

Generation-bridging experiences in third places: a call to action for transformative service scholars

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Abstract

Purpose – The intergenerational divide has been accentuated by the recent pandemic, the economic crisis and the digitization of social spaces, posing the risks of increased isolation, reduced civic engagement and social disparities. This conceptual viewpoint introduces generation-bridging experiences (GBXs) as a means to reduce intergenerational distance and social isolation in the context of physical third places.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on transformative service research and experience design, this study combines an analysis of the literature with real-world examples to set a research agenda for service scholars and provide guidelines for practitioners willing to design GBXs in third places.

Findings – This study defines GBX as an experience that creates value through meaningful interpersonal interactions across generations, fostering sustained individual and collective change to reduce generation tensions, loneliness and potential marginalization. Experience design is crucial to increase the transformative potential of such service interactions in third places. This study proposes a holistic framework for GBX design conceptualizing three intergenerational pillars of inclusive environment for interaction and collaboration; intergenerational co-creation; and sustained engagement.

Research limitations/implications – This viewpoint proposes a research agenda to stimulate more theoretical and empirical service research on GBX design in third places.

Practical implications – This study suggests a managerial guide for each GBX phase, which provides illustrative examples for service managers willing to design GBX in physical third places.

Social implications – Designing and managing GBXs in physical third places can reduce social tensions and age-related stereotypes, and increase mutual trust.

Originality/value – This viewpoint redirects service scholars' and practitioners' attention to the ever-increasing importance of experience design in third places for bridging generational divides and supporting more inclusive, intergenerationally just communities.

Keywords Intergenerational divide, Third places, Transformative experience, Experience design, Customer journey, Touchpoints

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Across many countries, particularly in urbanized societies, younger and older generations experience diverging realities in areas such as economic opportunity, digital fluency, political preferences, and social values (Bengtson, 2024; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2002; Fang *et al.*, 2023). Structural factors – including housing affordability, labor precarity, gentrification

and climate crisis responsibility – disproportionately burden younger people while older generations are perceived as having benefited from more stable economic conditions and social mobility. This has fueled a sense of generational injustice, often

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caricatured in media discourse as the “OK Boomer” versus “entitled Millennial” dynamic whereby particular generations are presented as the cause of social and cultural problems along with divisive language (Bristow, 2020). For example, baby boomers are often typified as influential agents of change with considerable purchasing power for businesses (Davey, 2015; FitzPatrick *et al.*, 2013; Phillipson *et al.*, 2008). Amid scholarly debate on the use of generational labels and stereotypes (Kowske *et al.*, 2010; Niemelä-Nyrhinen, 2007; Rudolph *et al.*, 2021), the generational divide is defined by generational identity and differences in beliefs, values and attitudes between different age groups, shaping generational tensions and marginalization (Lee and Hartanto, 2025; Urick *et al.*, 2017). Diminishing levels of intergenerational contact and empathy mean older people are becoming more age-segregated and at risk of social, economic and digital exclusion (World Health Organization, 2015, 2021) [1]. The societal challenge of generational divides and the associated challenges of loneliness and potential marginalization provide the impetus for this conceptual viewpoint.

Over the past decade, service research has increasingly prioritized human well-being through transformative service research (TSR), examining how services can enhance consumers’ quality of life while driving social, economic and environmental change (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015; Ostrom *et al.*, 2021; Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2019). Recent research has also highlighted the importance of integrating individual and intergenerational well-being (Heinonen *et al.*, 2025). Unfortunately, the intergenerational divide has become increasingly pronounced in recent years, shaped by population aging, rapid urbanization, and increasing digitization of social spaces and resources. Third places – informal public spaces such as libraries, parks, cafes and community centers – were originally theorized by Oldenburg (1989) as offering neutral, inclusive environments that encourage spontaneous social encounters outside of home (first place) and work (second place). Third places, in particular physical third places, have gained renewed academic attention with recent studies highlighting how well-designed third places can foster intergenerational empathy, reduce ageist stereotypes and promote civic participation across age groups (Lane *et al.*, 2020). For example, intergenerational programming in libraries and co-located services in community hubs is shown to bridge generational divides through shared narratives, co-learning, and civic rituals (APPG, 2019; Kamrudeen *et al.*, 2024; Katz and Kaplan, 2022).

Although research has supported the benefits of third places in terms of health and social engagement for older adults (Canedo-Garcia *et al.*, 2017; Whear *et al.*, 2023; Zhong *et al.*, 2020), and despite the fact that third places are often celebrated as sites of belonging (Rosenbaum and Dickens, 2025), their potential to reduce loneliness across generations remains underexplored and insufficiently theorized. Much recent research has pointed out the decline of third places (Rosenbaum and Dickens, 2025) or their increasingly digital nature (Parkinson *et al.*, 2021). To address this gap, this viewpoint proposes that generation-bridging experiences (GBXs) can be intentionally designed in physical third places to reduce generational divides and conflicts. We conceptualize a GBX, underpinned by transformative learning theory

(Mezirow, 1991, 1994) and TSR, as a type of transformative experience that reduces generational tensions, loneliness, and potential marginalization with enduring and uplifting changes for individuals (Amaro *et al.*, 2025; Blocker and Barrios, 2015; Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Robledo, 2024). In this context, we conceptualize “bridging” as the creation of connections between age groups where these bridging ties help to cultivate empathy, reduce ageist stereotypes and promote the exchange of resources and knowledge (Putnam, 2000; Vanderbeck, 2007). Drawing on urban sociology and TSR, this viewpoint intends to propose a framework that enables the creation of GBXs in third places to bridge the intergenerational divide, thereby enhancing both individual and collective well-being.

