Technology Will Not Solve All of Our Problems, but Social Infrastructure Might
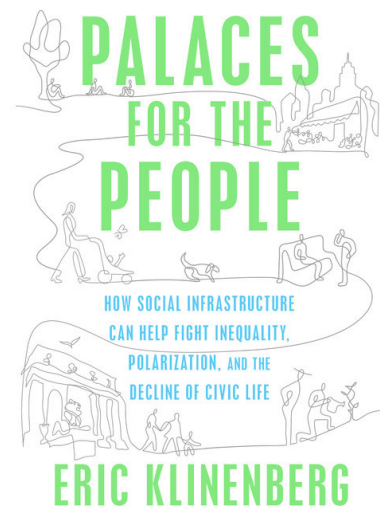

New York Public Library

Picture this: A building is bustling with people. Some are reading quietly in a corner while others are attending an exercise class. A child is spotted developing life-long friendships, and an adult is checking out tools to work on their next home remodel project. The building is a shared space where everyone is welcome, and everything is free. What you are picturing is a library, and more specifically, the result of a well-designed social infrastructure.

In *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, author Eric Klinenberg argues that social infrastructure is the solution to

the diminishing, fractured society in which we live. Klinenberg (2018) defines social infrastructure as "the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact" (p. 5). While the internet has led to broadened communication and interactivity among community members, Klinenberg (2018) has found the web to be an "echo chamber" (p. 8) in which a user typically seeks information that fits the perspective of their own. Rather than feeling more connected to their community, Klinenberg (2018) claims that the internet has caused society to become fragmented and disconnected. Today, teens view the internet as their "core infrastructure" (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 42) because of strict regulations imposed by adults (parents, school administration, security guards). Deprived of building connections in person, whether that be on the sidewalk or at the library, teens look to the internet to fill this void. Advocating for an increase in social infrastructure may be the key to solving this issue.

Penguin Random House

346- Palaces for the People
99% Invisible

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Episode 346- Palaces for the People from *RadioPublic*

99% Invisible's radio show focuses on the architecture and design that often goes unnoticed. The radio show is available for free on their website and as a podcast on Apple and Android devices. I was first exposed to Eric Klinenberg's ideals through the San Francisco-based radio show, created by Roman Mars, a few months ago in which Mars interviewed Klinenberg last year.

Klinenberg highlights how six main components of social infrastructure benefit a community and why it is vital for us to invest in these physical spaces for both social and economic growth. Below are the six components and how they relate to libraries:

GATHERING SPACE

> "Social infrastructure provides the setting and context for social participation, and the library is among the most critical forms of social infrastructure that we have" (p. 32).

ERIC KLINENBERG
Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life

SAFETY

> "We invest little in housing and far less in safe sidewalks and neighborhood amenities like libraries, senior centers, and community gardens, which draw people into the public realm and put more eyes on the street" (p. 59).

ERIC KLINENBERG
Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life

LEARNING

> "The library may well be the single institution that's most responsible for inspiring people to learn" (p. 111).

ERIC KLINENBERG
Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life

HEALTH

> "In the United States, branch libraries, particularly those that offer programs like video bowling leagues, book clubs, and karaoke sessions, play a significant role in helping old people remain active" (p. 134).

ERIC KLINENBERG
Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life

COMMONALITIES

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> "They [community organizations, including libraries] are critical parts of the social infrastructure, because they provide physical places where people can assemble, programs that bring people together on a regular basis, and local leaders who become advocates for the community" (p. 162).
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> ERIC KLINENBERG
> *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*

NATURAL DISASTER PROTECTION

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> "When people are in serious trouble they want to go to a place that's familiar and comfortable, where they are likely to find neighbors and friends" (p. 192).
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> ERIC KLINENBERG
> *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*

Infographics created with Canva

While Klinenberg chose to mainly focus on how libraries fit into these six components, he also emphasizes that churches, parks, public swimming pools, and community gardens are social infrastructures that complement communities and help to shape who we are. Along with Leferink (2018), Klinenberg identifies these community spaces as "third spaces;" not a place of residence or employment, but a place where people "develop and retain a sense of cohesion and identity" (Leferink, 2018). We often take these social infrastructures for granted and only notice their failings when they begin to break down. Social infrastructure is an investment and must be upheld in order to maintain humankind's well-being.

Several examples of libraries including DOK Library, San Francisco Public Library, and San Jose Public Library reinforce the benefits of physical, social infrastructure and have expanded and re-vamped their spaces to foster social connections.

