



Weaving together the Threads of Our Community: Weaver Street Market

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If the sun hadn't traced a low, southerly path across the sky that morning, it'd have seemed like the first day of autumn. A chilly breeze wound its way through the enormous oak that hangs over the Weaver Street Lawn, and dozens of people—of all ages—gathered in the patchwork shadow of the tree to take part in a ritual of great importance to this part of America: breakfast.

In fact, it was January, but the fleeting good weather belied the truth, and in the unseasonably warm morning air, the wind carried notes of new music, fresh coffee, and hearty meals shared between families and friends. The sun had brought the community back outside to a surprising and delightful patch of dirt outside this natural foods co-op. Here, as on practically every Sunday morning, they gathered to eat and chat, to unwind from the demands of an academic schedule. Weaver Street is a magnet for local academics, like the all-Slavic literary discussion group seated under the farthest reaches of the mighty oak's canopy, or the 2015 Nobel Laureate in Chemistry who would occupy the table after them. Whether students or professors, there was little question the space was an extension of the nearby University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: even the university Wi-Fi network has a special hub here. It's either the cloudless sky or the sea of UNC apparel—whatever the reason, Weaver Street Market is tinted Carolina Blue.

But if Chapel Hill's academics feel like owners of this space, they do so as a small part of a far larger and more diverse group. "It's hard to believe a town of 60,000 people can be as international as this one," said former Chapel Hill Mayor Mark Kleinschmidt in an interview late last year, "and we probably have a greater international flair to our daily lives than any city of our size in the world." But whatever international clientele the co-op serves, its success is firmly rooted in the tendency of that same diverse group to fall in love with local community. Weaver Street Market has more than 18,000 consumer-owners—all co-op members who filter through the aisles of organic food and linger in the pleasant shade outside. In a local community of fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, almost everyone in Chapel Hill and Carrboro knows or is a partial owner of this cooperative and this space. So the chilly mornings here belong to a spectrum of community members, bound by responsibility to patronize and engage with the cooperative—but not necessarily by any other commonalities. In this regard, Weaver Street is the glue that binds together a community whose disparate origins might otherwise tend to isolate.

Take Bruce as an example of Weaver Street's ability to, well, weave together the threads of this community. He is a tall man with graying hair and a kind disposition that could put anybody at ease. But he's not originally from Carrboro—he came here in 1998 on parole just out of a Florida prison for a crime he committed in 1980. He moved to Saxapahaw, a town about 15 miles west of Carrboro, to a place called the Human Kindness Foundation, an Ashram-based community. There, Bruce "practiced kindness and Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian meditation." To hear Bruce tell it, Weaver Street Market was what drew him into this community:

"I stayed out there for about eight months, and then I came to Chapel Hill. I got a job at the Weaver Street bread bakery, where I baked bread for about three years. When I first got here, I didn't dance as I do now. And if you saw me, you would see me sitting on a bench reading a book, or doing yoga, or talking to people."

Bruce quickly found home in a community that values public access to art and music. Within four blocks of the Lawn, there are ten public murals, many of which depict Carrboro's diversity, community values, and natural environment. Every Thursday evening and Sunday morning between spring and autumn, the Lawn regularly hosts live music from local musicians. It is through this cultural context that Bruce discovered he was a dancer.

"One day I came back for the Thursday night community. And I was sitting at the table watching some kids and a friend of mine dance around this tree that everybody loves." Bruce paused to look affectionately at the large oak tree which towered over us before continuing, "And I looked out and I said to God, 'God, I want to dance with the kids,' and God said to me, 'Well, get out there and dance with the kids.'"



Carrboro is home to medical students, lawyers, artists, and yes, even anarchists.

Photo Credit: Adam Hasan

Bruce's story is just one thread of the fabric that gives the Lawn its identity. The space is also designed as much for children as it is for adults.

"I actually live in Durham, but I come here because I'm a co-op member, and my son likes to climb the trees," Tim, a local musician, explained to me as his son swung off a low-lying branch of an oak tree and ran up to him. When asked about why he liked the Lawn, without hesitation his son replied "because I like to climb the trees!"

Whether intentionally or not, the Lawn is a space designed for children. It is well defined, serves as a natural playground, and is always occupied by fellow parents and patrons alike.

"Really, one of the coolest things about this space," Tim said as a smile crossed his face, "is that I can be here talking to someone, while my son is having a conversation with those people at that table over there, who are strangers – I've never met them before – and I can feel totally comfortable with it." Enrique Peñalosa, mayor of Bogota, Colombia, once described children as an "indicator species" in urban space, stating "if we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for all people."

