

Original Article

The Geography of Everyday Exclusion: Third Spaces and Occupational Inequality in Delhi NCR

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Abstract - Third spaces that sit between home (first space) and work (second space) are often described as neutral ground that is open and accessible to everyone. This study questions that assumption in the context of Delhi NCR (Delhi, Noida, Gurgaon, Ghaziabad), asking whether formal and informal (precarious) workers experience and access these spaces on equal terms. A structured questionnaire including largely quantitative questions was designed and administered to 116 workers, comprising 50 formal and 66 informal workers (6 of which were freelancers and business owners), and covered which spaces they used, how often, what limited their access, and how they felt within two categories of third spaces: formal commercial venues (malls, restaurants, gyms, etc) and informal public ones (street markets, food stalls, tea stalls, etc). Responses were analysed using Mann-Whitney U tests for the Likert-scale measures and chi-square tests with Cramer's V for categorical data. The two groups were found to inhabit largely separate spatial worlds, with formal workers concentrated in commercial venues and informal workers gravitating toward tea stalls and street markets. Informal workers rated commercial spaces as significantly less affordable and less safe, largely interpreted not as physical safety but rather mental security, yet reported no greater sense of being unwelcome or judged, which locates the barrier in cost and security rather than belonging. Access to informal public spaces, by contrast, did not differ between groups. The exclusion is therefore selective, targeted at the commercial sphere rather than spread across the city. In addition, time poverty was found to be one of the biggest limiting factors to accessing both kinds of spaces for both groups, indicating that long working hours, regardless of other factors, are a root cause for third-space inaccessibility. Thus, these findings reframe third-space inequality as a structural problem of time and money, and point to everyday public spaces as undervalued sites of social mixing worth protecting.

Keywords - Urban Spaces, Formal Workers, Informal Workers, Third Space, Socioeconomic Class.

1. Introduction

Urban life is characterised not just by where people work or sleep, but also by the moments in between. Beyond the spheres of domestic life and formal employment, cities are sustained by a variety of informal and semi-public spaces where people can rest, interact, and take a break from the continuous routine of daily life. These 'third spaces', as coined by Oldenburg in his seminal work (Oldenburg, 1989), are described as 'the physical locations outside the home (first place) or workplace (second place) that provide opportunities for social interaction and social support' (Finlay et al., 2019; Oldenburg, 1999). They are central to the everyday experience of the city. Cafés, parks, plazas, sidewalks, transit nodes, libraries, and neighborhood gathering spots operate as sites where social life unfolds in unscripted ways, offering opportunities for interaction, belonging and support. Third spaces could potentially improve social isolation and lessen the disconnect people experience due to rapid urbanisation and increasingly independent city lives by increasing social interaction and

eventually cohesion among workers. They act as community anchors that promote well-being and connection between populations. While third spaces are frequently discussed as inclusive and socially cohesive environments, their availability and experience rely inevitably on factors such as growing urbanisation and socioeconomic inequality, especially in developing countries with extreme class divides, such as India. India is a particularly acute case: a country where over 90% of the urban workforce is employed informally (Raveendran & Vanek, 2020) and where class stratification is deepened by the enduring structures of caste. The result is a social landscape in which inequality is not only economic but also spatial and psychological (Bharathi et al., 2021).

Oldenburg classified third spaces as neutral, accessible and low-pressure settings that encourage open conversation and social connection. Later academic studies have expanded upon this definition, emphasizing their physical features as well as their psychological and symbolic functions. Third



spaces let individuals inhabit the city without the demands and requirements of productivity or consumption, making them important places for rest, identity expression, and emotional regulation (Soja, 1996; Svensdotter, 2021). Research across urban studies, environmental psychology, and architecture consistently links access to such spaces with improved psychological well-being, reduced stress, and stronger feelings of social connectedness (Qi et al., 2024; Ramos-Vidal & Domínguez de la Ossa, 2023). At a collective level, third spaces support community formation by enabling repeated, informal encounters that foster familiarity and weak social ties, which are crucial to urban social cohesion.

1.1. The Myth of Neutrality: Class, Commodification, and Unequal Access

Third places are supposed to be ‘neutral’ and ‘accessible by all’, but this does not consider the psychological barrier that arises in the subconsciousness of the workers of different classes, so it unintentionally separates some spaces between formal and informal workers or workers of different socioeconomic backgrounds. It has become harder and harder to maintain the notion that third spaces are of equal significance for everyone living in the city.

With the increasing urbanisation and the commodification of land, many of the traditional public space uses have been replaced or transformed by consumption-oriented privatised spaces. In these settings, access is often governed by economic capacity, behavioural norms and subtle forms of surveillance, which reshape who can occupy a space comfortably and for how long (Carmona, 2021). The uneven distribution and experience of third spaces, as a result, have mirrored the greater social and spatial inequalities of the city. Being able to ‘just be’ in a city is becoming a sign of socioeconomic status.

