

Socio-material construction of public saunas as third places

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore Finnish public saunas as third places. Taking the theoretical lens of assemblage thinking, the study reveals how the socio-material capacities of public sauna assemblages enable and/or constrain public saunas to facilitate their unique social atmosphere.

Design/methodology/approach – This study develops insights from an interpretative data set consisting of interviews ($n = 39$) with sauna bathers in hotel sauna departments, three focus group discussions arranged in a commercial sauna environment, and articles from the *Sauna Magazine* published between 2018 and 2022.

Findings – The findings demonstrate how the elements of people, spaces and materials contribute to the production of public saunas as holy places, democratic places and experiential places. The study also addresses how socio-material capacities enable public saunas to facilitate their social atmosphere by connecting each assemblage to the four social dimensions – social leveller, regularity, diversity and enjoyment (Yuen and Johnson, 2017) – of third places.

Originality/value – This study extends previous third-place studies by looking beyond human agency in the construction of third places. That is, the study illuminates how the heterogeneity of material elements in collaboration with a variety of people creates diverse third-place assemblages and reveals how the assemblages interact with the social dimensions of public saunas. In particular, the study shows how the finetuned layers of social interaction, including pursuing for silence, facilitate the social atmosphere of public saunas.

Keywords Third place, Socio-material arrangements, Assemblage, Public sauna, Social atmosphere

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The sauna is one of the places where Finnish men feel free to talk. We've had many conversations, even emotional ones, in the sauna, while we're naked [...] I'm actually a member of the Finnish Sauna Society, and we have a fine venue in Lauttasaari [a district of Helsinki]—we get all kinds of people, from tram drivers to CEOs of listed companies, all sitting together on the same benches,

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and we talk about the same things. I think it's nice that in some way we're all the same there-naked. (Male I14).

Above, one of our informants mentions that the Finnish sauna is a place where people feel free to talk. He further ponders that genuine social encounters in the sauna are linked to a sense of social equality that comes from being naked. This creates a unique social atmosphere, particularly in public saunas, where people share the bathing experience with strangers. Indeed, the sauna has something that encourages quiet and "tongue-tied" Finns to become more communicative and emotionally connected (Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2025; Puro, 2009; Tillotson *et al.*, 2021; Sysö, 2021).

In Finland, public saunas are meeting places for people from various backgrounds. Public saunas can be owned by municipalities, non-profit organisations or private businesses. Saunas are readily accessible, often charging affordable admission fees and situated in locations that people frequently visit, like swimming halls and gyms. Public saunas can also be extravagant tourist attractions, or they may be located within hotels, offering visitors a place to relax. Whether they are non-profit or commercial, public saunas are places where bathers from various backgrounds can gather and enjoy time together.

Grounded on previous notions, this study explores public saunas as third places. "Third place" is an established theoretical concept to examine how certain places, outside home and work, encourage people to gather, enjoy each other's company and interact socially (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982). Third places are environments that are characterised by functions like socialisation, flow, a cozy atmosphere, conversation, accessibility, inclusiveness and regularity (Alexander, 2019; Laing and Royle, 2013; Linnet, 2015; Oldenburg, 1999). Since Oldenburg's (1999) study on coffee shops, pubs and hairdressers, a range of empirical contexts has been examined as third places, including retail stores (Alexander, 2019; Laing and Royle, 2013; Lin, 2012; Rosenbaum, 2006), libraries (Lawson, 2004), arts venues (Slater and Jung Koo, 2010), urban open spaces (Ujang *et al.*, 2018) and family dinners (Purnell, 2015).

Extant studies have insightfully investigated the functions and benefits of third places for individual place users (Hawkins and Ryan, 2013; Rosenbaum, 2009; Slater and Jung Koo, 2010; Ujang *et al.*, 2018) and for service providers and place managers (Alexander, 2019; Rosenbaum, 2006; Laing and Royle, 2013). However, two notable gaps stand out in the current understanding. First, while most previous studies have concentrated on human agency in the construction of third places, the role of materiality has received little scholarly attention (McArthur and White, 2006). As illustrated by the interview quoted at the beginning of the introduction, the sauna's socio-material agency renders it a unique place for social interaction (see also Leipämaa-Leskinen *et al.*, 2025; Puro, 2009; Sysö, 2021). Thus, responding to this gap, our study aims to explore the socio-material construction of public saunas to gain a rigorous understanding of the elements that together contribute to a third place's social atmosphere.

Second, most research has highlighted third places as social levellers (Oldenburg, 1999; Yuen and Johnson, 2017) that encourage pure socialisation among their users (Alexander, 2019; Lin, 2012). However, the multifaceted nature of social interaction has received limited academic focus. For example, only a few studies have questioned whether conversation is a truly essential element of third places (Linnet, 2015; Laing and Royle, 2013; Slater and Jung Koo, 2010). We address this issue by zooming in to the finetuned nature of sociality and explore how socio-material elements either facilitate or constrain the social atmosphere within a sauna.

To bridge these gaps, we take the theoretical lens of assemblage thinking to grasp the socio-material capacities enabling public saunas to facilitate their unique social atmosphere.

Thus, we approach public saunas as socio-material assemblages of people, spaces and materials (e.g. [Canniford and Bajde, 2015](#); [DeLanda, 2016](#)) and pose the following research question:

RQ. How do socio-material assemblages construct public saunas as third places?

