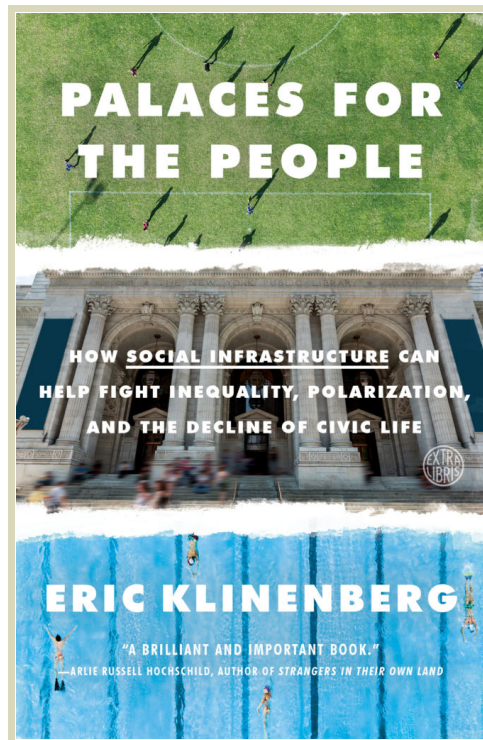


Social Infrastructure and Library 2.0

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When I first read—or rather listened to—social scientist Eric Klinenberg’s *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, it was early March of this year, before the orders to shelter in place, before libraries (and so many other places) were closed to the public. It feels like I read Klinenberg’s book much longer ago, probably because so much has changed in the past six months. And in early March, the specter of a worldwide epidemic wasn’t registering with me.



Social infrastructure is “the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact.”

Eric Klinenberg

Common Ground

Klinenberg’s compelling argument is that social infrastructure is a powerful force that provides crucial social and emotional support that can heal, or at least mitigate, the isolation that has come with an increasingly polarized society. The

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fractures in modern-day America encompass a wide range, from racial to economic to political, but also generational and technological. The idea that what Klinenberg calls social infrastructure could at least partly remedy those rifts was extremely appealing, and not just because libraries are a key component of social infrastructure (although I'd be lying if I said that wasn't part of the appeal). As [Barbara Fister](#) put it in her (now discontinued) Library Babel Fish [blog](#), "I'll admit, he had me at public libraries, but I stayed for the parks, housing, education, public health, and preparation for climate change."

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Social infrastructure is not 'social capital'—a concept commonly used to measure people's relationships and interpersonal networks—but the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops.

Eric Klinenberg

Healthy Bonds

Key to Klinenberg's thesis is that social infrastructure is crucial to fostering what social scientists call "bridging social capital," that which is necessary for societies to get along, to survive, and ultimately thrive. Bridging social capital is a product of the interrelationships among disparate groups, something sorely lacking in today's fractious world. While social and political polarization may advance "bonding social capital" within distinct groups, they necessarily exclude opportunities for interaction with people unlike oneself. And what better place to find people of all sorts than in public libraries, where (at least in theory) all are welcome, equal, and important?

Most needed are those 'third places' which lend a public balance to the increased privatization of home life. Third places are nothing more than

informal public gathering places.
The phrase ‘third places’ derives
from considering our homes to be
the ‘first’ places in our lives, and our
work places the ‘second.’

Ray Oldenburg

A Place to Gather

Providing a physical space in which to be and interact is still crucial to public libraries, despite their increasingly digitized existence. As [Leferink](#) points out, a library’s physical facility has an impact upon its users by setting a tone and shaping their experience. From Leferink’s point of view as a library administrator, libraries are in competition to be one of “the preferred” [third places](#). Klinenberg also sees libraries as fundamental third places, and gives multiple examples of how libraries bring people together. The first chapter of *Palaces for the People* is devoted to libraries, beginning with Klinenberg’s vivid description of a Brooklyn branch library’s Wii bowling league competition and the camaraderie of its diverse team of older adults who wouldn’t otherwise have found themselves together in a library basement.

