college or university significantly influences the community life and considerably shapes local cultural and social contexts. Normally, the college or university is the largest employer in town, and the students

of the college or university make up a large percentage of the local population. In general, the university campus is located close to the center of the town and becomes the hub of local activities, serving not only students and faculty but also the residents of the town and nearby communities. With the “green space” of campus, rows of fraternity houses and student dorms, as well as symbolic sports facilities, the university presents different attributes of places. In a college town, urban life is strongly tied to campus life and is strongly influenced by the distinctive characteristics of campus. Those characteristics not only provide distinctive place identification for local people but also facilitate diverse and rich social and cultural interactions between local residents and the environment.

In addition, college towns often pay considerable attention to the quality of their place images. Both the university and the local community are enormously dependent upon their positive “images.” For the university, a good image is an attraction for excellent faculty and students, and high levels of grants, donations, external investment and support. For the local community, the positive place image is equally important to encourage more middle-and upper-class families to move in and consequently increase opportunities for external investment and tax-revenues. A good place contributes to the standing of a good university while a good university contributes to cultural enrichment, social harmony and economic growth. College towns have posed a unique pattern of urban space. However, very limited studies focus on this particular quality of ordinary everyday spaces in college towns that acquire their own meanings to be placed through unusual processes.

This study is to examine the quality of the public spaces in college towns and to investigate how those spaces acquire their particular meanings through the interaction between their physical characteristics and human behaviors to the contribution of the urban identity of the host city /town. This study is conducted in Moscow, Idaho and Pullman, Washington, both with 25-35 thousand population, and homes for the University of Idaho and Washington State University respectively, two major state flagship and land-grant universities for the State of Idaho and the State of Washington in the US. The research inquiry employs two approaches: visual observations and face-to-face interviews. Visual observation uses various techniques, including diagrams, field notes, sketches, photographs, and video recordings. 122 people are sampled for interviews by convenience sampling. Both methods provide information about people’s behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions and their interactions with the physical characteristics and qualities of particular places. In this study, “public space” is identified as a physical place where people spend time in the active or passive socialization with other people or conduct particular activities.

2. OVERVIEW OF COLLEGE TOWNS IN THE US

There are hundreds of college towns in the US. Among them, some are famous due to the prestigious universities that are located in those towns, such as Ann Arbor, MI for University of Michigan; Newark, DE, for University of Delaware; Norman, OK for University of Oklahoma; State College, PA for Pennsylvania State University; Ithaca, NY for Cornell University, etc. Across the USA, no matter if the college town is home to a comprehensive state flagship university or a small private college, there are a series of fundamental differences between college towns and other kinds of cities and towns.

First, the demography of college towns shows a significant difference from other cities and towns. Due to a large number of students and faculty members in town, the median age of college towns are much younger, and the educational achievement of residents is much higher. For example, the Median age is 24.4 in Moscow, ID and 22.5 in Pullman, WA, beyond 10 years younger than the United States overall (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). There are 54% Moscow adults and 65.3% Pullman adults who have gained a bachelor's degree or above, compared with the national average of 24.4%. Also, in Moscow and Pullman, there is a high percentage of non-married people (45.8% and 58.5 respectively, much higher than the national level's 27.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This means that residents of college towns are youthful and highly educated with less family commitment.

In a college town, the hosted university is the primary economic driver and also the largest local employer. In general, education contributes nearly 20% of employment in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). But it provides 44% employment in Moscow, and 54% in Pullman, both the largest within the town.

College towns are often comparatively cosmopolitan and culturally diverse. In the Northwest Inland region of the US, both Moscow and Pullman are unusually diverse in their population makeup. Pullman has 9% Asian population, higher than all towns and cities in the entire state of Washington and Moscow has the highest percentage of Asian population within the state of Idaho (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). There are more than 2,000 international students from over 100 countries enrolled at Washington State University, and 500 students from over 76 countries at the University of Idaho.

The unique attributes of college town demographics would inevitably influence local culture and lifestyles and shapes an unusual urban identity for the local communities. The research orientation and large population of students and faculty create a strong intellectual context that would lead to a fashioned distinctive non-mainstream taste in public life. In his study of an American college town, Gumpercht (2003) discovered that due to the influence of students and faculty in social science, arts and humanities, college towns normally are more liberal in the political views and more likely support left-leaning causes and candidates. There are more non-mainstream tastes, active music scenes, ethnic restaurants and offbeat movies. There are more people in college towns who tend to read the New York Times, listen to National Public Radio, and advocate environmental sustainability and human rights. Also, residents in college towns are much less likely to use private automobiles for commuting to work or study. In Moscow and Pullman, around 20% of residents walk to work or study, almost nine times higher than people in other US cities and towns (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

In addition, since students contribute considerably to the makeup of the town population and most students would move to other places after their graduation, there is high life mobility in college towns. One-quarter of Moscow residents move from other states during the past five years, three times as likely as the overall US population. In Pullman, during the past 5 years, over 15% of residents are from other states. As a result, house ownership is significantly low while rental housing is more commonly occupied. In Pullman, nearly 70 % of residents live in rental housing and more than half of Moscow residents live in rental housing. Table 1 shows the percentage of housing tenure occupied by owners and renters. This also influences the form of housing units.