This difference is particularly stark when comparing the daily lives of and the environments in which elite professionals work, and the environments in which informal or precarious workers work. For middle-class and upper-class workers with stable schedules and disposable income, third spaces like landscaped parks, high-end cafés, or co-working hubs are used as extensions of their lifestyle (Kingma, 2016). In the Indian context, these spaces are increasingly concentrated in gated developments, upscale commercial districts, and privatised waterfronts, designed with the aesthetic sensibilities and consumption habits of the urban upper-middle class in mind, effectively signalling to others that they do not belong (Dupont, 2004; Harriss, 2006). For them, the third space is a site of “productive leisure” where they can network, create, express themselves or relax with a sense of complete entitlement. They have the “right to linger” without explanation. This ability is a characteristic yet often overlooked privilege that is inherent in the experiences of public spaces.

In contrast, informal, precarious or lower-class workers experience the city and these spaces through far more constrained and restricted eyes. Their work is frequently mobile, physically demanding and insecure, and is often performed in particular, separate spaces, restricting their opportunities and the time they get to spend for leisure. In India, where caste and class frequently overlap, this restriction is not merely structural but also deeply internalised. Many informal workers describe an acute awareness of being watched, unwelcome, or out of place in spaces coded as belonging to a higher social stratum (Flint, 2002). For them, third spaces cease to function as places of relaxation and rather become places for brief rest, shelter, or recovery between shifts. ‘Inferior’, less intentional third spaces such as edges of sidewalks, transit stations, shaded corners or residual public spaces that fall outside formal regulation (Laliberté Rudman et al., 2022) become their playground. Access to formal third spaces such as cafés or malls may be restricted not only by cost but also by social cues, surveillance, and design strategies that discourage non-consuming presence. Malls and branded coffee chains have become de facto social spaces for the formal middle class, while the same spaces deploy security personnel, dress code expectations, and consumption requirements that act as informal barriers, silently communicating to the informal worker that they are not the intended occupant (Jodhka & Prakash, 2016). Literature on spatial inequality and urban exclusion highlights how the right to occupy these spaces without a set purpose is socially differentiated and treated selectively, favouring those higher up on the food pyramid. Studies on hostile architecture, policing and informal labor show how certain groups of people are viewed and marked as inappropriate or disruptive in spaces that should ideally be associated with leisure, consumption and accessibility (Low & Smith, 2006; Petty, 2016). When it comes to the right to rest, linger, or be in these spaces, it becomes a political issue instead of a right for all. Third spaces, then, are no longer neutral spaces, but rather spaces of class difference that are based on privilege, which allow some presences and exclude others. In this sense, they do not merely reflect inequality but function as mechanisms through which it is normalized and maintained (Hsu, 2020).

1.2. Gaps in the Literature and the Psychological Dimension

These sharply differing experiences reflect how people understand their place in the city and their relationship to others. The way people move through third spaces shapes whether people see themselves as part of the city or as outsiders looking in, and everyday encounters with space feed into feelings of belonging or alienation, influencing how people see themselves as urban subjects (Soja, 1996). However, most of the current literature puts third spaces into one of two categories: idealised sites of community growth or abstract zones of exclusion. It does not fully account for how different social groups actually experience and interpret

them day to day, and in staying at these two poles, it misses the greys in between, the messy, subjective reality of how people feel when they occupy such spaces.

This gap is the most evident in comparisons across class and labour conditions. Spatial inequality is well documented, but how a person's job security, time pressure and social standing affect their psychological connection to a park or a café remains largely unexplored. A third space might be a chosen retreat for leisure, networking or self-expression for a corporate professional, but at the same time, for an informal worker, the same place might be a brief, high-stakes refuge born out of necessity, not choice.

1.3. Research Aims and Scope

This study aims to help to understand that division, moving past the inaccurate, normalised assumption that public spaces serve and are accessed by everyone equally. It examines how elite professionals and informal labourers make use of the same urban environment differently, and demonstrates how a single space can be perceived as a place of belonging for one person, and offer a sense of exclusion for the other. The research examines how urban form and class privilege intersect by focusing on these everyday perceptions, and how the "right to the city" is experienced differently based on one's place in the economy and social hierarchy. In doing so, it takes the discussion beyond mere inclusiveness to a more truthful depiction of the extent to which contemporary urban life reproduces significant social inequalities.

This research sees third spaces as socially differentiated spaces and focuses on how elite professionals and informal workers experience, use, and give meaning to them in the same city. It aims to develop an understanding of the many factors that affect access to the third space for both communities. In addition, it aims to contribute to broader debates on urban inequality, public spaces and subconscious divides based on socioeconomic and urban factors.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Aim of the Study

This study compares how formal (elite) and informal (precarious) workers in Delhi NCR perceive, make use of and experience urban third spaces to understand how class and occupational status shape a person's sense of belonging, comfort and access in these shared public environments. Third spaces are defined in two broad categories. The first is formal commercial spaces, spaces that include entry or hidden costs, including cafes, coffee shops, restaurants, shopping malls, community centres, clubs, bars, movie theatres, gyms, sports facilities, public libraries, salons and parlours. The second is informal public spaces, including tea stalls, street vendors, street markets, sidewalks, benches, roadside seating, public parks/ gardens, religious places and metro stations.