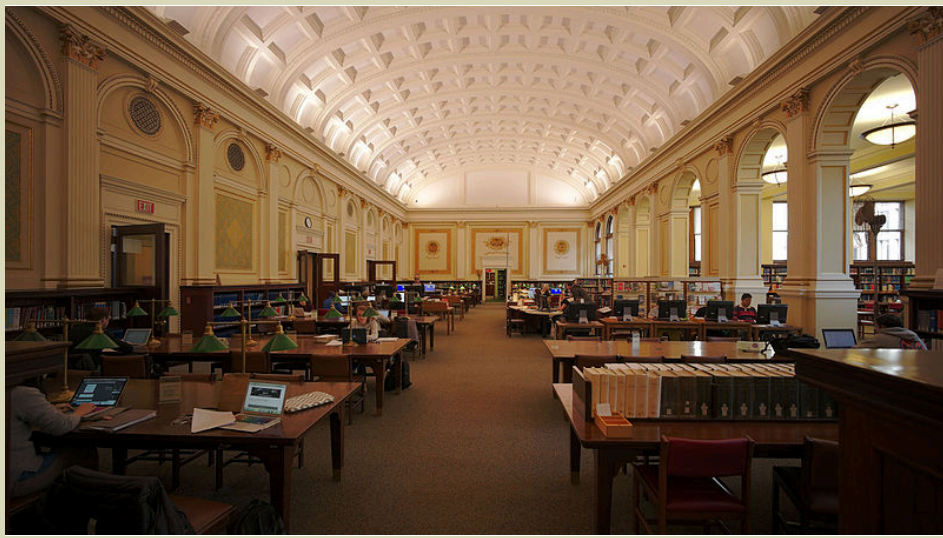


Library Lanes program at Brooklyn Public Library’s New Lots Library
Photo by Eric Klinenberg

Safe Spaces

Now it’s September of 2020 and I’ve finished listening to Klinenberg’s book, this time from a darker and far less optimistic perspective. I worry daily that fallout

from COVID-19 will result in the erosion of library as place. Could the pendulum swing so far towards focusing on remote and virtual access of library resources that the safe havens that used to be libraries will be a thing of the past?



Interior of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

[Dllu / CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Ironically or perhaps serendipitously, I received (via snail mail) the latest issue of *American Libraries* last week, the annual library design showcase issue. I read with some bitterness about the **noteworthy and inspirational designs** from the past year. Then I moved on to the optimistically practical article about **virus-responsive design** that libraries must consider going forward. And in a sort of cosmic convergence, Mathews of *Think Like a Start-Up* contributed a piece about **the impact of library surroundings**, which he concludes are a “physical interface” presented to library users. I wondered how the library world (aka ALA) could be confidently expounding on physical spaces as I fretted and fumed that the long-term ramifications of COVID-19 might render such discussions moot. Where I once saw hope in Klinenberg’s social infrastructure, now I can’t get past my dismay at the greatly diminished opportunities to gather in those third places, *especially* in libraries.

And yet...

Library 2.0

To see the light at the end of this surreal tunnel of time, I am going to try to focus on the convictions of Stephens, Mathews, and Casey & Savastinuk:

- “The library is everywhere—it is not just the building or virtual spaces.” (Stephens)
- “Libraries are about people, not books or technology.” (Mathews)
- “Participatory service and change are the heart of Library 2.0, and technology is a tool that can help us get there.” (Casey & Savastinuk)

Right now, libraries need to exist in a virtual world for most users, curbside delivery aside, and while technology is helping create that virtual world, the people on either side of the library entrance—those working from within and those currently denied entrance—need to stay connected in meaningful ways. Technology is only part of that solution. I concur with Klinenberg’s dismissal of **Mark Zuckerberg’s assertion** that Facebook can provide social infrastructure.

As we near a momentous election, one held during a worldwide pandemic, Klinenberg reminds us that libraries “are among our last trusted institutions” he

thinks may very well [save the 2020 election](#) by serving, as they have for decades, as reliable and safe polling places. That is how I want to think of public libraries right now, as places of integrity, safety, and equity. They are trusted and they are institutions, they are technology, they are books (and so much more), and they are people coming together however they can.

Posted by [Kay Wolverton Ito](#).

Tagged: [Klinenberg](#), [Library 2.0](#), [Palaces for the People](#), [social infrastructure](#), [third places](#)

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2 thoughts on “[Social Infrastructure and Library 2.0](#)”



Nydia

September 12, 2020 at 6:42 am

Hi Kay,

What a great review of Eric Klinenberg’s Place for the People. I think the concern you have about the erosion of the library as a place is warranted considering the unprecedented impacts libraries have experienced caused by the current pandemic atop years of underfunding. As daunting as it all feels, I think libraries will continue to be safe places where the community can gather. As social creatures, people yearn to connect and although emerging technologies have enabled us to connect and build communities virtually, these platforms are no enduring substitutes for face-to-face interactions and connections. Even still, I think our current situation has compelled us to recognize that, “the library is everywhere” and “not just the building or virtual spaces.” I think it’s a particularly relevant time that we are taking this course as we all try to make sense of it all given our current context. Thanks for the thought-provoking read,
Nydia

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Kay Wolverton Ito

September 12, 2020 at 4:45 pm

Thanks for reading my post, [@nydia](#). I probably come across as more pessimistic than I feel overall, but I worry about people whose needs require physically being in a library. I know there is creative thinking going on about how to address this, but since I’m not working in a library at the moment, I chafe at not being able to be part of this process. One of the main reasons I took this course is exactly because of the relevance to our current (and evolving) context.

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