We develop insights from an interpretative multi-data set consisting of interviews with bathers ($n = 39$) in hotel sauna departments, three focus groups discussions arranged in a commercial sauna environment and articles from the magazine *Sauna* (2018–2022) published by the *Finnish Sauna Society*. These data sets allowed us to bring forward the polyphony of actors, namely ordinary sauna bathers, institutional sauna organisations and sauna experts such as architects, entrepreneurs, medical experts and culture workers, and how they together formulate the social and material arrangements of public saunas.

By using a socio-material analysis, our study makes two notable contributions to the literature on third places. First, we extend the understanding of third places from the viewpoint of materiality, moving beyond the human agency that has dominated previous discussions. Our analysis, grounded on assemblage thinking, demonstrates how the elements of people, spaces and materials contribute to the production of public saunas as holy places, democratic places and experiential places. Second, we connect the findings to third place theorisation by discussing how the socio-material elements either facilitate or constrain the social atmosphere within the sauna by connecting each assemblage to the four social dimensions of third places – social leveller, regularity, diversity and enjoyment ([Yuen and Johnson, 2017](#)). Developing an empirical grounding on these conceptual categories, we add more nuances to previous studies on social atmosphere within a third place ([Lawson, 2004](#); [Linnet, 2015](#); [Slater and Jung Koo, 2010](#)). We specifically demonstrate that being in silence, rather than engaging in active conversation, can also enhance the third place's social atmosphere.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first discuss the research background of the study, followed by the methodological choices. The findings reveal three assemblages of public saunas and their associated socio-material capacities. The discussion delves deeper into these assemblages in relation to the social dimensions of third places. The study concludes with final remarks.

Research background

Third place as a theoretical lens to public sauna

[Oldenburg \(1999: 16\)](#) originally defined third places by stating that they “host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realm of home and work”. Since then, several social scientists have elaborated the concept further. In re-evaluating the conceptualisation of third places, [Yuen and Johnson \(2017\)](#) build upon [Oldenburg's \(1999\)](#) notions and characterise third places by means of four social dimensions:

- (1) *social leveller*; third places facilitate pure socialisation;
- (2) *regularity*; third places typically have regulars whose absence is noted;
- (3) *diversity*, third places are places where people from varied backgrounds meet each other; and
- (4) *enjoyment*; in third places entertainment is provided by the people themselves.

These are the dimensions that inform the capacity of third places to produce a social atmosphere for their users.

Besides being environments for pure and informal social interaction, third places are defined to function as inclusive and accessible places. To highlight these characteristics, Oldenburg (1999: 61–62) underlines that third places exist on neutral ground: “Third places [...] serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality.” This is supported by Ujang *et al.* (2018: 117), as they discuss how inclusiveness and accessibility influence how people use spaces and interact with others in urban public spaces. Similarly, Purnell (2015) discovered in his study of homes that hosting family dinners strengthens the feelings of social equality and boosts the feeling of support given to others.

Finnish public saunas are characterised by inclusivity and accessibility. Public saunas became common after urbanisation at the beginning of the 20th century (Tillotson *et al.*, 2021), as they were built for city blocks to provide hygiene facilities for residents living in crowded flats. Nowadays, while many Finns have private saunas in their homes, public saunas continue to exist in various forms, ranging from swimming halls to recreational destinations. Most public saunas are easily accessible for a modest fee, making them affordable. For example, a visit to a swimming hall sauna typically costs around 6 euros. Thus, even though their original meaning has changed over the years, public saunas still hold the purpose of gathering together a mix of people from varied socio-demographic backgrounds to spend time in a relaxed spirit (Tillotson *et al.*, 2021).

A sense of belonging is central to third places, and most studies address the themes of ease of conversation and pure socialisation (Alexander, 2019; Hawkins and Ryan, 2013; Lin, 2012). For instance, observing Danish cafés, Linnet (2015) showcased the multi-layered construction of a cozy (or *hygge*) atmosphere that is important for café consumers. Addressing the co-production of sensorial, material and social elements, the study (2015: 15) concludes that “the presence of others without any direct contact and with observance of a certain distance is conducive to a cozy atmosphere”. Similarly, Slater and Jung Koo (2010) discovered that conversation does not play a central role at art venues, even though visitors enjoy meeting people. Additionally, Laing and Royle (2013) discuss whether bookshops qualify as third places due to the limited conversation that occurs there. In essence, previous works have highlighted that various socio-material elements have agency in the construction of social atmospheres (Steadman and Coffin, 2024). Next, we describe how assemblage thinking provides us with an analytical lens to grasp the socio-materiality of public saunas as third places.

Assemblage thinking in the analysis of third places

Assemblage thinking brings together research that approaches socio-material aspects of everyday life (e.g. Canniford and Bajde, 2015; DeLanda, 2016; Latour, 2005). These studies share the perspective that social life is induced by an assemblage of heterogeneous entities that are intertwined. Therefore, assemblage thinking enables one to capture how the variety of material elements of public saunas coalesce in a network that enables a social atmosphere that is typical of a third place.

Assemblage thinking stresses the importance of non-human actors, and regards agency as being distributed across a socio-material collection of people, things and narratives, rather than being possessed solely by humans (Diaz Ruiz *et al.*, 2020; Syrjäälä *et al.*, 2016). Materiality is important, as things do not simply carry meanings or should not be handled as “mere objects” (Latour, 2005). Instead, the arrangements of material, social and living entities constantly renegotiate their relationships, and therefore the assemblages rarely remain stable (e.g. Molander *et al.*, 2023). Thereby, rather than being passive entities that

human actors use to carry meanings, these assemblages shape the realities in which humans live and carry out daily practices (Syrjälä *et al.*, 2025).