2.2. Objectives of the Study

1. To compare formal and informal workers' perceptions of urban third spaces
2. To compare formal and informal workers' preferences for particular types of third spaces
3. To understand the purpose, frequency and time of day of third space visits among both formal and informal workers in an urban context

2.3. Participants

The study was conducted in Delhi NCR and included a total of 116 participants, split across two groups: 50 formal workers and 66 informal workers. Formal workers were classified as professionals working under a contract within a company or organisation, who had some level of job safety. Informal workers were described as those engaged in work not regulated by labour laws, without any written contracts or social security benefits, such as paid leave or pensions and no job safety whatsoever. Participants spanned a range of age groups (18 to 60+), genders and professions, and were recruited through a mix of purposive sampling, initially distributed to a certain number of people, including a mix of formal and informal workers, and snowball sampling, with those participants further sharing the form and thus helping gain responses from a wider range of people, ensuring wide, varied representation from both occupational categories and backgrounds.

2.4. Instruments

Data was collected using a structured survey questionnaire of 23 questions, available in two versions: an English Google Form and a Hindi paper-based translation of the same form. Both versions of the form were completely identical in content, structure and response options to maintain uniformity.

The survey was divided into three broad sections. The first covered demographic and occupational information like age, gender, occupation type, profession and average daily working hours. The second segment enquired about third space usage patterns, asking participants to identify the places they commonly visit from a comprehensive list of answer choices covering more 'respectable' spaces (cafes, malls, gyms, cinemas, salons) and informal spaces (tea stalls, street markets, public parks, sidewalks, metro stations, religious places). Participants were then asked about their most frequented space, how often they visit, what time of day, whom they go with and what their primary reasons for visiting are.

The third section explored feelings and perceptions. It used a 5-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree to Agree Strongly) to determine participants' opinions on five statements about different types of third spaces separately; whether participants feel they can afford the space, feel welcomed, feel safe, feel it fits their daily routine, and

whether they worry about being judged. Follow-up questions asked participants to identify what factors limit their access to each category of space, how they feel while visiting, and whether they believe people from different income or occupational backgrounds use these spaces differently, with space for open-ended elaboration.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected via two methods. The English version of the survey was provided as a Google Form and produced answers mostly from formal workers- specifically 50 answers from formal workers and 6 from informal workers (freelancers and investors in their respective areas). The exact same survey was then translated into Hindi and printed as a physical paper form. These were distributed in person among workers in Delhi NCR, generating 60 responses, all from informal workers. In actuality, 67 forms were collected, but 7 of those responses were discarded as more than 3 questions had been left blank, making those particular responses futile to include in the paper, as they did not provide a complete insight into that participant's perspective.

Hence, a total of 50 responses by formal workers and 66 responses by informal workers were collected. The use of a physical Hindi form for most informal workers was a deliberate choice made to reduce language and literacy barriers and provide more reliable and inclusive data from those who may not be comfortable navigating digital or English-language formats.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Before being asked to respond to the questions, all participants were given a clear description of the study's purpose, ensuring that they knew what they were agreeing to partake in. Informed consent was taken. Participation was strictly voluntary, and the participants were informed beforehand that they had the right to withdraw their response at any given point in the research without consequence for any reason. Responses were kept completely confidential and used solely for research purposes, eliminating any mentions of names throughout the paper (filling in names was optional in both forms) or any other personal details (excluding demographic details) throughout the paper. This was informed to the participants prior to data collection as well. The survey included clear instructions on how to answer each question to minimise confusion, particularly for the Likert scale sections. The Hindi translation ensured that a much wider range of participants could engage with the survey in their preferred language, reducing the risk of misunderstanding or misrepresentation of responses and maintaining the accuracy of responses. The paper version ensured that participants who were not as comfortable navigating online mediums could give their answers in a format they were familiar with, reducing the time taken to complete the survey and eliminating any technical issues.

3. Results

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire administered to $N = 116$ respondents in Delhi NCR (Noida, Gurugram, Delhi, Ghaziabad), India. The sample included 50 formal workers (43.1%) and 66 informal workers (56.9%) recruited across occupational strata ranging from corporate professionals, consultants, and government officers, to security guards, housekeeping workers, masons, and hospitality workers. This stratified approach was adopted to enable direct comparison of third-space access across the formal-informal labour divide while maintaining diversity within both groups to ensure inclusive representation.

The questionnaire assessed which third spaces respondents visited, their most frequented third space, visit frequency and companions, self-reported barriers to access, emotional experiences within two broad categories of third spaces – formal commercial spaces (e.g., cafes, gyms, shopping malls, clubs) and informal/public spaces (e.g., tea stalls, street markets, parks, religious places, metro stations) – and perceptions of income- and class-based differential use.

Likert-scale items were measured on a 1–5 scale across five dimensions: affordability, sense of welcome, perceived safety, fit with daily routine, and fear of being judged. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests were used for all Likert comparisons, given the ordinal nature of the data and unequal group sizes. Chi-square tests with Cramer's V were used for categorical variables. Effect sizes are reported throughout. Statistical significance is set at $p < .05$ (two-tailed). SPSS version 25 was used for statistical analysis.

