

# The Comfy Chair Revolution

Glenn Reynolds

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I've noticed a gradual change in public surroundings over the past few years. Unlike the hard, unappealing settings of traditional retail space (ground rule: "get 'em in, get their money, get 'em out"), more and more stores are being designed to encourage customers to linger.

Some of these transformations are obvious—the cozy coffee bars and cafés featured by many bookstores, for instance. But the phenomenon has spread to less obvious locales. In the mall near my house, for example, an Abercrombie spin-off called Hollister & Co. features comfortable leather chairs complete with end tables and stacks of magazines. The first time I was there I joked to a salesgirl that I might come back with my laptop and camp out. "People do," she responded. And when I went back a couple of weeks later, the circle of armchairs nearest the cash registers was completely occupied by teenagers with cell phones and PDAs. A conversation with a couple of staffers confirmed that the store was intentionally designed to serve as a "hangout."

And I think this shift in design may be the key to understanding how personal technology has changed us. In the old days, retailers knew that most people squeezed shopping in between the office and home. The goal was to sell as much as possible to people during the small amount of time available. Hence the keep 'em moving philosophy. But people live differently now. Lots of people work independently, or part-time, or as telecommuters. The lifestyle is more fluid, in part because technologies like cell phones, laptops, and PDAs allow people to work no matter where they are while also staying connected to family, friends, and colleagues. I see a lot of folks with that kind of personal tech hanging out wherever there's a pleasant setting, checking email, returning calls, or writing. It's work that doesn't quite feel like work.

## THE APPEAL OF THE "THIRD PLACE"

This fluidity gives retailers and other businesses a different kind of opportunity. Retailers have always

### FYI

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tried to sell the idea of a certain lifestyle along with their product: a sweater can become a symbol of social status. But if you become somebody's hangout, you don't just sell the suggestion of a kind of lifestyle, you're selling a particular way of life. If price and selection are the main basis for competition, people can always buy on the Internet; but everyone—especially teenagers—will still want a place to go. By becoming a place to hang out, a store can sell both the experience and the goods.

Does it work? Well, I'm writing this on a laptop in a Borders right now, comfortably ensconced upon a leather couch and waiting for the line to thin so I can order a latte. I do a lot of writing here, especially during the summers or on breaks when the university is closed. (And they sell me more books and CDs as a result.) A few years ago, in the pre-laptop, pre-Wi-Fi era, it would have been much more cumbersome and inconvenient to work and hang out simultaneously.

Examples of this trend are ubiquitous. A new public library in my area is breaking the old library taboo against food and installing a luxurious coffee bar of the sort normally found only in chain book superstores. Some malls provide a place for tired moms to chat on their cell phones while their kids romp in elaborate play areas. Health food stores provide welcoming spaces complete with live music and kitchen access. Even many churches in my area feature coffee bars with Wi-Fi.

As the trend has continued, we've started to see all sorts of amenities added: not just comfy chairs and

beverage service, but wireless broadband Internet access, fireplaces, books and magazines (already begun at Hollister & Co.), and other furnishings and services designed to keep customers around, comfy, and receptive. Businesses reap rewards in the form of impulse buys and customer loyalty. But everyone enjoys the benefits of an abundance of safe, comfortable places to hang out, something that advocates of “community” were calling for just a few years ago.

People like to go out, and providing inexpensive hangouts may draw more business in a recession than when people are feeling flush. And it may be cheaper too, even when times are good. After all, you can buy a lot of comfy chairs for the price of a single Super Bowl ad slot.

Certainly the prevalence of comfy chairs and hangout-marketing bespeaks an attempt to meet an unfulfilled need for safe and comfortable public spaces. My Borders hangout is a good example—and it also illustrates how capitalism, combined with personal technology, can promote community.

I have an office with a nice computer, and I have a study at home with a nicer computer. But I often pack up my laptop, or a book that I’m reading, or student papers to grade, and relocate to this third place: somewhere more congenial than the office, less isolated than home.