Delving into the heterogeneity of the agentic capacities of various elements is a primary focus of assemblage thinking (Borgerson, 2013; Syrjälä *et al.*, 2016). With regard to previous studies on the issue, the agentic capacities of human and non-human actors have been addressed in various settings, including urban spaces, drinking assemblages, diplomatic saunas and music festivals (Kuruoğlu and Woodward, 2021; Kärrholm, 2008; Sysjö, 2021; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2024; Woodward and Swartjes, 2024). These studies insightfully demonstrate how weather, nature and other more-than-human entities (e.g. pedestrian streets, performance stages, tables and chairs, smells and music) participate in creating a space's social atmosphere. However, they do not incorporate their findings into the theory of third place. An exception is a study by Linnet (2015), which specifically explored cafés as third places and how their social atmosphere is constructed.

Inspired by these studies, we focus on agentic capacities of the heterogeneous elements of people, spaces and materials in the public sauna. *People* element shows how the construction of the sauna as a third place is intertwined with participating humans and the types of social interaction their relationships entail, thereby highlighting how as living beings, people may show expressive capacities of agency in the assemblage (DeLanda, 2016). Building on Linnet (2015), who points that the mere presence of other people is central in creating a social atmosphere in third places, we argue that saunas represent a unique third place. Because sauna bathing is carried out naked, no outer body signs such as clothes or marks of power or social status differentiate sauna bathers from each other. The example illustrates how saunas are places that underscore social equality among users (Oldenburg, 1999). Another distinctive aspect of the Finnish sauna culture is the so-called sauna etiquette (Puro, 2009), which consists of collective knowledge about a set of tacit rules and codes of behaviour. This etiquette emphasises the importance of respectful behaviour towards other bathers, such as valuing silence and avoiding making noise.

When it comes to the element *space*, saunas come in many forms as there are over three million saunas in Finland, a country with 5.5 million inhabitants (Official Statistics of Finland, 2024). This number includes private saunas in homes and summer cottages, and public saunas in their various forms. While sauna environments have changed during the long history of sauna bathing in Finland (Sysjö, 2021), even the most modern saunas hold certain traditional elements to ensure the authentic spirit of sauna, showing the material capacities of the agency of sauna while configuring assemblage. In addition to the sauna space, other *material* elements like interior design, lighting and sounds (see also Linnet, 2015), can also evoke material capabilities within this socio-material assemblage. The most important material element is *löyly* (there is no English counterpart for the word) which is the hot vapour or steam created by the practice of throwing water on the stove. This steam heats up the sauna room and creates sensorial and bodily impacts for sauna bathers to experience (Sysjö, 2021).

Following the suggestion of Canniford and Bajde (2015), we illuminate differences and interdependencies between various socio-material entities to show how multiple qualities of agency occur in assemblages. Sensitised by these arguments, we next contemplate how the empirical choices of our study were conducted.

Methodology

In this study, we used an interpretative research design. The multi-data set was gathered from a combination of interviews with bathers in hotel sauna facilities, focus group discussions held at a commercial sauna restaurant *Löyly*, and articles from *Sauna*, the official quarterly

magazine of the Finnish Sauna Society (see [Appendix 1, Table A1](#) for information about the data sets).

The interviews were conducted at five hotels in Finland, with 39 participants recruited onsite from among the hotel guests visiting the sauna facilities. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. All personal identifiers, except for gender and age, were removed prior to data analysis. The interviews were conducted in two stages. Initially, participants were asked some general questions about their sauna bathing routines, practices and memories. The participants then went ahead with their initial plan and bathed in the hotel sauna. After the sauna session, the interviews continued in a quiet place close to the sauna facilities, where the participants were asked more specific questions related to their fresh experience and related to the socio-material elements in the hotel sauna space. Although the Finnish sauna context involves nakedness, all interviews were conducted fully clothed to ensure participants' comfort and privacy. Overall, the interviews explored the participants' present experience with sauna bathing and how they incorporate sauna into their daily lives. Interviews were conducted in Finnish, each lasting from 30 to 40 min.

The focus group discussions took place at Löyly, a commercial sauna restaurant located in Helsinki, Finland's capital. Löyly positions itself as an urban oasis, appealing to both locals and tourists. Informants were recruited onsite and they formed two groups of regular customers and one group of first-time visitors, totalling nine informants. Informants were asked about their past and present sauna experiences, along with the elements they consider creating value in the sauna. Discussions were conducted immediately after their sauna visit in a clothed setting to encourage informants to share fresh memories and connect the discussions to tangible elements and objects in the sauna environment. Focus group discussions were conducted in Finnish, each lasting between 1 and 1.5 h.

Finally, we analysed articles from the open-access magazine *Sauna*, [1] published by the Finnish Sauna Society. This non-profit organisation, founded in 1973, currently has approximately 4,400 members from diverse backgrounds, who have access to its Sauna House in Helsinki. We analysed the 20 issues published between 2018 and 2022 (including editorials, original articles, sauna-related travel reports, research findings and sauna-related advertisements), totalling over 1,400 pages. This material represents cultural talk related to sauna bathing within the Finnish context.

The analysis proceeded through an iterative process between the data, theory and emerging concepts. We started the analysis by examining how the socio-material elements – *people, spaces and materials* – emerged in the interview and focus group data. We coded all data extracts representing each of the socio-material elements connected to public saunas. Next, we used a similar procedure and coded the *Sauna* articles. Finally, we combined the codings and constructed preliminary socio-material assemblages. We moved between empirical data and third place theory until the analysis produced three fine-tuned and divergent socio-material assemblages that described public saunas as third places: *holy place, democratic place and experiential place*.