Shaheen, a Muslim student at UNC from Raleigh, explains that the space offers safety for more than just children, "Carrboro feels like a really open-minded, diverse community, and I feel safe here, like no one is judging you for looking different." She brings the girl she babysits to the Lawn as well. As she says, "I like coming here because I get to see my friends, do my homework, and be outside." Coming to the lawn never fails to elicit the simple, utilitarian beauty of life's everyday experiences.

"If we can testify to nothing else in this world, we can testify that it's beautiful. Look at that!" Bruce says as he points to the sunset, "You can't tell me that ain't beautiful."

"Look at that!" he says again in a similar fashion as he points to the limbs of the oak tree, "You can't tell me that ain't beautiful. And in the spring time, oh my God!"



The Weaver Street Market Lawn. Photo Credit: Adam Hasan

Unlike many grocery stores whose scale necessitates a car trip, the co-op appeals to daily visitors and students. Three of Chapel Hill's fare-free bus lines make stops at the Market, and one of the area's few paved, dedicated bike paths sends a constant stream of cyclists right into the mouth of Carrboro at Weaver Street and Main. And while it's a bit of a hike from the UNC campus, students still make the trek even when the buses aren't running.

For Bruce, too, the Lawn at Weaver Street Market is more than just a social space—it's a spiritual one. "One of the beautiful things I learned through dancing is that I can get into that same sacred space I get into when I sit for hours in silent meditation," he explained. But initially, he was worried about dancing in front of people, afraid of what they might think of him. What quickly became apparent, however, was that Carrboro was different from where he had lived before.

"It's a very open minded town. Because when I first got here—I'm originally from New Jersey—I used to go on break, and I would be walking down the street here, and keep in mind I don't know anybody, I'm new. And people would walk by me, and they would say 'Good morning!' and I would do like this..." he says as he reenacts his experience by looking around theatrically, "because I thought they were talking to somebody behind me. Because where I'm from people don't speak to people, unless they know them. Carrboro was more open-hearted than where I grew up. And that's why I love the town of Carrboro, and that's why I come here all the time."

But not everyone was willing to accept Bruce. In 2006, management at Carr Mill Mall, which owns the Lawn, banned him from dancing. "I was out here dancing one morning, and the security guard was sitting right there by the tree. He got up, came toward me, I took my headphones off, and he said to me, 'I just got a call from the mall manager and he said that you are not allowed to dance on the lawn anymore.' I said, 'Hmm. Well, officer, you tell the manager I said thank you for allowing me to dance as long as I have been dancing out here. And tell him I said Merry Christmas and God bless you, and may

God bless you.’ I bowed to the security guard, I got my stuff, I got in my car, and I drove off.” It was the beginning of a highly publicized debate over who could use the Lawn, how they could use it, and who could regulate its use. “Even though I handled it with diplomacy and kindness, when I got in my car and drove off, I just about cried all the way out there. Because it was like his words of telling me I can’t dance out here was like a spear to my heart.”

The kindness Bruce had shown the people of Carrboro did not go unanswered. For the next three months, the town rallied around him and fought for his right to dance on the Lawn. The dispute attracted media attention from around the Research Triangle, and community members from as far away as Raleigh lobbied the mall to change their policy. The message Bruce and the citizens of Carrboro sent was clear: the Lawn belongs to all members of the community, and everyone has a right to enjoy it.

There is a temptation to observe third spaces in a vacuum—what works, what doesn’t, what’s positive, what’s negative. But most third spaces are far more complex than their obvious attributes. Third spaces are where we choose to spend time, yes, but in a way they are the sites of life’s most important moments: the quotidian experiences that make up who we are—as individuals and as communities. To judge if a public space is “good” for a community or not would ignore that third spaces are our communities, and the people who populate them the stewards of the microculture that emanates from any third space. Third spaces are not just places to sit—they’re expressions of the values and customs communities around the world choose to share. To hear it from Bruce, Weaver Street Market, perhaps to a passer-by nothing more than a grocery store, is a deep symbol of a community that is welcoming and open to all who choose to engage it:

“If it weren’t for this loving, compassionate, diverse community, Carrboro, I wouldn’t be able to dance right here. And that’s why I come here. And that’s why I love this space.”

Featured Image: Weaver Street Market. Photo Credit: Adam Hasan

About the Authors: Adam Hasan is a junior undergraduate student studying geography and city & regional planning. His research interests include understanding the actors involved in defining and redefining Global South urbanisms through social movements, governance systems, and media, as well as the history of spatial planning in post-colonial regions. Adam has previously worked with participatory informal settlement upgrading in South Africa, coastal resilience planning in Brooklyn, and was once ranked internationally as one of Simcity 4’s best city builders. In his free time he enjoys birdwatching, coffee roasting, and plays vice-skip on a local curling team.

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