By doing so, we contribute to emerging research on transformative experiences (Dieteren and Neuhofer, 2025) to cultivate more inclusive and intergenerationally just communities.

The rest of the viewpoint is organized as follows. First, in Section 2, we discuss the phenomenon of generational divide and how the role of physical third places has changed in recent years. In particular, we focus on physical third places and why they represent a relevant service context in which GBXs can be co-created. Next, in Section 3, we describe how experiences can have a transformative potential as GBX in third places. In the following Section 4, we focus on experience design and, through the support of real-world examples, we propose a conceptualization of GBX design in third places, suggesting a conceptual framework to guide the design of GBXs. In Section 5, we discuss the theoretical implications of our work and propose a research agenda for service scholars, followed in Section 6 by practical implications and suggestions for third-place managers. Finally, in the Conclusion, we call for the possible applications of our framework on GBX design in third places to other service contexts, thus contributing to expanding the opportunities for bridging the intergenerational divide.

2. Intergenerational divide and the evolving role of third places

Social isolation and loneliness represent a major challenge for the world’s population, threatening mental and physical health and well-being for people of all ages, particularly older adults (Lauder *et al.*, 2006; Valtorta *et al.*, 2016; Zhong *et al.*, 2020). Ageism and reduced opportunities for meaningful interaction across age groups are precipitating factors for social isolation and loneliness (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer, 2018) intensifying the intergenerational divide and weakening social cohesion (Victor and Pikhartova, 2020).

In rural communities, decades ago, younger and older generations would gather in the barn during cold evenings to warm up and unwind after a day of work. These informal gatherings often evolved into intergenerational storytelling sessions, where older adults, usually grandparents, shared personal experiences, folk tales, traditions and common knowledge with younger listeners. Such moments fostered emotional closeness, cultural continuity and deep social bonding. Scholars describe these communal habits as critical for building social capital and shared identity (Putnam, 2000; Oldenburg, 1989). Similar dynamics existed in urban neighborhoods, where shared courtyards, stoops, and

communal buildings facilitated intergenerational dialogue. In the courtyards of Naples, Italy, or on the stoops of Harlem and the Lower East Side in the USA, older residents offered stories and life lessons to younger ones, replicating the bonding and identity-shaping roles observed in rural barns (Gans, 1962). These spaces served as third places and, like their rural counterparts, provided the setting for intergenerational social interactions and experiences that had the potential to be transformative.

Digital technology, while connecting people globally, has often replaced traditional communal spaces where cross-generational interaction once occurred (Kaplan *et al.*, 2020; Di Bernardo *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, age segregation in housing, workplaces and social institutions contributes to siloed worldviews and mutual misunderstanding (Pickard, 2019). The consequences of this divide are wide-ranging, including social polarization, undermining of trust between generations (Brown and Henkin, 2014) and higher levels of anxiety and loneliness (Campbell *et al.*, 2023; Colurcio *et al.*, 2022a), not only among older generations, but also within younger generations (Eccles and Qualter, 2021).

Within this context, intergenerational interventions encompass diverse models involving different populations of younger and older people, for different purposes (APPG, 2019). Yet intergenerational activities are increasingly relevant. Urban sociology research has extensively studied urban space – public space, third space and private space – as a strategic tool for shaping (amongst others) social relationships and intergenerational activities (Carrera, 2023).

Since the pandemic, changes in working and social habits, such as the spread of remote work and declining social trust, have led to increased loneliness, making third places even more crucial as a context for fostering social bonds (Rosenbaum and Dickens, 2025). However, their ability to work as catalysts for intergenerational relationships seems to have diminished. Not only do younger and older generations tend to meet at different times and places, such as specific bars or public squares, but also nearby generational cohorts, such as Gen Z and Gen X, often frequent separate environments. Third-place social experiences often occur among people of similar age groups, turning into generational silos, preserving social distance rather than reducing it (Yuen and Johnson, 2017).