Others must feel the same way because when I’m tapping away at my laptop, I find myself surrounded by people of all sorts. On a typical day, the place is hopping: tables are filled by students, alternately studying and flirting; a parent drilling a home-schooled child on Babylonian history; one or two road-warrior salespeople catching up on scheduling and messages; a gaggle of Bible-studiers arguing about Job; and a leather-clad cyberpunk youth sitting with his more conventional mother. By now, I know all the regulars by sight, and many by name. We keep up on each other’s lives in a casual sort of way.

This third place, of course, is the “Third Place” that sociologist Ray Oldenburg called essential to civilization in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place*.<sup>1</sup> The third

<sup>1</sup>Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Marlowe & Co., 1999).

place, Oldenburg observes, must possess the following characteristics: it has to be free or inexpensive, offer food and drink, be accessible, draw enough people to feel social, and foster easy conversation. Oldenburg lamented that such places were disappearing.

Back in 1989, they were. Today, they’re not—and you can thank the much-maligned chain book superstores for this. Certainly when I moved to my upscale Knoxville suburb some years ago there weren’t many such places. Nor had there been many in Washington D.C.: the Afterwords Café at Kramerbooks was the closest thing, but it didn’t really fit the bill. When I lived in New Haven, Connecticut, the famous Atticus Books was like a poor man’s Borders: cozy, but no public restrooms. (They’ve since added them, in the face of competition from the palatial Barnes & Noble—operated Yale co-op down the street.)

Now, within about a mile of each other in my Knoxville suburb, stand three big bookstore/café complexes: Borders, Barnes & Noble, and Books-A-Million. All seem to be thriving.

They’re doing well because they’ve identified a need and they’re meeting it. You’d think that this would make a lot of people

happy—and, of course, it does, as I can tell just by looking around. But you’d think it would make more than just the customers happy; you’d think that it would please the people who are always worrying about America’s need for “community.”

In that, however, you would mostly be mistaken. While hostility toward book superstores has receded from its late-1990s peak, it is still very real. Independent bookstores, we are told, are genuine; chain bookstores are all about marketing. Chain bookstores are bad for small presses, bad for communities, and—as Carol Anne Douglas writes in *Off Our Backs*—bad for feminists, whose books apparently can only be bought at “feminist bookstores.”<sup>2</sup>

I don’t know about the feminists, but small-press sales appear to be up thanks to chain bookstores’ larger selection of titles. Communities are surely benefiting from the introduction of pleasant third places

<sup>2</sup>Carol Anne Douglas, “Support Feminist Bookstores!” *Off Our Backs*, 31 December 2000, 1.

### Even many churches in my area feature coffee bars with Wi-Fi.



where they didn't exist before. And what's more, with the exception of a handful of independents, chain bookstores are better at being third places.

Perhaps this is because independent bookstores traditionally have been run by people who like books. These people generally aren't interested in offering the other amenities that Oldenburg names as important and that superstores provide: coffee shops, big chairs, and live music performances. At many independent bookstores, employees like books better than people and want you to know it—the bookish version of the music geeks in the book (and movie) *High Fidelity*.<sup>3</sup> (Small bookstores may not have the money for these amenities, either, though they're not terribly expensive.)

The chains, however, aren't in business for personal gratification. They just want to keep customers coming back.

Want coffee? *Got it!*

Want a triple mocha latte and handmade fresh sandwiches and salads? *Got it!*

And, interestingly, the extra traffic that these amenities produce means that chain stores typically can afford a better selection of books than the independents, which is why small presses are benefiting right along with latte-lovers.

Well, no surprise there. That's what capitalism is all about. Funny that it's a dirty word to some people. But put technology and capitalism together, and what we often get is an updated version of the good old days; the changes we associated with technology and capitalism—fast-food-style uniformity, alienation, and lowest-common-denominator treatment—were actually products of a particular, and transitional, stage in technology. Now that the technology has changed, so have the economics, and so has the response from business. And it goes way beyond Borders.

As a believer in markets, I think that this trend will eventually find an equilibrium point. As an observer of the current direction of technological change, I think that equilibrium point will be a lot closer to where things were in the eighteenth century than to where they were just a few years ago. And this will be on account of many forces both pushing and pulling the change along. Let's look at these "pushes" and "pulls."

<sup>3</sup>Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* (Riverhead, 1996).