The interviews and focus group discussions provided first-hand insights into the socio-material elements of sauna, while the magazine material offered wider cultural context, supporting and complementing the interpretation of the data. In this way, data triangulation notably added rigour, breadth, richness and depth to the investigation ([Moisander and Valtonen, 2006](#)). Having grown up within the Finnish sauna culture, the authors are sensitised to its various meanings and practices. To avoid possible blind spots, we engaged in researcher triangulation and systematically revisited our interpretations during the analysis.

Findings

In the findings, we demonstrate three socio-material assemblages of public saunas. *Holy place assemblage* describes saunas as peaceful and silent places where social interaction is guided by normative rules grounded in “sauna etiquette”; *Democratic place assemblage* holds saunas as equal and respectful places where social interaction emerges differently according to fellow bathers; and *Experiential place assemblage* shows saunas as fun and inspiring places where social interaction is typically abundant, hilarious and loud. [Appendix 2, Table A2](#) provides a detailed description of each assemblage and their socio-material elements (people, materials and spaces) with illustrative data quotes.

Public saunas as holy places

Firstly, our analysis indicates how public saunas assemble as holy places (see also [Puro, 2009](#); [Tillotson et al., 2021](#)), where heterogeneous elements related to sauna invite sauna bathers to enjoy each other’s company and the “holy spirit of sauna”. The holy place assemblage communicates the sauna’s capacity to represent a place where people can meet each other in a manner that ensures physical and emotional recovering and wellbeing. The holy place is addressed in *Sauna Magazine*, where the President of the Finnish Sauna Society gives specific instructions on how to cherish the sauna’s holy spirit:

The sauna is a holy place in Finnish culture. Pontificating about your opinions or talking loudly with your group without considering others are not acceptable. If there are problems or disputes, contact our executive director or the society’s chairman if necessary. (*Magazine 1/2018*).

In our socio-material analysis, the element of *people* is grounded in sauna etiquette, which values good manners and respectful behaviour towards the fellow sauna bathers. As in the excerpt above, we can also see the pursuit of silence or silent conversations, as instructions are very explicit with regard to actual social interactions. The sauna etiquette shows decisive agency in assemblage as the human participants willingly align their behaviours. For example, they follow the rule of avoiding discussing sensitive matters in the sauna. These kinds of fine-tuned observations about social relations were often referred to in the data sets, as indicated below:

Let’s respect the sauna peace, keep voices down, and share personal stories preferably in the fireplace room rather than on the sauna benches. Sauna is about silence, but it doesn’t mean complete silence. In a way, the sauna influences sauna-goers who are lost in their own thoughts and may not want to listen to loud conversations. So, let’s not disturb other sauna bathers. We are all different and enjoy the sauna in our own way, which should be respected. (*Magazine 1/2020*).

The excerpt says that “sauna is about silence”. Silence is indeed at the core of sauna experience ([Puro, 2009](#)), and we argue like [Linnet \(2015\)](#), who found that the mere presence of other people creates a cozy atmosphere for cafés, that it catalyses the third place functions of public saunas. Research indicates benefits for human health; silence can play a significant role in preventing illness and even improving physical, mental and spiritual well-being ([Stéphan and Banbury, 2008](#)). For example, experiencing silence is found to be linked to reduced stress and anxiety ([Anderson et al., 2007](#); [Stéphan and Banbury, 2008](#)).

Sometimes in the holy place assemblage the social rules are contested by other people, highlighting the de-stability of the assemblages based on heterogeneity of consumer groups ([Molander et al., 2023](#)). Our analysis showed that the most tangible contestations were located in public saunas that are open for both domestic and foreign tourists. Below one regular visitor of *Löyly* tells how the behaviour of tourists and Finns differ in the public sauna:

Then, of course, people who come here as tourists are not so tight-lipped about the sauna. At least not the way we are – they want to talk and don't realize it. And yes everyone does it [talk in the sauna], but yes, at least I have kept it a sacred [space], so that one does not need to be in silence, but at least you give space to others. (Female, regular).

Even though the assemblage is contested and negotiated by talking (too much), the excerpt shows how the informant accepts “wrong” kinds of social behaviours from people who are not familiar with the Finnish sauna culture. Thus, in some circumstances other people who are not familiar with sauna etiquette may be in conflict with the holy place assemblage.

Spaces of the holy place assemblage are typically entwined with contextual situations where sauna bathing takes place in surroundings which are traditional and authentically Finnish, as described below:

Right near the center of Helsinki is an old traditional Finnish building and a landscape that is always beautiful and calming. I experience it as a sensory-free [place without environmental noise] place. (*Magazine* 1/2019).

Similar to spaces, the *material* elements of this assemblage help to ensure the sauna's capacity to stay as a holy place. Our data shows that they include dim lightning, natural materials (wood) and quiet surroundings and many informants stated that they would prefer the sauna to remain unchanged and not be modernised too much. For example, our informants felt that bright lightning and strong colours contradicted the real nature of the sauna. This aligns with Oldenburg's (1999) notion of low profile, indicating third places to be an ordinary and casual part of a daily routine. In the following excerpts, one informant in hotel sauna departments described that the sauna should be a traditional place that is authentic to Finnish culture:

It must have a certain kind of style—both natural and a little bit, what's the word, conservative. No garish tile walls or anything like that. Wood is the right material for a sauna. (Male I1).