Sociologists argue that social polarization has increased in recent years (O'Grady, 2023). In gentrified contexts, this risk is further compounded. Several studies indicate gentrification not only reshapes the urban environment but also contributes to the marginalization of older populations, increasing the likelihood of social isolation and undermining their sense of belonging (Santos *et al.*, 2024; Rooks, 2020). Generational tensions have become increasingly visible, driven by unequal access to economic resources and diverging values, expectations and lived experiences. For example, younger cohorts often face delayed access to homeownership and stable employment. In Australia, Millennial homeownership is around 10% lower than that of previous generations, with Gen Z even further behind in property accumulation (Henry, 2025). In Europe, Eurofound (2023, 2024) highlights similar trends: many young people face persistent insecurity in housing, employment, and mental well-being, despite higher levels of formal education. The European Social Survey (2022)

documents a clear generational divide in attitudes toward climate action, migration and institutional trust, with younger people more likely to support progressive and environmentalist policies, and older cohorts tending toward conservatism and institutional preservation. Similar dynamics are evident in North America, where younger generations express growing disillusionment. In the workplace, intergenerational tensions also emerge: research shows that age polarization can lead to miscommunication and increased conflicts, particularly in times of institutional reform or organizational stress (Wynen *et al.*, 2025). However, purposeful engagement of the aging population has been shown to produce positive relationship outcomes for older adults (Morrow-Howell *et al.*, 2017). Generational divides also persist regarding the use of technology (Lin *et al.*, 2025). For example, while online third places such as social media platforms can bridge generational gaps, they can also reinforce them. TikTok, for instance, was initially designed for very young users but has gradually gained popularity among older generations, thus apparently reducing generational distances. However, this social proximity is only virtual, and tensions remain, and younger users often dismissively suggest that older users “go back to Facebook.”

Third places can nevertheless play an important role in facilitating age-friendliness (Fang *et al.*, 2023), providing the context where transformative experiences are co-created, thus helping to reduce polarization between younger and older cohorts and promote individual and societal well-being. Third places in comparison to home (first place) and work (second place) are characterized by their openness (Oldenburg, 1989, termed this “neutral ground”) and accessibility, i.e. they often reduce social hierarchies, offering bridging of social networks, as in Putnam's (2000) reciprocal social relations. They also have a conversational focus (compared with structured routine activities at work or home), and are characterized by familiarity of regular visitors (Rosenbaum, 2006). They offer a space where people feel at ease, contributing to what Oldenburg (1989) called a “home away from home.” In the context of services marketing, third places have been described as socially supportive environments that foster connection and meaning through shared presence and interaction. Especially older people, therefore, tend to visit third places to address their needs for companionship and emotional support (Rosenbaum, 2006). For example, older individuals use physical third places like social clubs to regain a sense of agency and community (Meshram and O'Cass, 2013), build new relationships, rebuild their identity and strengthen their sense of belonging, thus increasing emotional comfort and social capital (Meshram and O'Cass, 2018).

The advent of digital technologies, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to the emergence of online third places, such as social media platforms and virtual communities. These digital spaces mirror some key characteristics of traditional third places, such as informality, recurring social contact and a shared sense of presence. Meanwhile, they also offer new avenues for social interaction, particularly for younger demographics. Platforms like *Discord* have been designed to emulate the characteristics of traditional third places, providing users with themed spaces for casual, low-pressure interactions (Kim *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, online support forums can create emotionally secure and inclusive

environments for vulnerable consumers (Parkinson *et al.*, 2017), allowing for shared storytelling and support that contribute to users' sense of connectedness.

The distinction between physical and digital third places becomes particularly important when considering the need for new approaches in the design of GBXs to bridge intergenerational divides. Customer age differences shape interactions in service environments and can lead to discomfort, but they also open possibilities for understanding and empathy (Nicholls and Mohsen, 2015). While online third places offer convenience and accessibility, they often fall short in terms of spontaneous encounters, multisensory engagement and embodied presence, and may not be equally inclusive for all. Many older adults face barriers when using digital services, including low confidence, lack of digital support and usability challenges (Bianchi, 2021). Therefore, while digital third places can enhance the well-being of tech-savvy older adults, they often require family or community help to be truly accessible, thereby lacking the depth of engagement and sense of community found in physical settings.

Conversely, physical third places offer a rich context for emotional engagement through atmosphere, routine, and community rituals that are difficult to translate into a digital format (Alexander, 2019). Physical third places also provide opportunities for regular encounters with familiar people, facilitating the development of social networks and friendships (Laurier, 2016). Due to these characteristics, physical third places create opportunities for people of different ages to interact in meaningful ways. Despite the rise of online social hubs, we thus argue that physical third places remain essential contexts for reducing the intergenerational divide. They enable casual, repeated, and embodied interactions that help people understand and relate to one another across age boundaries. As societies become more digitally fragmented and demographically diverse, investing in inclusive physical third places may be one of the most effective ways to foster intergenerational cohesion, reduce social incivility and encourage long-term social resilience.