## FORWARD MY MAIL TO STARBUCKS, PLEASE

The "push" comes from the office environment. You have almost certainly read *Dilbert*, and I'm tempted to simply cite the comic strip and say, "Case closed." But there's more to it than that.

Yes, the office environment can be unpleasant, and the commute can be nasty and time-consuming and expensive—just a few reasons people like to work at home. But working at home has its own problems. It can be hard to maintain the work/non-work boundaries. And who wants to meet with clients in your den?

On the other hand, offices are expensive. I've noticed a lot of small business people in my area giving up their offices and having meetings in public places—Starbucks, Borders, the public library, and so on. In fact, a real estate agent recently told me that the small-office commercial real estate market is actually suffering as a result of so many people making this kind of move.

The "push" comes from people wanting to get out of offices. But the "pull" comes from the technology that makes it possible, and from businesses' desire to cash in. The existence of personal tech like laptops, PDAs, and cell phones, coupled with Wi-Fi and other technologies that allow Internet access from all over means that you don't need to be at the office nearly as much anymore.

If a home is, in Le Corbusier's words, a "machine for living," then an office is a "machine for working." But nowadays, the machinery is looking a bit obsolescent. The traditional office took shape in the nineteenth century, largely due to new technology. People needed to be close to each other to communicate and make use of services like telegraphs, telephones, and messengers (and later copy and fax machines and elaborate computer equipment). You can pretty much carry all that stuff with you now. And people are doing just that.

Consequently, a market has arisen for places that cater to this more fluid workstyle. Right now we're seeing the early phase of that, with amenities that focus on Wi-Fi and lattes. In time, we're likely to see much more than that. A recent article in *Salon* by Linda Baker finds that many urban-design types are looking beyond connectivity to interconnectivity. For example, she points to pervasive urban networks that let people access the Web, determine whether



their friends are in the area via a tool called FriendFinder, and arrange meetings:

"I can come into downtown Athens [Georgia] with a PDA, send a text message that I'm going to be in Blue Sky Coffee for two hours, then turn it off and put it in my pocket," explains Shamp. "Then when one of my buddies comes into downtown, he can use the WAG zone to find out where his friends are."<sup>4</sup>

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Various target groups will get different amenities; business users might like readily available Internet printing, for example, more than friend-finding—or maybe not. But my guess is that the end result will look more like the eighteenth-century coffee-houses, in which so many of that day conducted their business (Lloyd's of London started in Lloyd's coffee-house), than like the office towers where the twentieth century's men in the gray flannel suits encamped.

In the eighteenth century, the coffee-house was a hotbed of activity. "There," according to British newsweekly *The Economist*, "for the price of a cup of coffee, you could read the latest pamphlets, catch up on news and gossip, attend scientific lectures, strike business deals, or chat with like-minded people about literature or politics." These coffee-houses even served as offices—Richard Steele, editor of London's popular periodical, the *Tatler*, requested that his mail be delivered to his favorite coffee haunt. Londoners would drop in at several coffee-houses to participate in all kinds of conversation. "Regulars could pop in once or twice a day, hear the latest news, and check to see if any post awaited them. . . . [M]ost people frequented several

<sup>4</sup>Linda Baker, "Urban Renewal: The Wireless Way," *Salon*, 29 November 2004. Available online at [http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2004/11/29/digital\\_metropolis/index\\_np.html](http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2004/11/29/digital_metropolis/index_np.html).

coffee-houses, the choice of which reflected their range of interests."<sup>5</sup>

## THE GENIUS OF BUILD-A-BEAR

I believe this is part of a larger phenomenon. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century technology seemed to favor aggregation, uniformity, and large size. Twenty-first-century technology seems to favor diversity, variety, and small size—along with a much higher degree of interconnection. From politics to work, from factories to malls, I think there are quite a few revolutions along these lines yet to come, and I think they'll go well beyond comfy chairs.

In fact, they're moving the factories into the malls. Build-A-Bear, a place where I've spent a lot of time, is a good example. My daughter had her birthday recently, and during her party I experienced what I'll call a Virginia Postrel moment. The party was at Build-A-Bear, a place that I thought was sure to go out of business when it first opened. *Why put a factory in a mall?* Who, I asked, would pay top dollar to assemble their own teddy bear or other stuffed animal when you could buy perfectly good ones off the shelf? Well, that was before I had a daughter, and now I know the answer: lots of little girls!