Grouping housing is more commonly employed. Table 2 indicates that residents in both Moscow and Pullman are more than twice as likely as the overall US population to live in a 2-bedroom housing. And more than half of residents in Pullman and Moscow live in collective housings with 3 or more bedrooms.

Table 1. Percentage of housing occupancy comparison among Pullman, Moscow and the national level. (Resource: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Type	U.S. Average	Pullman, WA	Moscow, ID
Owner-occupied housing units	66.2%	30.7%	43.8%
Renter-occupied housing units	33.8%	69.3%	56.2%

Table 2: Percentage of housing forms comparison among Pullman, Moscow and the national level. (Resource: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Number of rooms housing	U.S. Average	Pullman, WA	Moscow, ID
2 bed-room housing	4.3%	8.4%	9.3%
3 or above bed-room housing	22%	51.6%	37.5%

3. PUBLIC SPACES IN PULLMAN & MOSCOW

The rich and diverse public life in college towns encourages both formal and impromptu encounters and interactions. Public events occur in a variety of places, which possess particular physical characteristics or serve particular groups of people. In college towns, both the university and the community sponsor the shared experience in public spaces that serve basic survival, communication, and entertainment needs and perform cultural, social, civic and commercial functions. As a result, college towns have created some unconventional public spaces that are normally seen in other cities and towns.

3.1 UNIVERSITY CAMPUS AS A PUBLIC SPACE

In a college town, the university campus actually is the focus of community life. With its recreational facilities, libraries, bookstores, galleries and museums, banquet halls, auditoriums, theaters, stadiums, and gardens, the university campus is indeed the hub of event activities that are socially and culturally important. The campus serves not only students and faculty but also the entire community of the town and the region. Most local residents consider the university campus is an integral part of the town, providing a large range of activities and facilities. In college towns, the university campus is the primary provider for public interaction and draws people from surrounding communities, functioning as both a learning environment and a community public space. Hence, the university campus is central to the identity of the college town.

As a rural land-grant university, the University of Idaho campus is the largest within the state of Idaho, sprawling over 1,500 acres (6 square kilometers). Within this campus, there are two arboretums, an 18-hole golf course, a public gymnasium with a public swimming center, a public theater, two performing auditoriums, an indoor stadium, a bookstore, a daycare center, two baseball courts and multiple tennis courts, several religious centers and galleries, and conference facilities. There are also dozens of restaurants, café shops, and convenience stores. With the number and variety of events on campus increased, those spaces and facilities provide local residents with high quality social and cultural lives that can be normally associated only in large cities. Thus, the university campus becomes a major complement for college towns, greatly enhance the quality of local urban life and foster new social and cultural values into local communities. For example,

every February, the University of Idaho hosts the four-day-long Lionel Hampton International Jazz Festival, bringing international famous jazz masters together with elementary, junior high, high school and college students from the entire country to share and celebrate a truly American art form of music. This event attracts over ten thousand participants who come from different states and regions to Moscow. For local residents, this event is also the largest music gathering in town and they really enjoy the benefit of attending world-class jazz concerts in town without traveling hundreds of miles to other large cities.

During college football seasons, tens of thousands of fans are drawn from the entire region of eastern Washington and Northern Idaho to the two small towns. This becomes the primary economic driver for local communities and creates a “college football culture” such as group events before and after games, post-game traffic jams, and drunk fans. Washington State University’s Martin Stadium holds 35,117 people, ten thousand more than the entire population of Pullman. Visitors come from as far as Spokane and Walla Walla.

Over 95% of the interview respondents of this study report that they have either occasionally or frequently participated in events hosted on the campuses of the University of Idaho or Washington State University. Most of the respondents (92%) appreciate the opportunities of social and cultural events provided by the university and recognize that the university campus really improves their lives in a small town.