3. From experiences to generation-bridging experiences

While the previous section examines the changing role of third places, this section addresses the transformative potential of GBXs. In service research, customer experience has been defined "as consisting of *value creation elements*, *customer discrete emotions*, and *customer cognitive responses* at distinct *touchpoints*", with value creation elements including resources, activities, context, interactions, and customer role (McCull-Kennedy *et al.*, 2019, p. 10). Customer experience is therefore structured around touchpoints, context (situational factors that influence how a person experiences a touchpoint) and qualities (customer responses and reactions) (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020; Ponsignon *et al.*, 2017). It focuses on those interactions occurring in a service delivery process and customer perception and interpretation of those interactions (Helkkula, 2011; Patricio *et al.*, 2011). Within customer experiences, we view interactions as typically discrete encounters, despite being nested within social relationships. Contrastingly, relationships denote a more ongoing familiarity and trust-based connection

between individuals emerging from repeated interaction over time and requiring more investment of resources (Parkinson *et al.*, 2021). While repeated one-off interactions lead to ongoing relationships in third places, both contribute to well-being (Sandstrom and Dunn, 2014; Umberson and Karas Montez, 2010). Drawing from TSR, recent research has emphasized that some experiences can be transformative for individuals, i.e. they can produce "long-lasting, irreversible, pervasive consequences on an individual's beliefs, perceptions, identity and values" (Chirico *et al.*, 2022, p. 2, cited in Dieteren and Neuhofer, 2025). As emphasized by Dieteren and Neuhofer (2025) this transformative potential of the experience can only turn into actual transformation through sense-making and integration by the individuals.

Based on these premises, we argue that GBXs are transformative when they have a lasting impact on reducing intergenerational tensions, correcting baseless stereotypes and promoting a shared understanding of generational beliefs, values, and attitudes (Amaro *et al.*, 2025; Lee and Hartanto, 2025). We emphasize that for a GBX to occur, intergenerational interactions in physical places are essential. Physical third places represent an ideal context for facilitating spontaneous, embodied and affective interactions that are critical for building empathy and fostering deep social bonding. For example, proximity in physical space has been shown to enhance emotional connection and shared meaning-making between individuals (Shin *et al.*, 2019). Unlike digital spaces, which often lack immediacy and sensory engagement, physical third places provide the grounding and continuity necessary for GBX to emerge and be internalized at the individual level.

In fact, research has shown that face-to-face interactions, especially for older adults, are more consistently related to well-being than purely digital interactions (MacDonald *et al.*, 2021; Luo *et al.*, 2024). In addition, physical third places facilitate the propinquity effect, whereby physical proximity increases interpersonal liking (Shin *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, physical closeness between people promotes a sense of reciprocity and intimacy that leads to increased trust and mutual influence, also across generations (Cohen Goldstein *et al.*, 2024).

Blocker and Barrios (2015) differentiate habitual from transformative value according to scope and focus. Yet, acknowledging that both can co-occur, extended service encounters that span multiple months or years (Zimbatu and Russell-Bennett, 2025), such as those that occur in physical third places, may provide the context for enduring and uplifting changes. Repeated interactions that develop into more structured connections between individuals in explicitly designed generation-bridging third places can create transformative experiences that have lasting impact. For example, several "Grandfriends" programs run in different settings and formats across the USA, all fostering intergenerational relationships between children and older adults. Some operate in shared-site facilities, like Grace Living Center in Oklahoma, where preschool classrooms and elder care are housed together (www.graceok.com/igschool), while others are integrated into senior centers, like the Grand-Friend Program of the Topsfield Council on Aging in Massachusetts (www.topsfield-ma.gov/council-aging/pages/intergenerational-programs). In addition, programs like "Groovin' with Grandfriends," in Georgia, foster intergenerational

relationships through music therapy (<https://perfectharmonyhealth.com/groovinwithgrandfriends>). Despite not being officially related, these programs have the same objective: lowering age segregation and encouraging enduring, meaningful relationships between generations through carefully planned interactions. In addition, the Experience Corps program, active in over 20 US cities, places adults over 50 in elementary schools to help children improve reading skills while simultaneously reducing social isolation for the volunteers (<https://tutor.aarpfoundation.org/>). In Australia, intergenerational living initiatives in residential aged care facilities have been shown to promote daily interactions and support amongst residents, lowering ageism and isolation (Gurung *et al.*, 2022).

These examples illustrate how sustained interactions in third places can yield significant, long-lasting changes for individuals of all ages, bridging the intergenerational divide. The transformative power of these experiences lies in their ability to change individuals' worldviews (e.g. increasing mutual understanding through altered beliefs and heightened self-awareness) and for individuals to gain new knowledge through repeated, meaningful interpersonal interactions. In third places, this translates to purposefully designing service experiences that bridge generational gaps, ensuring that participants from varied age groups feel valued and capable of contributing, fostering a sense of collective agency and community cohesion. By prioritizing such designs, physical third places can amplify their role as catalysts for GBXs, creating environments where empathy and collaboration thrive, ultimately reshaping societal perceptions of generational differences.