Table 1. Sample Demographic Profile ($N = 116$)

Variable	Formal Workers (n = 50)	Informal Workers (n = 66)
Age: 18–25	16.0%	9.1%
Age: 26–35	36.0%	30.3%
Age: 36–45	32.0%	36.4%
Age: 46–55	14.0%	21.2%
Age: 56+	2.0%	3.0%
Male	80.0%	74.2%
Female	20.0%	25.8%
Work hrs/day: ≤ 6	0.0%	3.0%
Work hrs/day: 6–8	12.0%	1.5%
Work hrs/day: 8–10	78.0%	39.4%
Work hrs/day: 10+	10.0%	56.1%

Age and gender were approximately equally distributed among the two groups (formal and informal workers), but

working hours differed significantly. More than half of informal workers (56.1%) worked for more than 10 hours per day, compared to just 10.0% of formal workers. This inequality in temporal availability is theoretically and empirically relevant to third-space access, and was statistically significant: $\chi^2(3) = 30.93$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .52$ (large effect).

Table 2. Most Frequented Third Space by Occupation Type (N = 116)

Space Category	Formal (n = 50)	%	Informal (n = 66)	%
Street market/tea stall	3	6.0	27	40.9
Cafe/restaurant /bar	16	32.0	3	4.5
Gym/sports facility	10	20.0	1	1.5
Religious place	7	14.0	11	16.7
Public open space/park	5	10.0	5	7.6
Shopping mall	4	8.0	1	1.5
Cinema/theatre	1	2.0	6	9.1
Metro/transit	3	6.0	1	1.5
Salon/parlour	0	0.0	2	3.0
Other/ unspecified	1	2.0	9	13.6

Note. Chi-square test of independence: $\chi^2(9) = 49.86$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .66$ (large effect).

The most striking and theoretically significant finding concerns which types of third spaces each occupational group primarily visits. Analysis of respondents' self-identified most frequented third space revealed a sharp and

statistically significant pattern of spatial stratification between formal and informal workers.

Formal workers were found to cluster in commercial, curated indoor spaces such as cafes, restaurants, and bars (32.0%), gyms and sports facilities (20.0%), and shopping malls (8.0%), with a mention of religious places as well (14.0%). On the other hand, informal workers went the opposite way, overwhelmingly leaning towards street markets and tea stalls (40.9%), the lowest-cost third spaces available in the urban landscape. Their remaining visits were split across religious places (16.7%), cinema halls (9.1%), and an "other" category (13.6%) that covered spaces near work or along the daily commute.

A chi-square test of independence confirmed that this distribution was far from random; the two groups differed sharply in where they went: $\chi^2(9) = 49.86$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .66$. This large effect size indicates that occupation type is a strong predictor of third-space selection. The pattern maps closely onto cost structures: informal workers cluster in spaces that require minimal or no expenditure, while formal workers occupy spaces that are commercially mediated and carry a higher price of entry.

Nevertheless, visit frequency did not significantly differ between the two groups ($\chi^2(5) = 7.84$, $p = .165$, Cramer's $V = .26$), though informal workers showed a descriptive tendency toward more frequent daily visits (37.9% vs. 24.0%). This can be interpreted theoretically. Informal workers' preferred spaces (tea stalls, street markets, roadside stalls) are embedded in everyday work routines and commutes rather than led by leisure time and choice, making daily visits structural, regardless of preference.

Table 3. Likert-Scale Perceptions of Formal Commercial Third Spaces by Occupation Type

Dimension	Formal M	Formal SD	Informal M	Informal SD	U	p	r
Affordability**	3.48	1.01	2.51	1.57	2204	.001	.28
Sense of welcome	3.52	0.99	3.15	1.56	1774	.474	.08
Perceived safety*	3.42	1.01	2.94	1.19	2031	.026	.22
Fit with daily routine	3.24	1.04	3.23	1.23	1634	.960	.01
Fear of being judged	2.52	1.11	2.31	1.32	1830	.233	.11

Note. Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree—higher judged score = greater fear of judgment. Effect size r computed from Mann-Whitney U . ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

Respondents rated their overall experience of formal commercial third spaces (cafes, shopping malls, gyms, restaurants, clubs) across five dimensions on a five-point Likert scale. Table 3 reports the mean scores alongside Mann-Whitney U tests comparing the two occupational groups.

Two dimensions yielded statistically significant group differences. First, affordability was significantly higher for formal workers ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.01$) than for informal workers ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.57$), $U = 2204$, $p = .001$, $r = .28$ (small-to-medium effect). Informal workers' lower mean approaches the 'disagree' end of the scale, indicating that

cost constitutes a genuine material barrier to accessing commercial third spaces. Second, perceived safety was significantly higher for formal workers ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.01$ vs. $M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.19$), $U = 2031$, $p = .026$, $r = .22$ (small effect). This difference may reflect two things at once. Informal workers who do visit commercial spaces may be going to lower-cost outlets that feel less safe, so part of it is a real disparity in the kinds of formal spaces each group reaches. The rest may be a broader sense of social precariousness in spaces not designed for them.