During the party it was interesting to watch the girls picking out animals with the help of the friendly salespeople. (Note: The phrase "Would you like me to stuff your monkey?" sounds, somehow, *er*, inappropriate.) As my wife pointed out, the animal-and-clothing combinations that the girls put together reflected their own personalities and styles.

The girls were very happy, but I couldn't help thinking that quite a few bluenoses would have disapproved. Customized bears (or monkeys!) that you put together yourself? An endless array of bear-pants, bear-glasses, bear-hats, bear-dresses, bear-briefcases, and even bear-roller skates to go with them? Who needs it? Rotten kids, spoiled rotten!

<sup>5</sup>"The Internet in a Cup," *The Economist*, 18 December 2003. Available online at [http://www.economist.com/World/europe/displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=2281736](http://www.economist.com/World/europe/displayStory.cfm?story_id=2281736).



Except that actually they're rather nice girls, who with no prompting spent considerably less than the party budget allowed for, and who cooperated sweetly in picking things out and complimenting each others' choices. So as I was paying the bill (the cashier was an Albanian Kosovar refugee, who seems to have settled in rather well in that most inclusive and most American of institutions: the shopping mall), I had a Postrel moment: I realized why I was so thoroughly wrong about the prospects for Build-A-Bear.

Virginia Postrel has argued in her book, *The Substance of Style*,<sup>6</sup> that aesthetic values are becoming a major driver—perhaps the major new driver—of economic activity. It's easy to scoff at this because aesthetics seem divorced from function: an ugly car gets you where you're going just as quickly and reliably as a pretty one, an ugly coat keeps you just as warm as a handsome one, and an ugly house keeps the rain off just as well as a showplace.

Nonetheless, attractiveness matters. We all know that an ugly spouse can be just as faithful and loving as a gorgeous one—even, if popular legend is to be believed, more so—but we nonetheless tend to choose mates whose looks we like. To my daughter and her friends, it's natural to spend a lot of time thinking about what looks good. And, judging by the attention that my nephews pay to the subjects of their interests (automobiles, airplanes, and other vehicles, mostly), looks matter there too.

So does customization. What the folks at Build-A-Bear figured out, and what I missed entirely when I scoffed at their business plan, is that people don't just want things to look good. They want them to look good *their way*. That's what makes Build-A-Bear work.

Other stores have stuffed animals that are just as attractive, but the buyers don't feel that they are *unique*. So where will this lead? People talk about "customizing" outfits with accessories, but how long before on-the-spot manufacturing of clothing lets people design clothing themselves, or download designs from the Internet and produce truly one-of-a-kind outfits? People are already experimenting, and I suspect that a "Build-An-Outfit" will be coming soon to a mall near you.

I also suspect that it's just the beginning. (Design your own car? Why not?) But I also have another suspi-

cion that verges on certainty: when it happens, people will complain. Just as people complained about the enforced conformity of old-style mass-production, people (often the same people) will complain about the multiplicity of choices offered by new technologies.

But then, complaining is an aesthetic style too, of a sort—though it's one that, for better and worse, may not fit in as well at malls as it does elsewhere. And as malls develop (beyond comfy chairs and Build-A-Bear) that may become much more significant.

Reportedly, the new trend is toward a different kind of mall, the "lifestyle center," which fits the beyond-comfy-chairs description pretty well. Changes in shopping habits and an increased competitiveness due to the Internet and other local specialized boutiques have motivated retailers in shopping centers to be more imaginative in order to keep bringing in customers.<sup>7</sup> And people are specifically invoking the "third place" point in pitching these facilities, as this account of one such venture makes clear.

His idea for Camano Commons, a 3.3-acre gathering place, is to try to capture that European spirit of places where private commerce and public leisure mix readily, said the project's marketing director, Theresa Metzger.

"In Paris, you have the sidewalk cafe. In England, you have the neighborhood pub," Metzger said. . . .