4. An experience-design perspective to generation-bridging experiences in third places

Organizations “cannot create the customer experience, but they can monitor, design, and manage a range of stimuli that affect such experiences” (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020, p. 641). From a service research perspective, it is possible to orchestrate service elements, including the physical environment, people and service delivery processes, to facilitate the co-creation of experiences (Teixeira *et al.*, 2012). It is also important to consider the dynamic nature of experience design, so that experience-centric services need to evolve and be constantly improved to remain attractive. (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010). Based on these premises, we argue that although transformative experiences cannot be fully designed and created by third places, they can be designed to overcome potential age-related prejudice or stereotypes and stimulate transformative interactions between generations. In the past, moments for intergenerational interactions were more spontaneous. Since design is critical in service environments for enduring transformation (Anderson *et al.*, 2018), we argue that service research needs to provide actionable guidance on how to facilitate intergenerational experiences for transformative outcomes. In fact, while interactions can be spontaneous, experience design can increase its transformative potential by igniting meaningful intergenerational interactions.

Some purposefully designed experiences provide valuable insight into how physical third places can promote such

transformation intentionally. An example comes from intergenerational community gardens, spread in the UK and other countries (D'Amore *et al.*, 2025), that facilitate mutual teaching and care, where older adults teach traditional farming methods that promote physical health and cultural continuity. In Italy, children, adults, older citizens and individuals with disabilities come together in Florence's Orti Dipinti project, which turns an abandoned athletics track into a community garden. Participants of all ages co-design garden layouts, plant seasonal crops, and conduct workshops on traditional horticultural techniques and sustainability. Orti Dipinti encourages mutual learning, lowers social barriers and cultivates a strong sense of shared ownership and belonging among diverse generations by allowing them to share tangible tasks and generational knowledge in a sensory-rich environment (www.dipintosucci.com; www.ortidipinti.it). Anki Café in Toyohashi, Japan, provides a unique intergenerational dementia-friendly third place: since June 2021, local kids have helped older customers, including those with dementia, with coffee service, games, and companionship in a peaceful, nonjudgmental setting (“Anki” means “relief” in the local dialect). Anki Café normalizes behaviors associated with dementia, alleviates caregiver stress by offering respite and cultivates empathy through repeated, structured cross-generational roles (Kyodo News, 2022; PBS News, 2024).

These projects demonstrate how experience design in third places can have a transformative potential through shared rituals or collaborative learning. Third places can be seen as platforms for social innovation that promote inclusion by enabling diverse generations to co-create value. Caridà *et al.* (2024) highlight that TSR-driven platforms facilitate social inclusion by empowering participants to engage in collaborative interactions that enhance well-being and reduce exclusionary divides (p. 12). To unlock the full potential of third places as contexts for GBXs, a purposeful approach to experience design is essential. By prioritizing intentional experience design, third places can shift from neutral gathering spots to powerful platforms for reshaping attitudes, building empathy and strengthening social cohesion across age groups.

Following an analysis of the literature and reasoning on the examples discussed, we conceptualize GBX design as *an intentionally designed and potentially transformative experience for individuals of all ages based on three intergenerational pillars of: Inclusive environment for interaction and collaboration (Fisk et al., 2018; Rosenbaum et al., 2017); Intergenerational co-creation (Cushing and van Vliet, 2018; Fang et al., 2023); and Sustained engagement (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Storbacka et al., 2016)*. While generation-bridging can take place in different contexts (such as work, housing, health services or online platforms), our viewpoint focuses on those that take place in physical third places and that have transformative potential.

First, GBX design in third places centers on creating inclusive environments for interaction and collaboration that resonate with diverse generations. Physical spaces should invite participation through thoughtful features (comfortable, adaptable seating, clear signage and flexible areas) that support both structured programs and casual mingling. These elements create a sense of belonging, encouraging young adults and older individuals alike to engage freely. Activities must also be

designed to spark interaction and collaboration, such as workshops where younger participants share technological skills and seniors offer cultural or historical insights. This mutual exchange challenges age-related stereotypes, which often depict older adults as technologically inept or younger generations as disengaged (Nelischer and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2023). By fostering reciprocal learning, these interactions cultivate respect and lay the foundation for meaningful relationships. Being inclusive means removing barriers to involvement, at the same time accommodating identity while ensuring that designs encourage self-determination (Dodds and Palakshappa, 2022). Including physical accessibility features (such as ramps, varied seating or quiet zones) guarantees that older adults can participate fully, while flexible scheduling, such as evening or weekend events, accommodates younger individuals. By removing these barriers, third places provide equal opportunities for engaging in GBXs.

Second, Intergenerational co-creation amplifies this potential and aligns with TSR principles, emphasizing social inclusion. Involving participants in shaping activities or the space itself and jointly contributing their resources (skills, knowledge, time, experience), whether through co-designing a community event or suggesting new programs, ensures that third places reflect diverse generational needs to progress beyond the generational siloing of service provision (Cushing and Van Vliet, 2018). TSR-driven approaches can leverage social innovation that empowers diverse groups to co-create value, fostering belonging and reducing exclusion (Caridà et al., 2024). This participatory approach, echoed by Becker and Jaakkola (2020), enhances engagement by prioritizing participant agency. It also helps dismantle stereotypes by allowing individuals to present themselves beyond generational labels, revealing shared interests and values (Brubaker and Powers, 1976; Parekh et al., 2018; Jarrott et al., 2021).

