

Prompt

Life is full of interesting places and things to do. Write a concrete essay about places that stick out in your mind and how they are different or similar.

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McDonald's and Fox's Diner are two of the restaurants in Lake City, Tennessee. But even though they both sell hamburgers in the same town, they don't have anything else in common. They cater to different types of customers, there is a noticeable difference in service speed, and every facet of doing business is handled differently. Even the atmosphere of these two places is in contrast.

These two restaurants do not compete for the same customers. McDonald's is located just off the interstate, so many of their patrons are not local residents. Another reason is that they are universally known. Fox's is further away from the interstate. Aside from the over-the-road truck drivers who know the area, most of the Diner's customers are local residents. As well as targeting different customers from Fox's Diner, McDonald's also places more emphasis on speed. McDonald's makes job specialization an integral part of their operation. They crank meals out on an assembly line. They use computers to take orders, automatic timers to assist in cooking, and radio headsets to communicate. Even the color scheme used by McDonald's promotes speed. Studies show that loud colors like red and yellow increase customer turnover. With the exception of handling money, tasks are shared by the staff at the diner and there isn't anything high-tech about the operation.

Fox's Diner is a world away from the bland, impersonal McDonald's just a few miles north. It sits on the right side of a two-lane highway leading into town. The Diner serves both as a truck stop and as the restaurant for a small motel next door. The parking lot looks vacant until about five in the morning because it is large enough to accommodate a dozen tractor trailers. Years of use have left potholes and a patchwork of asphalt that resembles a moth-eaten quilt.

The diner itself is a doublewide trailer set high on a five foot, cinderblock foundation. An aluminum awning extends outward about six feet along the front of the building. Underneath the awning, yellow fluorescent lights, which theoretically do not attract bugs, glow at night. They are mounted over a row of metal framed, screened-in windows. To reduce heating and air-conditioning costs, as well as keep the interior floor clean, an entrance was built about fourteen years ago outside the original entrance. Concrete steps covered with brown patio turf lead to the front door. Walking inside is like traveling back in time twenty years.

Trans Ams, Lucky Strikes, and eight-track tape players are some of the things that come to mind when walking in. The white tile floor is always clean; however, it has yellowed with age and feels rough under your shoes because it has never been waxed. A counter runs half the length of the diner. Even though the stools that sit in front of it aren't permanently attached to the floor, they still sit in the same places they were in thirty-five years ago. So over the years, the counter has been worn smooth by countless elbows. Four booths are at one end of the diner. The benches are covered in green and brown plastic, and they surround yellow formica tables. A jukebox also sits

there, usually playing an old song by George Jones or Willie Nelson. A blue haze of smoke hangs around the lights.

A room has been added to the far end of the diner. It holds a cigarette machine and an old Donkey Kong Junior video game that hasn't been played in so long that the words "game over" are permanently etched into the picture tube. There are also two pinball machines that see slightly more use than the video game. Four machines labeled "for entertainment only" are where the money is made. They are video poker machines, and they draw truck drivers, housewives, and anyone else easily addicted to gambling the same way an Indian reservation casino does. People come in with rolls of quarters and grab a stool. They get that dull look in their eyes. Some smoke like a freight train while others light up and the cigarette never touches their lips again. It just rests between their fingers and burns down to the filter. The winners don't get excited. They just walk to the register and collect their money. But they are few and far between.

The same people have worked here since before I was born. A lady named Millie runs the place. She has a poodle name Midnight. Originally, Midnight was black. But at almost twenty years old, he's as white as a snow drift. Even when he was young, he could be found curled up behind the candy-bar counter. Maybe that is the key to his longevity. Once a year, Millie goes to the beach for a week's vacation. This year she went to Myrtle Beach while it rained. Last year, a motel in Daytona put a five-dollar charge on all the long distance credit calls she made. Her vacations are a big topic of conversation.

The McDonald's in Lake City could be one of a million other franchises across the continent. Like many others, it is located just off the interstate. And like all the others, it has the same famous sign on two seventy-five foot, brown, steel poles that are in clear view for miles before encountering the interstate exit. The parking lot is well-thought-out and easy to navigate. There are no potholes here that could swallow a Mint. The asphalt gets an annual coat of sealant and large white arrows direct the flow of traffic. Concrete curving borders the pavement to prevent anyone from parking on the grass or the mulch where durable evergreens have been planted.

Like thousands of other McDonald's across the country, this one has a playground to attract people with kids. It is surrounded by a wrought-iron fence to keep kidnapers out and children penned in. A two-story, plastic structure stands in the middle of the playground resembling some sort of alien architecture. It is made out of the same 50 percent consumer, recycled plastic that the roof tiles, trays, and happy meal toys are made of. This is "green marketing," designed to appeal to environmentally conscious customers.

An automatic teller machine has been installed in the parking lot beside the playground. It belongs to Nation's Bank--a big multinational conglomerate just like Ronald McDonald. Not only does this machine make it easier to pay for a meal, it also gives a big bank the opportunity to charge one dollar for a service that is performed by a computer for less money than it could be performed by a bank employee.

This McDonald's is as stereotypical on the interior as it is on the exterior. Instead of a jukebox, they have a television that is always tuned to the Country Music Channel. This gives the customers something to watch as well as listen to, so they aren't put into the awkward position of having to speak to one another. The Country Music Channel always features a new star, such as Ricky Lynn Gregg or Rick Travino. They sound like they are

trying to have a hick accent. They don't sound like Johnny Cash or Willie Nelson; they sound like dime-store cowboys. They are like formica countertops that attempt to look like wood.

The latest video games are constantly stuffed through the arcade in the front of the restaurant. Instead of paying with cash, these pay off with tickets that can be traded for a coke or a box of cookies. Just keep feed the machines quarters, and eventually enough tickets will come out. The noise can be nerve-wracking, but very profitable.

Like all their other restaurants, this one is redecorated every few years. Nothing is permanent here, what looks good today will be dated and trendy in three years. Consumption on this scale is conspicuous and gaudy, especially when McDonald's never fails to advertise their recycling program.

But McDonald's can't be condemned for being successful. They have done a lot of things right. Since they're a franchise, everyone follows the same business plan. This lets the customer know exactly what to expect whenever he pulls into McDonald's. That is an advantage independent restaurants will have to live with.

But Americans do not support small businesses the same way they once did. The famous arches that identify McDonald's are a catalyst that people respond to like dumb animals in a laboratory experiment. Instead, we should give the little guy a chance whenever possible. Even though we cannot always support small business, we should try if the produce is comparable and the price is competitive. A car or personal computer made by a small business wouldn't be a good investment. But a house built by an independent contractor would certainly compare favorably to a particle board house built by Clayton Homes. And Fox's Diner makes a better hamburger than the soybean sandwich McDonald's markets.