However, it is important to note that a sense of welcome and fit with daily routine did not differ significantly between the groups. That nuance matters. Informal workers do not feel out of place in these spaces in any cognitive sense, and commercial third spaces are not wholly cut off from their daily lives. The barrier is mainly material and security-related, a question of cost and safety rather than of belonging or unfamiliarity. Fear of being judged was also comparable across groups, which suggests that self-consciousness inside formal spaces does not track occupational status.

Table 4. Likert-Scale Perceptions of Informal/Public Third Spaces by Occupation Type

Dimension	Formal M	Formal SD	Informal M	Informal SD	U	p	r
Affordability**	3.48	1.11	2.55	1.50	2204	.001	.28
Sense of welcome	3.48	0.89	3.55	1.44	1425	.193	-.12
Perceived safety	3.24	0.96	2.94	1.21	1842	.267	.11
Fit with daily routine	3.08	1.03	3.39	1.23	1358	.092	-.16
Fear of being judged*	2.62	1.05	2.20	1.34	1978	.026	.22

Note. Informal/public spaces include tea stalls, street vendors, parks, religious places, metro stations, and roadside seating. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

For informal and public third spaces, the pattern partially reverses. Affordability was still significantly lower for informal workers ($M = 2.55$ vs. 3.48 , $p = .001$, $r = .28$). That may seem counterintuitive, since tea stalls and street markets are supposedly low-cost. One interpretation of this finding is that even small amounts of spending strain the bottom of the income distribution; another is that respondents answered the affordability item holistically, across all the informal spaces named, parks included, which are free. More importantly,

informal workers reported significantly lower fear of judgment in these spaces ($M = 2.20$ vs. 2.62 , $p = .026$, $r = .22$). Since informal spaces are where these workers actually prefer to go, they seem to carry a lighter burden of social self-consciousness. Welcome, safety and routine fit showed no significant differences, though informal workers leaned directionally toward stronger routine integration ($M = 3.39$ vs. 3.08 , $p = .092$), which fits their greater reliance on public and street spaces day to day.

Table 5. Composite Third-Space Access Scores by Occupation Type

Space category	Formal M (SD)	Informal M (SD)	U	p	r
Formal commercial spaces	17.14 (3.79)	15.55 (3.50)	2074	.011	.28
Informal/public spaces	16.66 (3.34)	16.12 (3.10)	1696	.583	.06

Note. Composite = affordability + welcome + safety + routine + (6 – judged). Range: 5–25. * $p < .05$.

To pull the multi-dimensional Likert data into a single interpretable index, a composite access score was built by summing affordability, welcome, safety and routine, then adding the reverse-coded fear of judgment item (computed as 6 minus the raw score, so that higher values consistently mean better access). This gave a possible range of 5 to 25. The composite was computed separately for formal commercial spaces and for informal or public spaces.

The result points to something important. Formal workers had significantly higher composite access to formal

commercial spaces ($M = 17.14$, $SD = 3.79$) than informal workers did ($M = 15.55$, $SD = 3.50$), $U = 2074$, $p = .011$, $r = .28$. For informal or public spaces, no significant difference emerged ($U = 1696$, $p = .583$, $r = .06$). This asymmetry is what makes the case for selective spatial exclusion: informal workers are not shut out of all third spaces across the board.

Their exclusion is concentrated in the commercial sector, which happens to be the very kind of space at the centre of Oldenburg's (1989) original account of the "third place" as a site of leisure, sociality and civic life.

Table 6. Reported Barriers to Third-Space Access by Occupation Type and Space Category (Multiple Responses Permitted)

Barrier	Formal: Formal Spaces %	Informal: Formal Spaces %	Formal: Informal Spaces %	Informal: Informal Spaces %
Cost / Price	28	59	24	50
Time constraints	66	50	58	50
Location / Distance	32	6	22	3
Safety concerns	18	3	12	5
Social norms/class	10	9	14	14
Feeling out of place	6	8	14	6
No barriers (None)	12	12	12	5

Note. Multiple responses permitted; percentages are within-group proportions and do not sum to 100.

Respondents were asked to pick, from a predefined list, what limited their access to both formal commercial and informal or public third spaces, and could select more than one. Table 6 gives the frequency and percentage of each barrier type by occupational group and space category.

The two groups have fundamentally different barrier structures, a qualitative split that aggregate access scores on their own would hide. For formal workers, time was the main barrier to formal commercial spaces (66%), then location or distance (32%) and cost (28%). For informal workers, cost came first (59%), then time (50%). This crossover suggests the two groups are kept out of formal spaces for structurally distinct reasons. Formal workers have the money but not the time, whereas informal workers have neither, and for them,

time poverty adds to restricted access rather than being the root of it.