"Americans are so unfamiliar with third places, so I always like to describe it this way: Remember the TV show, 'Cheers'? They didn't always get along, but when somebody was missing, they got concerned," Ericson said.<sup>8</sup>

I think we'll see more of that. In my local mall, blue-haired Goths with multiple piercings cluster in one area, while Dungeons & Dragons-playing teens stake out their territory in another spot. All the while, senior citizens and families stroll around them. It seems to me that the traditional downtown is being replaced by commercial spaces. And that has its ups, its downs, and its lessons.

<sup>7</sup>Beth Mattson, "Where Town Square Meets the Mall," *Minneapolis-St. Paul Business Journal*, 27 August 1999. Available online at <http://www.bizjournals.com/twincities/stories/1999/08/30/focus3.html?page=1>.

<sup>8</sup>Scott Morris, "A Third Place for Camano," *Daily Herald (Everett, WA)*, 5 September 2003. Available online at <http://www.heraldnet.com/Stories/03/09/5/17437484.cfm>.

<sup>6</sup>Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* (HarperCollins, 2003).





The “up” is that Americans are getting the kind of safe, diverse, and communal public space that critics of suburbanization have long called for. Rather than being locked in their tract homes, watching television and not knowing their neighbors, Americans are increasingly spending their time in public spaces surrounded by all sorts of other people.

Another upside is that—unlike the cumbersome white-elephant “downtown revitalization” projects envisioned by urban planners and funded by massive quantities of taxpayers’ money—these public spaces are market-driven and actually generate tax dollars rather than consume them. And, because it’s market-driven, the comfy-chair revolution can turn on a dime to meet consumer needs and interests.

## FREEDOM OF...SHOPPING?

The downside is that the traditional downtown has been replaced by corporate-controlled space. What’s wrong with that? Well, in the traditional downtown, things like the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech apply. In malls, they generally don’t. (One of my former students has written an interesting law review article on this subject.<sup>9</sup>) But that’s where the people are, meaning that First Amendment guarantees of the right to protest downtown are increasingly meaningless when nobody goes downtown. Indeed, here in Knoxville the antiwar protests, such as they were, were held on the sidewalk in front of West Town Mall when the protest organizers realized that a weekend protest downtown would be the proverbial tree falling unheard in the forest. Malls often have such offensive characteristics as omni-present security cameras coupled with draconian bans on picture taking. It’s not like Singapore, exactly, but it’s not your old-fashioned downtown square either.

But there’s a lesson too. One reason why people go to malls instead of downtown is that they feel safe. Part of this is physical safety. Though that’s partly an illusion. Mall crime doesn’t get reported much—all those advertisers make it easy to persuade local media to keep it quiet—but there’s lots more of it than you’d think.

<sup>9</sup>For much more on the subject of malls, private property, and free speech, see Jennifer Niles Coffin, “The United Mall of America: Free Speech, State Constitutions, and the Growing Fortress of Private Property,” Volume 33, University of Michigan J.L., Reform 615 (2000).

Makes sense: criminals go where the money is, and a mugger would starve to death in most downtowns.

But more important than the desire for physical safety, I think, is the desire to go un-hassled by unpleasant people. Vagrants (relatively safe from prosecution in light of Supreme Court decisions), panhandlers, and accosters of pedestrians ranging from Bible-thumping street preachers to various political activists are free to express themselves in downtowns, thanks to the expansive First Amendment jurisprudence of the past half-century. But, except in a few states where the state constitution has been interpreted to treat malls as public space, they’re barred from these spaces. And, in a curious coincidence, that’s where people tend to go. (How do people really feel about this? I’ve observed that in the movie *Airplane*, the audience always cheers when the airport solicitors get beaten up.)

So what’s the lesson? Free speech absolutists (and I’m pretty much one myself) may tell people that being hassled by loudmouths is part of democracy. And people may even agree—but they’ll still choose the mall over downtown if the hassle-factor gets very high. What that means, among other things, is that public-sector rules are always subject to private-sector competition. It also suggests that you can enact rules that promote free speech at the cost of people being hassled—but if you go too far, people will vote with their feet by choosing a controlled environment with fewer hassles.