Thus, the sauna represents a third place which changes very slowly, at least in relation to its socio-material arrangements (Author, 2024). The next section goes into greater depth about the nature of democracy in public saunas.

Public saunas as democratic places

The second socio-material assemblage of public saunas indicates them to be democratic places that invite sauna bathers to participate free of visual status symbols and outward marks of socio-demographic differences (Oldenburg, 1999). Our analysis shows that the democratic place assemblage is connected to social equality and the sauna's material capacity to take account of all kinds of sauna bathers.

When it comes to the *people* element of this assemblage, our analysis reveals a large number of ways in which the expressive capacities of agency are constructed in the sauna. The public sauna occurs as a third place where people can be alone, together or alone together, bringing a novel aspect to prevailing third place discussions. The *Magazine* quote below illustrates these multifarious capacities:

A good sauna is one where you can laugh, talk or be quiet with people. So there are different saunas, but also saunas and different situations when you go to a sauna. A good sauna is therefore also a place that is capable of transformation, which takes into account the current situation and all the saunas in its embrace at the time, without forgetting a single one. It is a place that teaches people values that should be taken with them when leaving the sauna. A good sauna is one where respect is not in-built but is given democratically by everyone in the sauna. There titles and other

beautiful or jagged frames built in people's thoughts dissipate, putting everyone on the same level. (*Magazine* 1/2019).

The excerpt highlights the role of social equality of public saunas as third places (Rosenbaum, 2006; Ujang *et al.*, 2018). Like Tillotson *et al.* (2021), our analysis indicates that public saunas induce material agency by supporting the community spirit among sauna bathers and strengthening social togetherness. Thus, the element of people encourages sauna bathers either to chat with fellow people in a courteous manner or to engage in in-depth discussions that create unforgettable memories. Several previous studies have shown how third places strengthen social relations between people (Alexander, 2019; Lin, 2012; Lawson, 2004; Slater and Jung Koo, 2010), and public saunas appear particularly as places where people can interact with unfamiliar people, often on an emotional level. Indeed, the present data include numerous examples in which people talk about opening up with strangers in public saunas. Consider the following interview excerpt, where a male informant remembers past emotional discussions that have taken place in public saunas:

For instance, I talked about divorce with a Colombian man here last autumn. A very interesting conversation. He'd just gotten divorced [...] I think it's a lot to do with the fact that the facade comes down there. No clothes. People are what they are, without extra identifying features. (Male I22).

It would appear that public saunas enable their users to respect and value other people as they are. This is due to the lack of visual signs and status symbols and, for example, in a hotel sauna, people may start having good discussions with each other, and then, while having hotel breakfast next morning, they may realise that they chatted with somebody they would otherwise not have connected with. In this way, something that is missing may in fact produce material agency in the assemblage. In this sense, public saunas have much in common with libraries, which also have been seen as third places that are open to diverse consumer groups (Lawson, 2004), and how a diversity of participating consumer groups might produce value in the assemblage (Molander *et al.*, 2023).

Inclusiveness is also highlighted in the *spaces* of this assemblage. Most of the data addresses the sauna's inclusive material capacity, for instance an excerpt from *Sauna Magazine* (2 / 2020) says that "you meet people from varied backgrounds in the Sauna association saunas". This assemblage is typically connected to sauna associations' public saunas or swimming hall saunas, which represent sauna spaces that are easily accessible due to their modest admission fee. Inclusiveness is most often viewed through the viewpoint of socio-demographics, with topics such as physical disabilities being discussed less frequently. However, *Sauna Magazine* includes a few articles where the spatial elements of public saunas are evaluated from the viewpoint of disability, like in the following excerpt that tells about saunas that are designed for deaf-blind persons:

But what kind of sauna environment would be barrier-free and also accessible to the deaf-blind? The Action Center for the Deaf and Blind in Tampere has saunas where people with sensory disabilities are taken into account in different ways. (*Magazine* 1/2020).

According to our analysis, *material* elements of the democratic assemblage should support saunas to assemble as shelter-like environments. Then the use of artificial materials, for example, glass walls and bright lightning, should be avoided. This helps the bathers to feel safe, further encouraging meaningful social encounters. Below two informants describe how the material elements matter in creating a shelter-like environment:

Well, it should at least be airy—so that it's easy to breathe in there. And I don't think there should be anything artificial. I don't like that kind of thing. It should be more neutral, in a certain kind of way. Maybe like a hut or a place of shelter and calm. Nothing too open. (Female I16).

I don't like that there is a glass wall between the sauna and the washroom, at least in the public one, and probably not at home either, somehow it bothers me. Too open and it takes away privacy (Male I15).

In the next section, we discuss how public saunas may become experiential third places imbued with the meanings of fun and casual relaxation.

Public saunas as experiential places

Finally, the data enabled us to uncover how people, materials and spaces come together and shape the experiential assemblage of public saunas. This assemblage is connected to the ideals of having fun and a hilarious time in the sauna, being an opposite to the holy place assemblage, which addressed the purpose of relaxation in a quiet and peaceful atmosphere. Below a regular visitor to Löyly tells how assembling a great number of people together makes the social atmosphere fun and energising:

But there were so many people that there were no signs of relaxation, even though it was fun. We also had a good time chatting. We talked more than usual in the sauna because everyone else was talking and chatting. (Female, regular).

