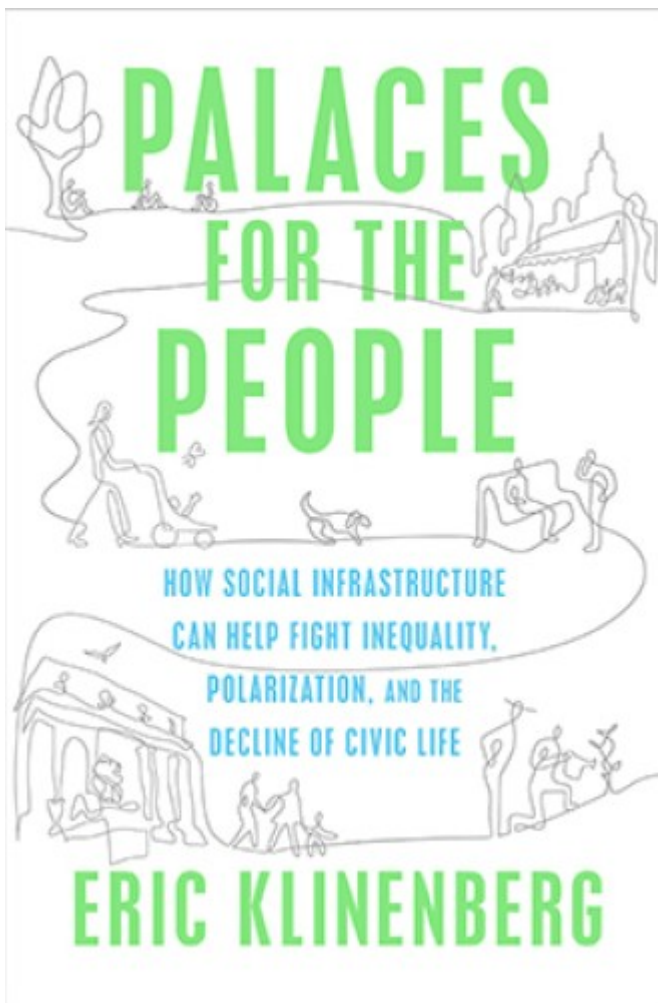


Can libraries save us?

## **What holds the world together, Eric Klinenberg believes, is social infrastructure.**

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [August 28, 2019](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **Palaces for the People**

# How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life

By Eric Klinenberg  
Crown

Andrew Carnegie—no angel when it came to industrial relations, but dollar for dollar the greatest philanthropist in modern history—built 2,811 lending libraries, two-thirds of them in the United States, and called them Palaces for the People. Today, when most people glean their information from the Internet, it may seem a quaint gesture. Not to Eric Klinenberg. He regards the library as the epitome of the social infrastructure that is crucial to the survival of Western society.

Klinenberg is one of a generation of sociologists for whom Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* constitutes the Old Testament and Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* the New. His gospel is social infrastructure. What holds society together is contact and conversation. These, when frequent, and when coinciding with shared interests and passions, create common humanity.

Gone are the factories and industrial towns that forged blue-collar communities from diverse ethnic groups. Gone are the athletic contests that transcended class. Now we have cable news and radio talk shows that foster social bonding but jeopardize social bridging—and thus deepen polarization. Besides the library, the temples of Klinenberg's faith are the barbershop, the gymnasium, the well-groomed park and playground, and the communal lounge with free Wi-Fi.

Klinenberg is well aware of the horsemen of the apocalypse facing the developed world: climate change, profound inequality, serious poverty, an aging population, and explosive ethnic divisions. His conviction is that we can address such challenges only by developing stronger bonds and genuinely shared interests.

It's common to lament the chronic underinvestment in hard infrastructure: bridges, embankments, sewage works, railways, communications, and storm protection. Klinenberg's argument is that hard infrastructure improves society only when social infrastructure accompanies it—and that when hard infrastructure fails, social infrastructure determines our fate. As it turns out, "social isolation and loneliness can be as dangerous as more publicized health hazards, including obesity and smoking." The answer isn't technocratic or civic but something in between: the

hidden networks and taken-for-granted systems that underpin collective life.

I've sometimes described ministry as creating the right spaces and letting the Holy Spirit do the rest. Klinenberg has a similar view of the need to establish appropriate space. Athletic fields, YMCAs, and swimming pools can do it but so can sidewalks and community gardens. Churches qualify only if they foster an established physical space where people can assemble. Regular markets for food, furniture, clothing, and art will do, as will diners and bookstores if they operate as "third spaces" where people are welcome to congregate, linger, and strike up conversations with strangers. In rural areas, this can take the form of hunting clubs, town halls, and fairgrounds.

Klinenberg points out the difference between "a village where everyone gets their water from the same well and a city where everyone gets their water from faucets in their private homes." (His citing of the English pub suggests that he recalls a bygone era before drinking-and-driving laws and smoking bans.) Particularly enjoyable is his breadth of reference: Who knew that in Iceland geothermal swimming pools are civic spaces where people habitually cross class and generational divides?

Klinenberg makes his way through the major aspects of American life, in each case finds them wanting, and argues that attention to and investment in social infrastructure could turn things around. There's health, education, and sports, but the library shines out above all. More than 90 percent of Americans see their library as important, and 50 percent have used a library in the last year. In an era in which every major institution (government, churches, banks, corporations) has fallen in public esteem, only first responders, the military, and libraries stand apart.

For all the detailed argument and extensive illustration in the book, its opening narrative remains compelling. Klinenberg describes how the 1995 Chicago heat wave, which killed around 750 people, affected social groups and neighborhoods differently. Eight of the ten worst-hit neighborhoods were African American, places where isolated individuals hunkered down in the shadow of poverty and crime.

But three of the ten neighborhoods with the best survival rates were African American and also poor. Why? People in both groups were equally committed to caring for one another, but in the resilient neighborhoods, diners, parks, grocery stores, and barbershops were within easy walking distance. People were missed, and it was easy to check on them. As a result, people in such areas live as much as ten

years longer than in neighborhoods of corresponding income but poor social infrastructure.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a book by a sociologist intended for a general audience, congregations appear only in a formal way. There's nothing in it about how and where a community organization's convictions shape its practice. But for churches that seek to be a blessing to their neighborhoods, there's plenty here to ponder.

A congregation that organizes extensive social outreach—a soup kitchen, perhaps, or a food pantry—might pause to consider whether its person-hours could be better spent cultivating social capital by speaking to neighborhood residents in regular visits to the barbershop or swimming pool. The danger of gated living is that not just housing but also worship, schooling, leisure, and retail become secluded spheres, overtly or subtly designed to insure that social barriers are upheld.

Klinenberg is exasperatingly silent on how to conduct the conversations and interactions his book regards as fundamental to civic health. His argument is a concatenation of absorbing inducements to lead horses to water but with no counsel about how to help them drink. He is imaginative, engaging, and persuasive on the subject of creating and fostering social infrastructure. But he's quiet on how to put the social infrastructure we have to best use. His most memorable illustrations come from the idyll of his own family life, jauntily trotting down the sidewalk to a Manhattan elementary school or giving in to the car drop-off culture of Stanford while on sabbatical.

Maybe such counsel will constitute Klinenberg's next book. Or perhaps one of his theologically minded fellow travelers, fresh from the farmers' market with wholesome, locally sourced produce purchased amid countless spontaneous cross-cultural and intergenerational social interactions, should write it for him.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "What holds society together."*