Finally, sustained engagement, an observable concept of resource integration and value co-creation, is critical for transformative outcomes (Storbacka et al., 2016). As Becker and Jaakkola note (2020, p. 639), “experiences shaped by repeated interactions over time are more likely to drive lasting change.” Regular programs (i.e. intergenerational book clubs, art classes, or community projects) can establish rituals that anchor cross-generational bonds. These routines build trust and familiarity, enabling shifts in how generations perceive one another. Importantly, such programs can counteract negative stereotypes, such as assumptions that older adults lack vitality or that younger people are inherently self-absorbed, by providing consistent opportunities for authentic engagement (Meshel and McGlynn, 2004). By embedding these rituals, third places counter the trend of age-segregated social spaces, nurturing a shared community identity, while providing inclusive, socially innovative spaces that make all generations feel appreciated and capable of contributing to the community (Caridà et al., 2024).

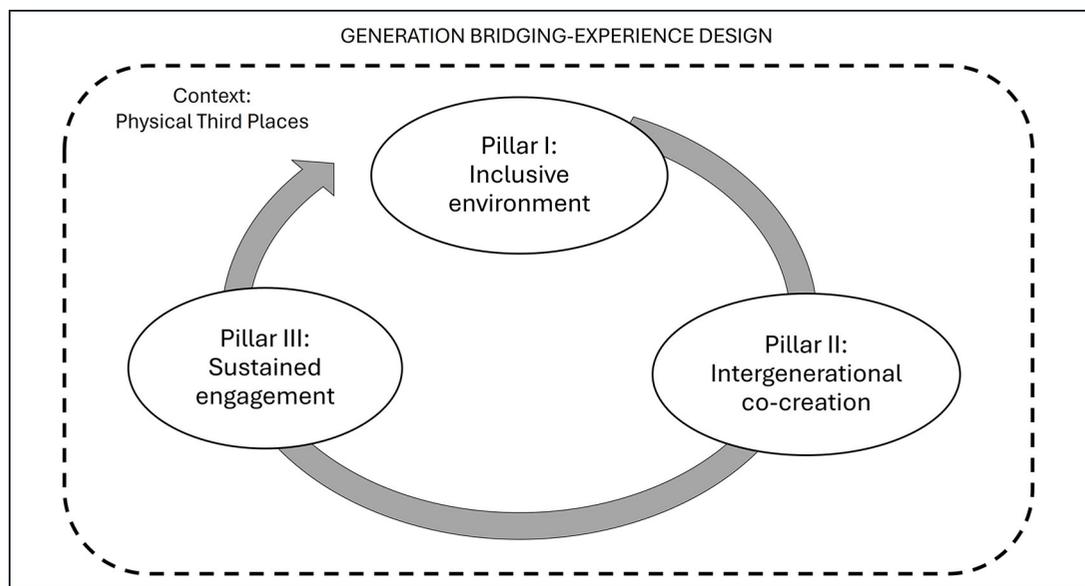
Based on our analysis, we propose a framework to guide the design of GBXs in third places. Following Mezirow’s (1991) sequence of perspective transformation, we focus on the six phases of GBXs: discovery, welcome, sharing, mutual discovery, collective event and follow-up. Figure 1 shows the three GBX design intergenerational pillars that need to be taken into account in physical third places across all six phases of the experience.

5. Theoretical implications and research agenda

This viewpoint contributes to service research by drawing attention to the importance of GBX design in third places to bridge intergenerational divide.

The first contribution is conceptual: it positions GBXs as a distinct type of experience that can generate change not only in individual well-being but also in the quality of intergenerational relations. This shifts the focus of TSR from individual or

Figure 1 GBX design in physical third places



Source: Authors’ own work

consumer outcomes to collective and relational dynamics. While previous studies highlight the importance of the social dimension in transformative experiences, mainly in the realm of travel experiences (Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2022), this viewpoint emphasizes the importance of intergenerational interactions and relationships that can produce enduring positive effects in individuals, bridging distances and ultimately leading to personal and community well-being. In addition, transformative experiences have been investigated so far mainly in “extra-ordinary” service contexts, such as travel (Huang et al., 2024) or immersive professional events (Dieteren and Neuhofer, 2025). Differently, we encourage the design and co-creation of GBXs in daily life contexts, such as those provided by third places.

The second contribution emphasizes the importance of considering third places not only as physical/digital settings but as service environments where design, interaction and relational processes intersect. This perspective moves the analytical lens from isolated encounters to the organizational and spatial conditions that enable intergenerational exchange. With this viewpoint, we thus enrich the literature on third places as “platforms for transformative change” (Rosenbaum and Dickens, 2025, p. 5) by emphasizing their role in facilitating GBXs.