We found that *people* induce significantly expressive agency in turning saunas into experiential places. Our informants explained how social interaction – even with strangers – begin naturally in the public saunas. This socio-material capacity reinforces public saunas' embodiment as third places where natural social interaction is central (Oldenburg, 1999). Within this assemblage, sauna bathers engage in positive and fun conversations which, may at best, even extend the time spent in the sauna. Hence, the presence of other sauna bathers is even expected and anticipated for. One informant said that “Well, it is quite nice to chat with someone there. Especially when you work on the road alone” (Male I12). Another pointed out that “[...] you go there to socialise with other people in the sauna, and usually you see others and exchange a few words” (Male I1). These positive experiences culminate in how people are embedded in the experiential assemblage, as pointed out by one informant:

Just drinking good wine or a cocktail alone isn't necessarily an experience. You need other people there, and it becomes bigger with more people involved. Of course, it can be an experience alone too, but the more people you have, or good friends, with good drinks, good food, a nice environment and scenery—many different elements—the more layers you have, the more experiential it becomes. (Male, regular).

As indicated in the excerpt above, this assemblage is embedded in varied *spatial* and *material* elements. The informant talks about “good drinks, good food, a nice environment and scenery” that participate in the creation of an experiential sauna assemblage. However, it should be noted that the element of people is the most important element for him: “the more people you have, the more layers you have, the more experiential it becomes”. This assemblage most typically takes place in commercial saunas, where it is possible to complete the sauna experience with extra service offerings, such as buying food and drink, or wellbeing services like massages and facials. Other typical spaces are hotel saunas, where hotel visitors, especially groups of friends, often start their party evenings before going to a night club. Below a hotel visitor describes how a hotel sauna environment imbues decisive material agency:

It has a pretty big meaning in terms of the overall visit, how you enjoyed yourself. Especially if we go for entertainment purposes, we always check what the sauna facilities are like and that's it, because that's part of going out with friends to have fun. (Male I36).

When it comes to tangible material elements of the sauna environment, modern and even luxurious materials are typical in this assemblage. They also help in constructing the sauna assemblage so that it is different from regular saunas, as stressed by our informant:

This is a different kind of experience. It's a more modern approach that includes some of the same elements, but you can't really compare it directly to, say, a traditional cottage sauna. (Male, regular).

The quote shows that the interior design induces pivotal material agency. For the experiential place assemblage to occur, the interiors, like the washing room and the sauna itself, ought to be clean and free – not from furniture and decorative items as such – but from unnecessary clutter. Thus, the experiential sauna assemblage acts against the original low-profile characteristic of a third place (Oldenburg, 1999), but aligns with Hawkins and Ryan (2013: 198), who conclude about music festivals that “it is less about the low profile and more about the intended activity that the space facilitates that makes these spaces third places”. In conclusion, the findings highlight the important role of material elements in creating an atmosphere that elevates public saunas so that they feel like experiential third places.

Discussion

In the discussion, we look at how the socio-material elements of public sauna assemblages appear in relation to the social dimensions of third places. This allows us to analyse more closely the social atmosphere that is constructed in public saunas. In this context, we refer to four social dimensions that Yuen and Johnson (2017) have identified as characterising third places: enjoyment, regularity, social leveller and diversity. Figure 1 showcases how people, spaces and materials of each assemblage connect with social dimensions. As visualised in the figure, the social dimensions appear to overlap, thus being non-exclusionary with regard to socio-materials assemblages. The dimension of social leveller – indicating the third place as an inclusive place that facilitates socialisation (Oldenburg, 1999) – is depicted in the middle, as it connects to the element of people, which is crucial for public sauna assemblages.

The “holy place” assemblage connects most closely to the dimension of *regularity*, which according to Oldenburg (1999: 34) refers to regulars “whose mood and manner provide the infectious contagious style of interaction”. While emphasising the regular users of the assemblage, regularity also indicates that the holy place assemblage is part of Finns’ everyday lives, thus being a low-profile place where Finns regularly go. In this sense, the element of people includes regular sauna bathers of a specific sauna, but also all Finns who follow the traditions and routines of Finnish sauna bathing. The materials of the holy place assemblage are also preferably natural; saunas are built from traditional materials and they communicate Finnish nature-related meanings. Our analysis shows that the holy place assemblage addresses the peaceful social atmosphere of the sauna, with the sauna etiquette highlighting silence serving as an important stabiliser of the assemblage. When it comes to spaces, this assemblage is typically actualised in public saunas which are open for members of sauna associations or other authentic sauna environments. These are the environments that have most capacities to facilitate the holy place assemblage, because their users typically know the sauna etiquette and act in a way that creates a peaceful and quiet social atmosphere.

The second assemblage is a “democratic place”. Within this assemblage, the social atmosphere is stabilised by respecting social equality, which embodies different kinds of social interactions that are carried out in respectful and inclusive ways. The assemblage is thus connected to the social dimension of *diversity*, which according to Yuen and Johnson (2017) addresses how the full spectrum of local humanity is represented in a third place. Based on this, the people of this assemblage are diverse and come from different