For informal and public spaces, the profiles move closer together. Informal workers cite cost and time equally (both 50%), while time remains the leading concern for formal workers (58%). Social norms and class-based discomfort turn up at similar, moderate levels for both groups in informal spaces (around 14%), which suggests the discomfort of navigating public street spaces is not specific to one class. Informal workers name location as a barrier far less often (3% for informal spaces, 6% for formal spaces), in line with their reliance on nearby, neighbourhood-embedded third spaces rather than the more scattered commercial spaces formal workers use.

Table 7. Affective Experience in Third Spaces by Occupation Type

Emotional state	Formal: Formal %	Formal: Informal %	Informal: Formal %	Informal: Informal %	p (Formal)	p (Informal)
Relaxed/comfortable	82	78	62	70	.034*	.430
Happy/excited	48	46	56	58	.501	.294
Stressed / anxious	4	8	0	3	.184	.439
Observed/judged	0	6	5	3	.258	.750
Invisible	2	2	9	5	.232	.818

*Note. Multiple responses permitted. p-values from Fisher's exact test where expected cells < 5, chi-square otherwise. *p < .05.*

Beyond structural access, the study looked at the affective quality of third-space experience, asking respondents to select all applicable emotions from a predefined list when visiting each category of space. Table 7 reports frequencies and Fisher's exact p-values for comparisons where expected cell counts were low.

Formal workers were significantly more likely to report feeling relaxed and comfortable in formal commercial third spaces (82% vs. 62%, $p = .034$). This is the only statistically significant difference in emotional experience, and it matters: relaxation is widely considered the defining affective purpose of third places in the sociological literature (Oldenburg, 1989; Mehta, 2007). A 20 percentage point gap suggests that when informal workers do access formal

commercial spaces, the experience is comparatively more guarded, or takes more effort to move through comfortably.

Other affective indicators did not reach significance at conventional thresholds, but their direction is still worth noting. Informal workers were more likely to report feeling invisible (9% vs. 2%) and observed or judged (5% vs. 0%) in formal spaces. They were less likely, though, to report feeling stressed in informal public spaces, where formal workers actually reported slightly higher stress (8% vs. 3%). Together, these patterns fit an interpretation of informal workers' experience of formal spaces as one of partial inclusion: physically present, but socially on the margins. The formal workers' slightly higher stress in informal spaces may reflect unfamiliarity with the norms and social textures of environments they visit less often. Neither group differed

significantly in reported happiness or excitement across space types, which suggests both groups draw positive affect from whichever spaces they actually spend time in.

4. Discussion

The analysis revealed a clear pattern of spatial stratification in how formal and informal workers relate to and make use of third spaces. The two groups differ not only in how often they use such spaces, but also in which spaces they are able to inhabit at all, and the barriers that produce this separation were found to be material, rooted in cost and time. When respondents were asked to rate whether they felt unwelcomed in the space, the informal workers reported low scores. However, with regard to cost, they did showcase significant differences from formal workers. It needs to be highlighted that the inflated costs of certain third spaces, such as bars, gyms, restaurants, etc., are set in such a manner that it prevents certain sections of society from entering the space. However, even across this unequal, unfair landscape, both groups continue to feel relaxed and draw positive feelings from the spaces available to them. The discussion that follows interprets each of these findings in turn.

The first major finding was that both groups tend to drift towards different kinds of third spaces, creating spaces that are not shared by both groups and thus only serve to further this divide. Informal workers, who by definition lack the job security and stable “second place” of formal employment, must navigate conditions of spatial exclusion within the city. Rather than entering the formalised, commercial third spaces that their formal counterparts frequent, they were found to gravitate toward the leftover spaces at the peripheries of urban life, such as tea stalls and street markets. This pattern reflects the work of Chen et al. (2018), who document how many cities actively practise exclusion toward the urban informal workforce, including denying them access to public space. However, such exclusion does not simply leave informal workers without third spaces; it simply prompts them to make their own. As Laliberte Rudman et al. (2023) show in their review of precarious workers’ lives, those navigating conditions of spatial exclusion exercise collective agency to create and sustain alternative third places that align with the conditions of precarious living. These alternative spaces are made to meet the precise social needs that the formal city withholds from them: a sense of belonging among others with similar lifestyles, a temporary break from the strain of precarious work, and a way to be present and visible. Thus, the finding that informal workers congregate in tea stalls and street markets is better understood not as a freely chosen leisure retreat but as the making of functional refuges- spaces claimed out of necessity to secure the belonging, respite and visibility otherwise denied to them.