Campus landscape and university gardens are also central to the local residents’ public use. In this country, the belief that a college campus should be green and wooded has historically influenced most American university planning (Gumpercht, 2003). A park-like campus landscape fosters a natural consolation and also instills an appreciation for natural beauty and refinement to students and faculty. Gumpercht (2007) describes this trend in campus planning by citing Turner’s statement “the romantic notion of a college in nature, removed from the corrupting force of the city, became an American ideal.” (p.96). Both the University of Idaho and Washington State University have spent over 1 million dollars on their campus landscape maintenance and improvement. Both campuses are open to all public 24/7. Many local residents like to go to campus for walking the dog, jogging, or taking a rest. 54% of respondents occasionally go to university campuses for leisure activities. Consequently, it is more likely to see non-university residents in college towns be present on campus for a variety of purposes and there are more opportunities for social interactions for non-academic activities on the university campus which is located in a college town. Local communities often conduct event gatherings on the University of Idaho campus, see Figure 1.



Figure 1: Event gatherings on the University of Idaho campus.

Both Washington State University and the University of Idaho campuses have been used for occasional outdoor markets by local communities. Figure 2 displays an open market in operation close to the student housing of Washington State University campus.



Figure 2: An open market close to the student housing of Washington State University campus.

3.2 DOWNTOWN AS THE EXTENSION OF UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

Due to the unique demographics of their population, college towns have to develop a student- and faculty-oriented commercial business to meet their needs. This implies that certain types of businesses are more presented in college towns than in other cities and towns. In both Moscow and Pullman, it is so easy to find café shops, pizza stores, fast-food restaurants, ethnic foods, bars, bookstores, computer repair centers, bike shops, and t-shirt shops. For example, there are 12 pizza stores in Pullman and 7 in Moscow. Therefore, the pizza store per capita is 4.9 stores for every 10,000 residents in Pullman and 3.0 in Moscow, much higher than the state of Washington's 1.79 and the state of Idaho's 2.0 (Pizza Magazine, 2009). Also, because the car ownership per capita is low among students and the limited size of the town, those businesses are usually close to the campus and tend to be located together to form a commercial district where students can easily find what they want. Therefore, the commercial business area is normally located within 5-15 minute walking distance from campus and is often between the campus and the student-dominated neighborhoods.

In terms of the items provided by businesses in college towns, there are more un-mainstream and unconventional tastes and preferences. Bookstores in Moscow and Pullman often sell foreign books and independent film DVDs. Café shops often have divisions to separate spaces for group activities. Local businesses normally provide flexible shifts for their student workers. There are more restaurants that provide vegetable menus.

Also, the community events held at the commercial area and town center attract college students, faculty and staff members to actively participate. In both Pullman and Moscow, their downtown areas host weekly farmers' markets where the university population is not only the major buyers but also the major participants for playing live music, organizing group events, providing ethnic foods and products, and promoting new ideas and thoughts. During holiday seasons, groups and organizations from the university are normally the major participants of the town's annual parade. Through this interconnection occurred in community events, the college culture and identity naturally merge into local communities and shape the unique culture and identity for college towns.

4. THE SHAPE OF URBAN IDENTITY BY PUBLIC SPACES IN PULLMAN & MOSCOW

With their historical roots in agriculture and similar population sizes, both Pullman and Moscow offer a small-town comfort and cosmopolitan amenities. Like other college towns, Pullman and Moscow share many similar urban characteristics. Both towns are located in the heart of the Palouse area which is featured with rolling hills and wheat farming. Residents in both towns are young, culturally diverse, and highly educated. The number of college students makes up a large percentage of the entire population. The two universities are the largest employers in town and offer a lot of cultural, educational, and recreational opportunities for public events. Both towns have gained national attention and become known due to the two land-grant universities hosted.

However, both towns demonstrate a significant difference in urban identity and the quality of public spaces perceived by residents. 83% of respondents report that they consider Moscow is a better place to live with better urban sense and features than Pullman. 72% of respondents consider Moscow is more pedestrian-friendly and 65% report more urban amenities located in Moscow. In fact, 61% of respondents who live at Pullman often go to Moscow for leisure and shopping while only 35% of Moscow residents frequently travel to Pullman for leisure and shopping (one major reason is that there is no tax for grocery shopping in Washington). Figures 3 and 6 demonstrate the huge difference of weekend street scenes at the Main Street of Pullman and Moscow. The two photos are taken on the same day and same time. Obviously, there are many more people showed in Moscow's Main Street where public spaces are more used and better appreciated. Therefore, although as college towns, Pullman and Moscow are alike in many aspects, their public spaces show different patterns of performance.



Figure 3: The Different Street Life in downtown Pullman (left) and Moscow (right) at a typical weekend.