This sort of market-constrained approach to rights may trouble some people, though it’s really just a public-private version of the sort of competition among states that federalists have always supported. Either way, it’s a reality worth keeping in mind when planning rules and regulations for public and quasi-public spaces—especially since we are likely to see the latter increase as a result of the comfy-chair revolution.

The upside, though, is that the traditional lonely orator, trying to get his (it was almost always “his”) message across in the public square, isn’t so important as a symbol of free speech anymore. The Supreme Court once wrote, “The liberty of the press is the right of the lonely pamphleteer who uses carbon paper or a mimeograph just as much as of the large metropolitan publisher who uses the latest photocomposition methods.”<sup>10</sup> But more recently, the Court noted, “Through the use of Web

<sup>10</sup>*Branzburg v. Hayes*, 408 U.S. 665, 794 (1972).



pages, mail exploders, and newsgroups, the same individual can become a pamphleteer."<sup>11</sup>

But, actually, technology has made it possible for individuals to become not merely pamphleteers, but vital sources of news and opinion that rival large metropolitan publishers in audience and influence. Since these independent sources are both *less* expensive and usually less annoying, perhaps First Amendment doctrine will take the difference into account.

Charles Black once wrote of "the plight of the captive auditor," who is subjected to messages that "he cannot choose but hear."<sup>12</sup> Limits to technology may have required us to overlook the captive auditor's plight in the past in the name of free speech—causing many people to vote with their feet in favor of controlled private space. But newer technologies may justify a different approach today: the First Amendment often requires the government to pursue the least restrictive means in regulating speech. Perhaps there should be at least an implicit requirement that speakers use the least *annoying* means of speaking too, or at least abide by limits when choosing the most annoying. This doesn't strike me as a bad thing. While the Internet makes publishing—and hence a free press—easier and cheaper, technologies like The Cloud and FriendFinder

should make free speech, and public orations, easier and cheaper too, without the need to annoy. They'd better, anyway, because people's willingness to put up with annoyance is limited, while people's choices are, thanks to technology and the market, growing all the time.

What makes this issue difficult is that the tidy division between public and private spaces that we've taken for granted in recent years is breaking down. Traditional public spaces, like town squares, usually lack amenities. Even public restrooms are often hard to find. Private-public spaces like bookstores and coffee-houses have amenities and are open to everyone; but people tend to develop a proprietary interest in the places they frequent most. (No surprise to anyone who has ever heard a Londoner refer to "my pub.") Likewise, as people develop more control over their environments, they tend to have less tolerance for things that threaten that control. Americans tolerate TV commercials but hate popup ads, accept junk mail but despise spam, and, I suspect, will respond even less favorably to interruptions by strangers in public places once they become accustomed to meeting mostly with people they know or have something in common with. The "third place" may be a partial remedy to that, but as with the pub, we're likely to see people who don't fit in get a somewhat chillier reception. Determining the boundaries for acceptable public conduct, especially in private-public places, may prove a challenge in the future.

Working it out won't be easy, but then all revolutions have their difficulties.

<sup>11</sup>*Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 521 U.S. 844, 870 (1997).

<sup>12</sup>Charles L. Black Jr., "He Cannot Choose but Hear: The Plight of the Captive Auditor," Volume 53, *Columbia Law Review* (1953), 960.

### CONSIDER

- 1 Reynolds describes his local Hollister & Co. store—with its comfortable lounging areas—as a "hangout" for teens. Describe a local spot to which you would apply the term. What makes a place a hangout? Is it an environment, as Reynolds suggests, that represents a particular lifestyle?
- 2 Reynolds describes a need for "safe and comfortable public spaces." What social functions might such places promote and what might their absence do to a community?
- 3 Reynolds argues that the concept of a "third place" is more common in Europe than in the United States. What is a "third place"? Do you have a third place or would you want one?

### COMPOSE

- 4 Spend a few hours in a local hangout examining the environment and observing the people and activities there. Then write a description of what you have experienced.

### CHALLENGE

- 5 Reynolds defends big chain retailers such as Barnes & Noble against those who prefer smaller, independent bookstores. Analyze his argument and then try to apply it critically to other kinds of retail operations. Is a Wal-Mart Superstore better for a town than many mom-and-pop stores?