Whereas the first pattern found concerns where informal workers go, the second talks about what keeps them from the commercial alternative- cost. Cost operates as a genuine

material barrier and is oftentimes the biggest limiting barrier in informal workers’ access to commercial third spaces such as shopping malls, formal sit-down restaurants, etc. As Bittman (2002) argues, the ability to participate in leisure is a function not only of free time but of access to leisure goods and services, and the consumption of those goods and services is powerfully determined by income. Those with the least money are effectively excluded from the everyday forms of social participation that others take for granted. In the context of commercial third spaces, where entry is conditional on payment, this dynamic is sharpened (Rhubart et al., 2023). By looking at the distribution of third places, Rhubart et al. (2023) found that higher poverty rates in an environment are often associated with significantly fewer third places, and warn that even where such spaces do exist, availability does not guarantee access since cost continues to act as a barrier for lower-income users. Inflated prices and hidden entry costs act as a subtle, built-in barrier for low-income workers, all without having to explicitly define who is and who is not allowed to use the space. Hence, this shapes social hierarchy and furthers exclusion implicitly. The consequence is not only fewer third spaces but unequal benefits from them as well. Chan et al. (2025) show that a greater presence of commercial leisure and entertainment third places yields fewer well-being gains for lower-income individuals than for wealthier ones, precisely because such places are less accessible in terms of money, time and social status. It is against this material barrier that the behaviour observed in the present study becomes legible. As Aldrich et al. (2024) argue, financial precarity pushes workers toward alternative third places defined by low barriers to entry and few obligations, which is exactly what the tea stall and the street market offer. Hence, cost, in this sense, does not just keep informal workers out of commercial third spaces but rather pushes them toward the low-cost periphery.

Furthermore, perceived safety was a significant barrier to the visitation of both types of third spaces by both groups. Two factors likely combine to produce this safety gap. Informal workers who do go to commercial spaces tend to land at the cheaper, lower-end venues, which feel less secure to begin with, and they also contend with a broader unease in places designed around a clientele they are not part of. Ahmed and Basha (2025), working in the same context, Delhi NCR, found that young adults with lower incomes reported sharper concerns regarding theft, harassment and poor infrastructure, while in contrast, higher-income respondents who had access to better-serviced areas, felt safer overall, and were not as worried about the same concerns.

Research on the “psychological ghetto tax” (Imperial College Business School, 2022) found that poorer consumers avoid upscale commercial settings out of a fear of discrimination, expecting to be judged on their class, watched with suspicion, or even reported to security, and that

many would rather pay more in a humbler place than face that hostility. Perceived safety, on this reading, sits at the intersection of material conditions and anticipated social treatment. The study contradicts the findings of the current research, in that it has identified the fear of being judged as a significant force, whereas the findings of the present study revealed no meaningful difference between groups for the sense of welcoming, fit with daily routine or fear of judgement in urban third spaces. Informal workers do not feel cognitively foreign to these places, but still feel unsafe regardless, a finding that may be attributed to the fact that there are no set rules barring them from the space, but they feel out of place in spaces not designed for them. One reason for the difference in findings between the current study and research conducted by the Imperial College Business School (2022) may be that judgment is a real factor but a minor one here, overshadowed by the more visible pressures of cost, time and safety. The ghetto tax study isolated social belonging as its sole concern, so that factor surfaced clearly; in the recent study, respondents may have registered it as too small to matter beside everything else. The pattern in informal public spaces counters this- both groups feel equally safe and at peace here. Radomskaya and Bhati (2022) describe hawker centres in Singapore as social spaces that build connectedness across diverse groups through co-presence and shared spatial design. Delhi NCR's tea stalls and street markets work in much the same way, and in the present data, informal workers reported notably less fear of judgment in these settings, their actual preferred destinations. Neither welcome nor safety separated the two groups here, which suggests both feel equally secure.

Although overall visit frequency did not differ sharply between the groups, both groups reported that time was one of the biggest barriers when visiting third spaces. Time was the single most cited constraint for formal workers and one of the biggest ones (alongside cost- both reported by 50% of informal workers) for informal workers too, which suggests that time poverty cuts across the occupational divide rather than falling on one group alone. Bardasi and Wodon (2010) define time poverty as the condition of working long hours without real choice, because one is poor or would risk deepening that poverty by working less, leaving too little time for rest and leisure. While this bind is sharpest for informal workers with their extended and unpredictable days, formal workers are not exempt- long and rigid working hours leave them similarly short of the discretionary time that leisure depends on. This is consistent with Chatzitheochari and Arber (2012), who show that free time is a welfare resource unevenly distributed across the workforce, with long-hours workers across the spectrum disproportionately time poor. Moreover, because taking part in leisure depends on having enough free time and not merely the means to pay for it (Bittman, 2002), a shortage of hours limits access to third spaces for both groups, the only difference being that for formal workers, time is the only major constraint whereas

for informal workers this limited access to third spaces is compounded by cost as well as time limitations.