Several factors help explain why local residents are in strong favor of Moscow's public space. First, the public space in downtown Moscow is much easier to access for the university population. Although both Washington State University and the University of Idaho campuses are close to the downtown center of their hosted towns, it is much easier and more direct for the university population to commute between the town center and campus in Moscow. In Pullman, the public space of downtown is separated from the campus by Washington State University's Greek community which is situated on the downhill of College Hill and among residential buildings and apartments. The walking distance from the Compton Union Building, the main campus center of Washington University, to Pullman's Main Street is over one mile, which normally takes 15-20

minutes for walking. Also, many student apartments are far away from the downtown area. For those who are living north to the campus, it would be hard to go to the downtown public spaces without cars. From Figure 4, it clearly sees that the physical distance between the town center and the campus discourages the public space use in downtown Pullman. On the other hand, Moscow downtown demonstrates a different relationship with the campus and nearby student neighborhood. The downtown area is adjacent to the University of Idaho's campus and also close to major student neighborhoods. It is only half a mile between Main Street and the Idaho Commons, the heart of the University of Idaho campus. For most students, it only takes 5-10 minutes to walk to Downtown Moscow from their classes or apartments. Many students actually use local café shops as their primary study spaces. In this study, visual observation finds that over 70% of café shop users in Moscow are college students. Hence, a short distance between the campus and the town center would significantly promote the everyday public space use in college towns.

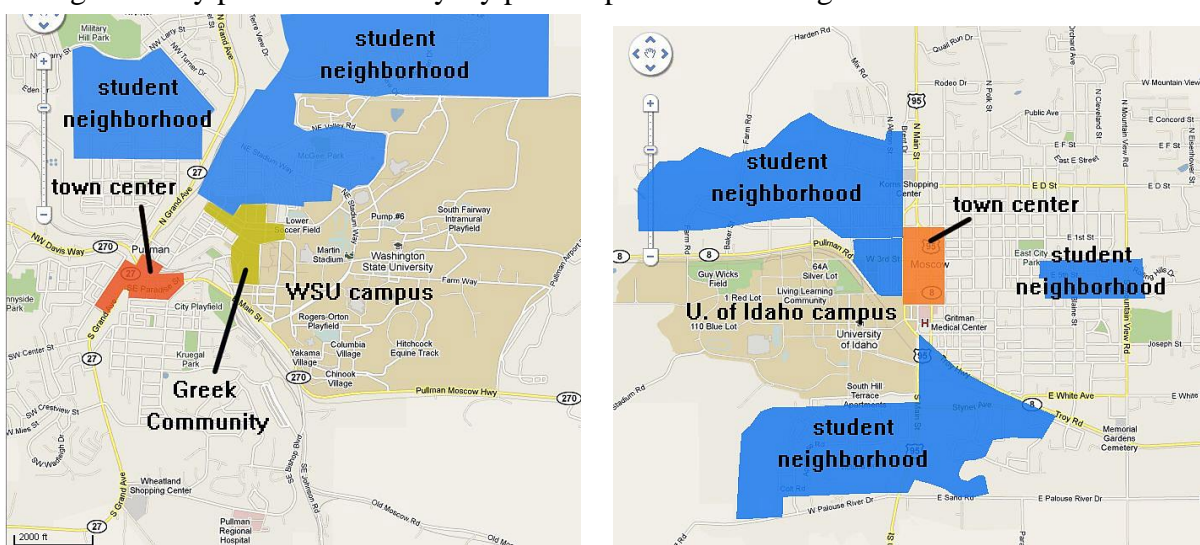


Figure 4: the comparison of campus-downtown connection between Pullman (left) and Moscow (right)

Second, due to the apparent difference of urban layouts in Pullman and Moscow, the distributions of central business districts in these two towns are by no means identical. In Pullman, separate campus-adjacent business districts have been developed around the campus to the west, north, and south. Most stores are café shops, fast food restaurants, and bars. For students, it is not necessary to go to the downtown area for food or for fun. As a result, there is no need of using downtown's public spaces to satisfy students' immediate demands. Thus, Pullman's downtown business district is small, and not well developed. Within the 8 blocks of downtown business district, there are nine restaurants, three bars and only one café shop. However, Moscow's downtown serves both the university population and the general public. Most of Moscow's businesses are situated along its Main Street to form a centralized business district. Covering 20 blocks, Moscow's downtown offers a wide range of businesses including 21 restaurants, nine bars, six café shops, three bookstores, two art galleries, two bicycle store, two theaters, two music stores, one grocery supermarket, one spa, one beauty salon, and many other services. Both the university population and local residents are attracted to come here for consumption and socialization. The increased human activities create a positive use of public spaces in downtown Moscow. Also, the wide range of merchants encourages and promotes the diversity of public spaces for different

human interactions. In downtown Moscow, it is easy to find the public space is used for multipurpose, which offers considerable spatial flexibility. As a result, Moscow's Main Street possesses the ability to promote the chances of seeing and meeting other people in different ways and consequently to make this social interaction an integral part of local residents' daily routine. This creates a sense of collective ownership of physical places and makes the public spaces to be easily recognizable and memorable.