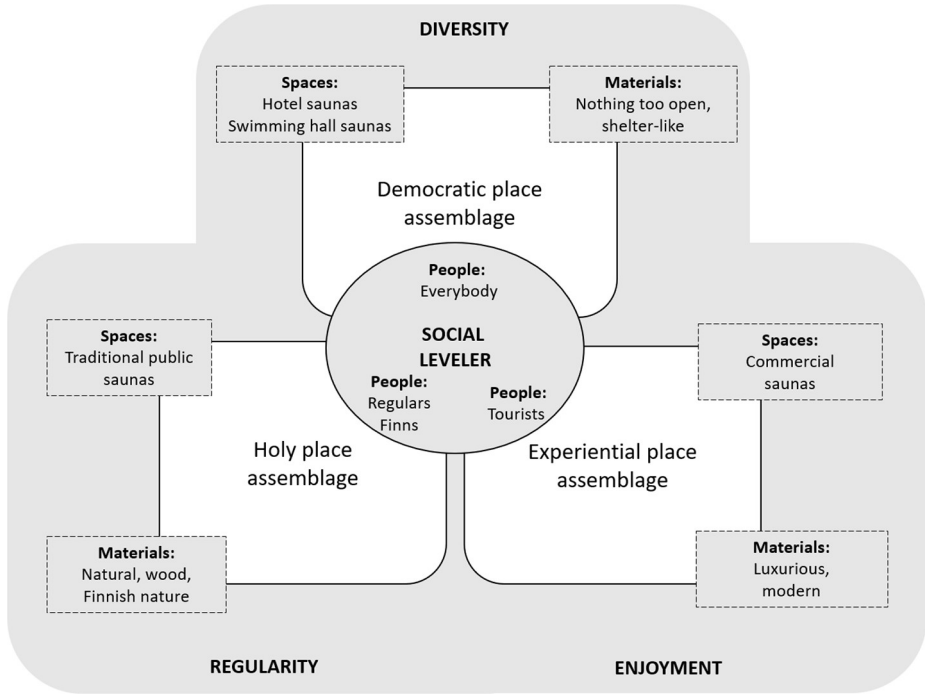


Figure 1. Public sauna assemblages in relation to third place's social dimensions
Source(s): Authors' own creation

backgrounds. Consequently, the spaces are typically swimming hall saunas, which are accessible for a nominal admission fee, or hotel saunas, where various hotel visitors can meet. Materials of this assemblage highlight the sauna as a snug place where people gather to feel safe and sheltered, thus, for example, glass and bright lighting are not part of this assemblage. The social atmosphere of this assemblage resembles [Linnet's \(2015\)](#) findings, where the mere presence of other people can create a cozy atmosphere.

Finally, within the “experiential assemblage”, the three socio-material elements create an ambience that makes the sauna feel enjoyable, fun and inspiring, thus stabilised by a social atmosphere that facilitates abundant and amusing social interaction. This assemblage is naturally connected to the social dimension of *enjoyment*, which addresses the sustaining activity of conversation, which can be “passionate and light-hearted, serious and witty, informative and silly” ([Oldenburg, 1999](#): xxii). This assemblage is typically actualised in commercial saunas, which are designed to be extraordinary sauna environments. The materials are luxurious and modern, thus being the opposite of materials that are preferred in democratic and holy places assemblages, where casualness and a low profile were highlighted ([Oldenburg, 1999](#)). The element of people encompasses various sauna bathers, such as sauna enthusiasts who explore new types of saunas, domestic or foreign tourists who visit saunas when travelling or casual visitors to commercial saunas. They all share a desire to escape from one's daily routines and to experience unique and meaningful moments alongside fellow bathers, much like at festivals ([Hawkins and Ryan, 2013](#)) or in arts venues ([Slater and Jung Koo, 2010](#)).

Conclusion

This study used assemblage thinking when studying public saunas as third places. While third places have been explored across various empirical contexts and through different theoretical lenses, socio-material analyses are sparse. Our study fills this gap by analysing the heterogenous socio-material networks and social atmosphere that construct public saunas as third places.

The findings offer novel theoretical insights to existing third place studies. First, they highlight the importance of the socio-material construction of third places and spaces (Linnet, 2015; McArthur and White, 2016; Woodward and Swartjes, 2024). We discovered how the assemblages of public saunas are facilitated by the capacities of people, spaces and materials that come together to create a third place. Hence, the study illuminates how the heterogeneity of material elements in collaboration with a variety of different people create diverse third place assemblages. In essence, our study demonstrated that silence, rather than vivid conversation, can act as an important catalyser for constructing a third place. Second, the study addresses how socio-material capacities enable public saunas to facilitate their unique social atmosphere. By doing so, our study develops an empirical grounding based on Yuen and Johnson's (2017) conceptual categorisations of social leveller, regularity, diversity and enjoyment, showing how these social dimensions connect with public sauna assemblages and their socio-material elements.

We encourage place marketers, place brand creators and place designers to analyse third places more carefully in relation to their socio-material construction, for which Figure 1 May serve as a useful tool. When branding saunas, the holy place assemblage would encourage designers to ensure that the sauna space provides enough material elements to enable bathers to feel that they have escaped from daily routines and enjoy the bodily-sensorial experience of sauna to the full. This experience can be enhanced by incorporating dim lighting, quality acoustic materials, and clear sauna guidelines that encourage mutual respect among bathers, in line with the traditional sauna etiquette. The democratic sauna assemblage could be used by highlighting saunas as shelters for becoming engaged in conversations with a diverse mix of people, and the experiential assemblage prompts designing sauna spaces that are more extravagant than home saunas. However, our findings also underline that it is important to enable alternative assemblages to occur, for example by devoting certain sauna areas for silence while others could invite more celebratory gatherings.