Finally, despite these asymmetries in access, both groups reported comparable feelings of happiness, excitement and relaxation within the spaces they actually frequent. This is consistent with a wider body of work establishing that third spaces, whatever their form, support psychological well-being. Lee (2022) found that cafés and other eating-and-drinking places, including street-food stalls, deliver restorative, park-like psychological benefits and were among the spaces people most often sought out specifically for relaxation. It shows how these places promote a sense of belonging and well-being, while emphasizing the fact that affordability and inclusivity are what ultimately determine whether those benefits are mutually shared by all. At the community scale, Jeffres et al. (2009) link the perceived availability of third places to people's overall quality of life. Taken together, this shows that both formal and informal workers draw relaxation and positive emotion from the third spaces available to them, suggesting that third spaces continue to serve their restorative, well-being-sustaining purpose for each group within its own domain but the unequal access of these spaces needs to be addressed in order for both groups to draw equal benefits and equal amounts of comfort from all spaces- commercial and informal third spaces both.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to test a common assumption in people's minds, that third spaces (cafés, parks, markets and stalls) that sit between home and work serve everyone in the city equally. The findings of the study reveal that they, in fact, do not. Across 116 workers in Delhi NCR, formal and informal workers were found to inhabit largely separate spatial worlds, with formal workers concentrated in commercial, curated venues and informal workers gravitating toward tea stalls and street markets. What gives the finding its weight is that this exclusion is selective rather than total. Informal workers were not pushed out of every kind of third space, only the commercial ones, while access to informal public spaces was statistically indistinguishable between the groups. The barrier, moreover, turned out to be material and security-related rather than a matter of belonging, since informal workers did not report feeling unwelcome or out of place so much as priced out and, in commercial settings, less safe. The divide between the two groups is therefore drawn less by who feels they belong and more by who can afford the time and money to enter, which reframes third-space inequality as a structural problem rather than a question of taste or comfort.

If the spaces that genuinely serve informal workers are the tea stalls, roadside markets and shaded corners of the city, then these deserve recognition as real social infrastructure rather than being treated as clutter to be cleared

in the name of beautification and development of the city. These spaces are the ones that carry the lowest burden of self-consciousness for everyone, no matter their work type, which makes them rare points of genuine social interaction and mixing in a stratified city. Protecting and improving these spaces by building simple infrastructure for and ensuring basic protections in terms of seating, shade, water access, and security of tenure for vendors would go a long way toward bridging this divide compared to merely expanding a commercial sphere that already excludes the urban poor on the basis of cost. The study also points to time and money as the two most significant factors. Policies or laws that ease either, be it more humane working hours or affordable commercial public spaces, could widen access to them in a way that simply building more infrastructure cannot. At least, the findings ask planners, employers and residents to notice the divide that is usually overlooked and to recognise that the right to pause and exist in the city is, at present, unevenly distributed, which goes against the very purpose of third spaces itself.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

1. Sample size and regional scope: The study gathered responses from 116 respondents across a single metropolitan region, Delhi NCR. While this data was sufficient for the comparisons made, it limits how far the findings can be generalised to other Indian cities, smaller towns, or rural settings where the distribution of third spaces, the ratio of the kinds of spaces and the nuances of class relations may differ considerably.
2. Absence of a validated instrument: The questionnaire given to respondents was designed specifically for this study, and no confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to verify that the Likert items measured the underlying constructs cleanly. Some parameters, such as perceived safety or fear of judgment, may have been interpreted differently by different respondents, thus producing slight variations in the answers and trends. This means these measures should be read as indicative rather than psychometrically established when looking at the findings regarding them, and should not be taken with a hundred percent guarantee.
3. Narrow range of informal occupations: The informal sample leaned heavily toward a few occupational types, particularly security and housekeeping workers, and did not capture the full breadth of informal labour in the city. Occupations such as waste picking, other domestic work, or home-based production may carry distinct spatial routines that this sample did not reach and were thus not taken into account.
4. Internal heterogeneity of the informal category: A small number of informal respondents were freelancers,

businessmen and self-employed workers, a group whose earnings and social standing vary widely and can sit well above those of precarious manual workers. Folding them into the same category as security guards or housekeeping workers blurs an important internal difference and may have muted some of the contrasts the study was trying to surface.

5. Reliability test: The questionnaire was not assessed for reliability. Future studies can focus on scale development for the same, as understanding the existing inequalities is the need of the hour.

5.2. Future Recommendations

There are several branches and ways that this research could be carried forward and expanded upon. Future researchers could expand the geographic scope and compare this divide within smaller cities, or conduct the same comparison across multiple regions (from larger metropolitan cities to small rural towns and villages), to determine if the selective-exclusion pattern continues to be true in different urban fabrics or if the nature and distribution of third spaces change with different urban density and development. A validated scale, which has been refined and tested by factor analysis, would provide the perceptual measures with a more solid foundation and allow more confident conclusions about dimensions such as safety and judgment. There is also an opportunity to go deeper, not wider. Qualitative work, such as interviews or time-use diaries or observation, walking with informal workers on their daily journeys, would help explain why informal workers feel less safe in commercial settings despite reporting no sense of being unwelcome, and would capture the lived texture of these spaces that a survey cannot. A wider sample of the informal sector, and an analytically distinct classification of freelancers from precarious manual workers, would help in making the comparison even more salient.

The results suggest that the spatial separation between formal and informal workers is easy to overlook because it is an integral part of the everyday life of the city, yet it determines who can rest, gather and be seen. Bridging it is not a matter of grand intervention, but of an understanding of street stalls and markets as legitimate civic space, a recognition of the legitimate rights of vendors, and a sense of easing the constraints of time and cost that keep the urban poor at the fringes of the city's social life. The first step to bridging the divide is to recognise it.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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