Thirdly, Moscow's Main Street is better pedestrian-friendly and therefore promotes more repeated interactions and the shared experience of everyday life. In both Pullman and Moscow, a major highway travels through the downtown areas. In Pullman, the Washington State Route 270 (SR270), which connects Pullman and Moscow, is divided into a one-way couplet in the downtown. The westbound SR270 uses Pullman's Main Street for about 4 blocks. Although the speed limit is reduced to 25 miles per hour in this area, the large number of passing-by vehicles poses a serious inconvenience and discomfort for people to use downtown Pullman's public space. In Moscow, US Route 95 (US 95) also passes through the downtown area in a one-way couplet. However, neither the northbound nor southbound US 95 merge with Main Street. Both travel on the east and west edges of the downtown area. The entire Main Street is reserved for slow traffic use. Walking along Moscow's Main Street, people do not need to worry about vehicular traffic and the spaces provide comfort and at-easiness for local people's everyday life. This promotes opportunities for repeated and continuous human interactions in downtown public space. As a result, a continuous daily routine in public spaces provides the familiarity of a physical place which leads to the creation of a sense of security and comfort. In addition, the pedestrian-friendly street offers business owners an opportunity to personalize the street frontages to be more permeable to the street. In Moscow, most stores along Main Street make their doors and windows wide open, allowing people outside to see and know the activities inside. Also, signs and displays are often used to personalize the store's interface with the street. Therefore, Main Street becomes a meaningful place to go. For example, Figure5 shows outdoor seats and displays are often employed in Moscow's Main Street to create a personalized public space by extending services to the street. This enhances the spatial adaptability of streets by making responses to the changing needs of people and the environment. For people with diverse backgrounds, this quality of space results in a positive place identity that transforms this place into a meaningful attachment for people. Pullman's public space lacks this street feature (see Figure 6).



Figure 5: Business owners in Moscow Main Street use outdoor seats, displays, and signs to personalize the interface with streets.



Figure 6: Street frontages in Pullman's Main Street lack of personalization and permeability.

5. CONCLUSION

College towns in the United States provide an unusual urban pattern with different features from other types of towns and cities. With their unconventional demographics, college towns form particular cultures and lifestyles, which strongly influence the way of using and perceiving public spaces. First, the university campus becomes an integral and essential part of the town's urban public space. Most college towns are remote from metropolitan areas and therefore lack the significant urban experience like that in large cities. However, the university campus provides a considerable supplement to enrich the quality of urban life in college towns. Through its buildings, landscapes, and facilities, the university campus serves both as an environment for students' learning and a public space for the local community's everyday life needs. Second, the urban space of college towns is often developed as an expansion of the university campus, primarily serving the university population. Student housings usually take over campus-adjacent neighborhoods and transform those neighborhoods into student-dominant places. Downtown and campus-adjacent commercial districts primarily serve the needs and desires of the college community. There are more student-oriented public spaces and services. This mixed-use of public spaces by both university population and local communities creates a uniquely vibrant, attractive, and sustainable pattern of lifestyle and also an unusual urban pattern that caters to the daily needs of both students and local residents and promotes the interactions between college communities and local residents.

With the comparison of downtown public spaces between Pullman, WA and Moscow, ID, the findings of this study suggest that the public spaces in the college towns' downtown area are the desired places for to promote a more vibrant, attractive, comfortable, and safe daily life. The quality of downtown's public spaces is primarily influenced by three factors: its accessibility to the university campus and student neighborhoods, a centralized commercial district with diverse businesses, and the Pedestrian-friendly Main Street as well as the permeable and personalized street frontages. A short distance and direct access to the downtown public spaces from the university campus and student neighborhoods would promote the increased use of public spaces by university communities. A centralized downtown commercial district not only provides life easiness and comfort to both university populations and local residents but also helps satisfy the university population's diverse life needs and encourages different kinds of social interactions. In the downtown commercial district, Main Street plays a major role in forming a college town's urban

everyday life experience. A pedestrian-friendly main Street facilitates the use of public spaces and makes it possible to enhance the street frontage by personalization and permeability, which ensures an everyday public space to become a place with meanings and attachments.

6. DATA AND MATERIALS AVAILABILITY

Information relevant to this study is available by contacting the corresponding author.

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