Regarding future research, we invite researchers to investigate the nuances of social interaction within third places. One intriguing aspect relates to the relationship between silence and conversation. For example, our study shows instances where third place dimensions may appear even when sauna bathers are alone, suggesting the need for more nuanced theoretical developments in this regard. Previously, third place studies have taken varied stances on the issue of silence. Laing and Royle (2013), for example, concluded that chain bookshops cannot be called a "third place" owing to the lack of conversation therein. However, Lawson's (2014) analysis of art venues demonstrated how social interaction may take a less perceptible role in a third place, and Linnet (2015) indicated that the mere presence of other people creates a cozy atmosphere in a third place. We suggest that seeking silence can be an important social dimension of a third place and understanding how it facilitates the social atmosphere of third places opens avenues for future research.

Note

[1.] Sauna Magazine is publicly available at <https://sauna.fi/sauna-lehti/vuosikerrat/>

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Table A1. Data sets

Code	Interviews			Magazine articles	
	Gender	Birth year	Year	Issue	Pages
I1	Male	1971	2022	4	88
I2	Male	1964	2022	3	68
I3	Male	1954	2022	2	76
I4	Male	1958	2022	1	64
I5	Male	1968	2021	4	68
I6	Male	1990	2021	3	76
I7	Female	1970	2021	2	84
I8	Male	1970	2021	1	68
I9	Male	1993	2020	4	80
I10	Female	1985	2020	3	68
I11	Female	1975	2020	2	64
I12	Male	1997	2020	1	64
I13	Male	1965	2019	4	68
I14	Male	1968	2019	3	68
I15	Male	1965	2019	2	100
I16	Female	1977	2019	1	60
I17	Male	1979	2018	4	72
I18	Male	1959	2018	3	72
I19	Female	1968	2018	2	60
I20	Male	1956	2018	1	60
I21	Male	1976	In total 1,428 pages		
I22	Male	1970			
I23	Female	1970	Focus groups		
I24	Male	1955			
I25	Male	1966	Group A	Age	Type
I26	Male	1993	Male	30	Regular
I27	Female	1993	Male	29	Regular
I28	Male	1957	Male	31	Regular
I29	Male	1958			
I30	Female	1956	Group B	Age	Type
I31	Female	1957	Female	30	Regular
I32	Male	1970	Female	30	Regular
I33	Female	1975	Female	30	Regular
I34	Male	1992			
I35	Male	1976	Group C	Age	Type
I36	Male	1977	Male	30	First-timer
I37	Female	1976	Male	35	First-timer
I38	Male	1961	Male	38	First-timer
I39	Male	1964			

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table A2. Socio-material assemblages in the production of public saunas as third places

	<i>Holy place assemblage</i> : peaceful and silent. Social interaction is guided by normative rules grounded in 'sauna etiquette'	<i>Democratic place assemblage</i> : equal and respectful. Social interaction emerges differently according to fellow bathers	<i>Experiential place assemblage</i> : fun and inspiring. Social interaction is typically abundant, hilarious and loud
<p>People show how a third place is connected to other people and what kind of social relations it concerns</p>	<p>Let's respect the sauna peace, keep voices down, and share personal stories preferably in the fireplace room rather than on the sauna benches. Sauna is about silence, but it doesn't mean complete silence. In a way, the sauna influences sauna-goers who are lost in their own thoughts and may not want to listen to loud conversations. So, let's not disturb other sauna-bathers. We are all different and enjoy the sauna in our own way, which should be respected. (Magazine 1 / 2020)</p>	<p>For instance, I talked about divorce with a Colombian man here last autumn. A very interesting conversation. He'd just gotten divorced [...] I think it's a lot to do with the fact that the facade comes down there. No clothes. People are what they are, without extra identifying features. (Male I22)</p>	<p>Just drinking good wine or a cocktail alone isn't necessarily an experience. You need other people there, and it becomes bigger with more people involved. Of course, it can be an experience alone too, but the more people you have, or good friends, with good drinks, good food, a nice environment, and scenery—many different elements—the more layers you have, the more experiential it becomes. (male, regular)</p>
<p>Spaces describes the contextual situations with which the assemblages are entwined with</p>	<p>Right near the centre of Helsinki is an old traditional Finnish building and a landscape that is always beautiful and calming. I experience it as a sensory-free place. All extra stimuli are stripped away: clothes, phones, makeup and jewellery. No one is recognisable, as everyone has the same green towels. (Magazine 1 / 2019)</p>	<p>You meet people from varied backgrounds in the Sauna association saunas. And you never know in advance what kind of conversation will emerge—there is both joy and deeper topics. That is one of the values of communal sauna experiences. (Magazine 2 / 2020)</p>	<p>It has a pretty big meaning in terms of the overall visit, how you enjoyed yourself. Especially if we go for entertainment purposes, we always check what the sauna facilities are like and that's it, because that's part of going out with friends to have fun. (Male I36)</p>
<p>Materials represent all the material elements and infrastructures connected to a third place</p>	<p>It must have a certain kind of style—both natural and a little bit, what's the word, conservative. No garish tile walls or anything like that. Wood is the right material for a sauna. (Male I1)</p>	<p>Well, it should at least be airy—so that it's easy to breathe in there. And I don't think there should be anything artificial. I don't like that kind of thing. It should be more neutral, in a certain kind of way. Maybe like a hut or a place of shelter and calm. Nothing too open. (Female I16)</p>	<p>This is a different kind of experience. It's a more modern approach that includes some of the same elements, but you can't really compare it directly to, say, a traditional cottage sauna. (male, regular)</p>
<p>Source(s): Authors' own creation</p>			



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