The third contribution relates to service design principles. By foregrounding inclusivity, intergenerational co-creation and sustained engagement as central intergenerational pillars, the viewpoint extends current discussions on customer journeys and touchpoints (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). It shows that transformative potential depends on continuity, accessibility and mutual recognition, encouraging

scholars to study experiences across time and generations rather than as discrete events (Anderson et al., 2013; Teixeira et al., 2012).

Building on these implications, future research can be systematically developed around the three intergenerational pillars of GBX design: inclusivity, intergenerational co-creation and sustained engagement. These pillars capture the key dimensions where design, interaction and continuity intersect to support intergenerational transformation (Fisk et al., 2018).

Table 1 summarizes, for each pillar, the main objectives, guiding questions and possible methodological approaches that service scholars could use as a research agenda.

6. Practical implications

To support service practitioners in designing GBXs, in Table 2, we propose a managerial guide with an “Intergenerational CoLab” with illustrative examples for GBX design. In the Intergenerational CoLab, each GBX phase triggers a transformative potential regarding one or more transformative experience dimensions (Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2022): behavioral, psychological, social and spiritual. Table 2 illustrates the service touchpoints of an older actor (Anne – 72-year-old, retired teacher) and a younger actor (Luca – 20-year-old university student) across these phases, illustrating the activity, touchpoint, transformative potential, potential barrier, activated experience dimension(s) and illustrative examples for GBX design. For instance, in the Discovery phase, participants encounter a flyer or social media post that interrupts their habitual routines and provokes reflection, thereby activating

Table 1 Research agenda for generation-bridging experiences (structured around the three intergenerational pillars)

Pillar	Objectives	Key research questions	Illustrative methods
Inclusive environment for interaction and collaboration	Analyze how third-place servicescapes, activities, and practices remove barriers and encourage equal participation across age groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do spatial design, accessibility, and environmental cues in third-place servicescapes influence inclusion? What welcome practices foster participation across generations? How can stereotypes be reduced through inclusive entry points in physical third places? 	Comparative studies of physical third places; ethnographic observation; field experiments; surveys; service co-design and longitudinal evaluation studies
Intergenerational co-creation	Examine how experience co-production and shared activities support reciprocal learning and stereotype reduction in physical third places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which co-creation practices (cultural, technological, environmental) promote/hinder intergenerational dialogue? How do sharing and mutual discovery phases enhance empathy and reciprocity? What service principles can be applied to facilitate this? What forms of collaborative service design strengthen collective agency? 	Design interventions; participatory labs; mixed-method surveys; qualitative interviews
Sustained engagement	Identify how experience design and servicescape conditions maintain intergenerational ties and ensure long-term participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which service rituals or practices during collective events consolidate enduring relationships? How do customer follow-up mechanisms (digital reminders, shared projects) sustain engagement and intergenerational connections? What indicators capture the durability of intergenerational connections? How can service processes facilitate these enduring transformative experiences? 	Longitudinal studies; social network analysis; diary studies; well-being indicators

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 2 GBX design illustrative managerial guide: Intergenerational CoLab