DOK Library

Multitouch Microsoft Surface: Cultural Heritage

Multitouch Microsoft Surface: Cultural Heritage Browser

from **Jaap van de Geer**

04:08

Jaap van de Geer, Head of Innovation at DOK, Library Concept Center

Using Microsoft Surface interactive tables, patrons at DOK Library in Delft, Netherlands can interact with a cultural heritage browser to view archived images of their neighborhood streets. The technology also allows users to add their own images and tell stories. "At DOK they understand that to increase participation, the entire design should be focused at doing stuff" (Visser, 2011). This interactive display permits community members to gather and tell tales concerning their neighborhood. In *Palaces for the People*, Klingenberg (2018) reinforces that "communications technologies work best, and fulfill us most, when they direct us to physical places that everyone can access" (p. 42).

San Francisco Public Library

In the process of designing a new teen space at San Francisco Public Library called "The Mix," Costanza (2015) notes that teens were involved in the decision-making process when designing the new space. "Collectively, they helped shape the space into a haven for digital learning" (Costanza, 2015). Social infrastructure should be built with the community in mind, and what better way to achieve this than allowing users to be a part of the process.

San Jose Public Library

TeenHQ Now Open

TeenHQ at the SJSU King Library

I visited the TeenHQ area at the SJSU King Library in May 2019 and was amazed by the design of the space. Similar to The Mix at SFPL, teen librarians at the King Library, the design firm Gyroscope, and ten teens collaborated to rebuild the teen area to fit the needs of current users. Chant (2016) found that "few libraries are taking it to the next level, not just finding out what patrons need or value and filtering that through the lens of librarian and architect expertise but also letting users directly drive design decisions in collaboration with the professionals."

If the COVID-19 pandemic provides any indication, it's evident that humans are social beings. While we are forced to shelter-in-place and are restricted from seeing friends and family, the internet does not serve as an equivalent substitute to forging relationships with other humans. We *need* to be around other people, even if it means putting ourselves risk. Without social infrastructure readily available for use, humans are experiencing psychological distress and loneliness. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that social infrastructure is more important than ever.

Mattern (2014) argues that "the library as always been a place where information and social infrastructures intersect within a physical infrastructure." Klinenberg's *Palaces for the People* argues that if we lose focus on the importance of libraries, we will lose social participation, safety, empathy, and most importantly, human kindness. "Building real connections requires a shared physical environment — a social infrastructure" (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 41) that cannot be found online. Weinberger (2001) from *The Cluetrain Manifesto* argues that the key to building hyperlinked spaces is fostering human connections.

Technology may be an additional element that ignites learning, but physical spaces are essential to allow tech to serve its purpose. As information professionals, and more generally, as humans, we must advocate for the importance of social infrastructure to continue building connections and new ideas. "If libraries remain focused on channeling their resources toward helping people solve their problems and meet their needs, then we are providing a service so unique in this world that it will be hard to readily dismiss us" (Kenny, 2014).

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This entry was posted in Context Book Assignment on September 13, 2020 [https://287.hyperlib.sjsu.edu/ciera-pasturel/2020/09/13/technology-will-not-solve-all-of-our-problems-but-social-infrastructure-might/] .

3 thoughts on "Technology Will Not Solve All of Our Problems, but Social Infrastructure Might"

Amber Bales
September 13, 2020 at 6:03 pm

Hi @cierapasturel– You post is great! Social infastructure is key to our future! I started reading Palaces for the People in the early weeks of quarantine. Thank goodness, it wasn't for an assignment, because at the time it just brought me to tears everytime I picked it up (I couldn't finish it at the time). I missed my library and my community so much. Libraries play a huge large part in social infastructure. My current library is in a rough neighborhood (one of few in Denver suburbs). We are an 11 year old library and 3 years ago we added a huge expansion for a children's area. This summer a large empty lot was turned into a gorgeous playground and park. It impossibly not to see the connections. Part of social infastructure is past decisions as well. I recently read a NYT Article about how redlining districts in the 1930 in Richmond VA has made them the hottest areas of the city today – WHY? Because of a lack of infastructure. Trees and green space were not prioritized and now almost 100 years later we are still seeing those areas as less desirable because of the heat densisty.

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/24/climate/racism-redlining-cities-global-warming.html?smid=tw-share

Ciera Pasturel Post author
September 13, 2020 at 9:04 pm

Hi Amber,

Thank you for reading and commenting on my post! I know, reading Palaces for the People definitely made me upset about the lack of open social infrastructure available to people at the moment. Wow, that is so cool regarding your children's area at your library! I would love to see a photo.

The 1930 heatwave in Richmond, VA reminds me of what Klinenberg discussed at the beginning of his book: the 1995 heatwave in Chicago. Thank you for sharing the link!

Ciera

Kay Wolverton Ito
September 17, 2020 at 4:25 pm

@cierapasturel I really enjoyed your synthesis of Klinenberg with class readings, and your infographics are great! I heard the interview on 99% Invisible, too, but this was after I'd read the book the first time. I hope some of our classmates listen to it, since it's a good way to get an overview without having to read the whole book. Thanks for a great post.