Persona	Activity	Touchpoint	Transformative potential	Potential barrier	Activated experience dimension(s)	Illustrative examples for TSX design
1. TSX Phase Discovery						
Anne	Learns of the Intergenerational CoLab via flyer; curious but hesitant	Flyer distribution; community liaison	Interrupts routine; prompts reflection on purpose	Flyers obscured by competing messages; belief "not for my age"	Psychological	<i>Pillar I Inclusive environment:</i> Use age-neutral imagery and authentic testimonials in promotional materials
Luca	Encounters an Instagram post on the Intergenerational CoLab; curious but busy	Social-media channels; peer recommendation	Disrupts peer-only networks and sparks curiosity	Digital overload; perceived academic tone	Psychological	<i>Pillar I Inclusive environment:</i> Craft concise, visually engaging posts featuring peer voices; complement digital outreach with a visible chalkboard announcement
2. TSX Phase Welcome						
Anne	Arrives to mixed-age seating and creative materials	Warm décor; active greeter	Establishes inclusion and psychological safety	Youth-oriented décor; lack of personal greeting	Social	<i>Pillar I Inclusive environment:</i> Combine mixed seating with clear signage Pair newcomers with host-buddies; provide interest-based name badges
Luca	Steps into a hub branded for all ages, greeted by peers	Reception desk; shuttle drop-off	Creates rapport and sense of shared purpose	Intergenerational anxiety; awkward small talk	Social	<i>Pillar I Inclusive environment:</i> Blend youthful and mature branding elements Offer "study-buddy" pairings; issue interest-based name badges
3. TSX Phase Sharing						
Anne	Narrates a personal memory in a facilitated circle	Circle-time workshop	Encourages critical reflection and recognition of narrative value	Anxiety over self-disclosure; vocal dominance	Psychological; Social	<i>Pillar I Inclusive environment:</i> Employ structured turn-taking cues <i>Pillar II Intergenerational co-creation:</i> Use collective note-taking to value every story
Luca	Listens to elder narratives and shares a travel anecdote	Shared whiteboard session	Prompts reassessment of assumptions and deepens mutual respect	Fear of patronizing; cross-age discomfort	Psychological; Social	<i>Pillar I Inclusive environment:</i> Use paired prompts ("What surprised you most?") <i>Pillar II Intergenerational co-creation:</i> Capture insights on shared boards
4. TSX Phase Mutual discovery						
Anne	Co-creates an inclusive city-of-the-future map with a student	Collaborative workshop; visual mapping	Demonstrates accessibility of new roles and collaboration	Tool complexity; fast pace by younger partners	Behavioral; Psychological	<i>Pillar II Intergenerational co-creation:</i> Provide low-tech prototyping kits <i>Pillar III Sustained engagement:</i> Assign a brief "homework" sketch to sustain engagement
Luca	Integrates tablet sketches with hand-drawn concepts	Hybrid digital/analog session	Balances technological fluency with tactile creativity	Tech overreliance; manual impatience	Behavioral; Psychological	<i>Pillar II Intergenerational co-creation:</i> Offer hybrid prototyping kits <i>Pillar III Sustained engagement:</i> Issue a "social media take" assignment
5. TSX Phase Collective event						
Anne	Exhibits the group's work to neighbors and guests	Public exhibition; community event	Reinforces belonging, breaks social isolation	Low turnout; logistical challenges	Social; Spiritual	<i>Pillar II Intergenerational co-creation:</i> Involve participants in exhibit planning <i>Pillar III Sustained engagement:</i> Host a post-show gathering to deepen bonds
Luca	Curates digital slideshow and invites peers	Live-streamed presentation	Cultivates narrative ownership and intergenerational synergy	Technical glitches; low peer attendance	Social; Spiritual	<i>Pillar II Intergenerational co-creation:</i> Engage youth in digital curation and hashtag creation <i>Pillar III Sustained engagement:</i> Schedule an online after-party forum
6. TSX Phase Follow-up						
Anne	Receives personalized keepsake with her workshop insight	Physical mail; social-media message	Solidifies renewed identity, nurtures relational ties	No follow-up; impersonal messaging	Behavioral; Spiritual	<i>Pillar III Sustained engagement:</i> Dispatch personalized keepsakes within one week; display a rotating "Community Wall" in the space
Luca	Receives email summary with Anne's quote and co-host invitation	Email newsletter; mobile app	Embeds facilitator role, motivates sustained engagement	Email overlooked; unclear next steps	Behavioral; Spiritual	<i>Pillar III Sustained engagement:</i> Send calendar invitations and in-app reminders; award digital badges; update the "Community Wall" monthly

Source(s): Authors' own work

the psychological dimension of experience. During Welcome, warm décor, mixed-age seating and host-buddy pairings establish immediate inclusion and foster new social bonds. The Sharing phase brings personal narratives into the community view, eliciting critical reflection and mutual respect across psychological and social dimensions. Mutual Discovery invites hands-on co-production (sketching an "inclusive future city" or integrating digital tools), encouraging new practices and mindsets (behavioral and psychological dimensions). At the Collective Event, public exhibition or co-curation reinforce community membership and offer moments of transcendence (social and spiritual dimensions). Finally, Follow-Up through personalized keepsakes and digital reminders sustains new identities and routines over time (behavioral and spiritual dimension). Rather than providing a comprehensive and

prescriptive ready-made toolkit for practitioners, this managerial guide aims to support GBX design by highlighting the transformative potential of each phase and by focusing on how the pillars need to be taken into account in each phase of the experience. We also recommend implementing *ad hoc* control activities at each phase to enhance the transformative opportunities of the experience, and monitoring the GBX over time in the long run. For example, membership programs could enhance patron engagement while simultaneously facilitating the collection of their insights regarding the GBXs.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, intentionally designed third-place GBXs can be crucial for developing deep, continuous, and collaborative

relationships between generations. They can break down generational barriers and build more resilient, compassionate communities by fostering inclusive settings, cooperative initiatives and consistent participation, thus reducing social polarization and promoting collective well-being in a fractured world. In this perspective, physical third places can be viewed as regenerative service infrastructures that stimulate the motivation for intergenerational exchange and facilitate the co-creation of GBXs.

This viewpoint stresses the need for adopting a service perspective to promote intergenerational inclusion, not only as a moral issue, but as a pathway to trigger the creation of new forms of experiential and relational value. Our framework, in its effort to support the design of GBXs, shows that intentional service interventions, although small, can create suitable conditions for purposeful participation across generations. While this viewpoint focuses on GBXs in physical third places, looking ahead, further research could address the development of GBXs in diverse service settings, such as housing or working environments.

Note

- [1.] The authors acknowledge the wide variety of meanings of “aging” and “old age.” The boundaries of what is old age are becoming blurred along with diversity in the aging process. We thus acknowledge a diversity of subjectivities among aging people as well as differences in aging across lifestyles, cultures and experiences (Gilleard and Higgs, 2002).

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