

PALACES FOR THE PEOPLE, by Eric Klinenberg
Book Report and Commentary by David G. Schwartz, M.D.
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We know that our physical infrastructures are in trouble, but what about social infrastructure? What is that? We hear the term "social capital" more frequently now. This is people making real connections with each other in public communities, strengthening the basic social fabric. How is this important for public health? Rebuilding social infrastructure can save lives during disasters, reduce crime, increase public safety, and basically facilitate people helping each other and decreasing animosity caused by political polarization. We also know that a major factor promoting well being and longevity is strong, positive social connections.

Part of the reason for such stark political, racial, cultural, and religious polarization, leading to animosity, anger, and fear (not exactly health-promoting emotions) is the loss of public infrastructure. People make connections in their own echo chambers and gated communities, but that creates more isolation for the whole society and doesn't build mutual understanding of people with diverging viewpoints, which is necessary for a society to function well. So this is a vital part of public health.

Eric Klinenberg is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University.

The author believes that the future of democratic societies rests on not only shared values, but shared spaces such as libraries, childcare centers, bookstores, churches, synagogues, mosques, and parks. When people gather in those places, they can make friends across group lines and strengthen their entire communities.

"Social Capital" is a term describing people's relationships and interpersonal networks. Social infrastructure is the physical conditions in which social capital can develop.

Social epidemiologists have clearly established the relationship between social connections and health and longevity, but they had not studied the physical conditions and places that encourage these social connections. That is what this author has done. He has traveled throughout the world, studying what communities and countries are doing to build and preserve social infrastructure.

Klinenberg introduces the subject by describing the heat wave that hit Chicago on July 12, 1995, with temperatures at 106 degrees F, and heat index of 126. Record breaking energy consumption overwhelmed the electrical grid, leaving 200,000 homes without air conditioning, and causing water pumps to fail. From July 14th to 20th, 739 people died from the heat, 7 times more than perished in Superstorm Sandy, and double that of the Great Chicago Fire.

The death rate differed sharply between two Chicago communities, Englewood, and Auburn Gresham, both in the hyper-segregated South Side, 99% African Americans, with

high rates of poverty, unemployment, and violent crime. Englewood had 33 deaths per 100,000 population, and Auburn Gresham, 3 per 100,000, safer than Lincoln Park and the Near North side. Why the difference?

Between 1960 and 1990, Englewood lost half its residents and most commercial outlets. An Englewood resident who has lived there for 52 years says, "Now we don't know who lives across the street or around the corner. And old folks are apprehensive about leaving their homes."

In contrast, the people in Auburn Gresham participated in block clubs and church groups and walked to parks, grocery stores, diners, and barbershops. They knew their neighbors, not because of special efforts to meet them, but, because of where they lived, casual interactions were a part of everyday life.

During a cold spell or heat wave, neighbors check in on one another and knock on doors of the elderly and disabled. It's what they always do, so not only during that heat wave, those neighborhoods that survived the disaster better, had always had better measures of health and safety than areas with less social infrastructure. Five years before the heat wave, life expectancy in Auburn Gresham was 5 years longer than in Englewood.

The author had previously published the book, Heat Wave, about that tragedy in Chicago. Then he thought he should look at other communities throughout the world. He found that across the planet, societies are becoming more fragmented, conflicted, and divided, as if the "social glue" is coming undone. Distrust and fear, class segregation, extreme inequality, gated communities, and armed guards have increased in many countries. Social class has become more entrenched, and opportunities for upward mobility have become increasingly limited. The Internet was supposed to open up democratic communication and cultural diversity, but it has too often become an echo chamber.

Infrastructure in general tends to be invisible, something that is just there, supporting many tasks. It becomes most visible when it breaks down. When hard infrastructure fails, then the softer, social infrastructure, "determines our fate," as we saw in the Chicago heat wave.

What things make up social infrastructure? Public institutions like parks, libraries, schools, athletic fields, swimming pools, sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, churches and civic organizations, outdoor markets, cafes, pubs, diners, karaoke bars, barber shops, bookstores, town halls, fairgrounds, and community suppers. Levees, seawalls and bridges can be engineered to function as social infrastructure by incorporating parks, walking trails, and community centers. I think of the streets and plazas in Europe, off limits to cars, where people walk and congregate.

When the hard infrastructure is designed to move lots of people efficiently, there is less chance for people to connect. People getting water from the same well vs. private faucets make more social connection.

Klinenberg encountered many social centers, traveling the world, the Souk in Doha and in Jerusalem, early AM Tai Chi in Shanghai, geothermal swimming pools in Iceland, the plaza in Barcelona, the Italian piazza, and many beaches.

Andrew Carnegie built 2800 grand libraries across the world, which he called, "Palaces For the People." Libraries are among the most critical forms of social infrastructure, and yet one of the most undervalued. Public officials say people can get their information through the Internet, and they have cut funding severely for libraries. What they fail to recognize is that usage of the libraries and the borrowing of books continue unabated, and in many places, circulation has actually increased. Library personnel are overwhelmed with the traffic. Many other institutions such as government, churches, banks, and corporations have fallen in esteem, but not libraries.

What political officials don't realize is that libraries are not just sources of information, but a major part of social structure. Too many public officials don't visit a library and are out of touch. There is always something going on in many libraries, classes for literacy, song and story hours, book clubs, movie nights, sewing circles, classes for music and art, group meetings, and games. The organized activities are designed for inclusion and openness to many ethnic and cultural groups. Friendships develop quickly in shared activities for children and parents. For many seniors, it's the main place they interact with people from other generations. For many older people who live alone, that is their main connection with people. To go to a senior center isolates them with only older people.

Young people use the Internet more nowadays because of hyper-vigilant administrators and helicopter parents, both interfering with their social life with peers, but also they are using the public libraries to congregate, where there are no prohibitions against loitering.

Libraries are generally safe places for people of varieties of cultures, social classes, and ideologies to come together, with very little worry about security. Many homeless people come to the library to use the bathrooms. The services of the library "are founded on the assumption that, if given chance, people will improve themselves." It assumes the best out of people.

At the Seward Park Library in New York, "Tea Time" became one of the more popular programs, when people can share newspapers and stories and form a community of diverse people. One of the library employees, Andrew, instituted Tea Time. He says, "Tea Time is one of the best ways that the library can express faith in people. There's a term you don't hear these days, one you used to hear all the time when the Carnegie branches opened: "Palaces For the People." The library really is a palace. It bestows nobility on people who can't otherwise afford a shred of it. People need to have nobility

and dignity in their lives. And you know, they need other people to recognize it in them too. Serving tea doesn't seem like that big a deal, but the truth is it's one of the most important things I do."

Safe living places make a huge difference in people's social connectivity. The author recounts the story of two housing complexes in North St. Louis in 1956. One, Pruitt-Igoe, with 33 eleven-story buildings, had vandalism, graffiti, garbage, broken glass, prostitution, drug dealing, burglary, and violent crime. The other, Caru Square, a building with an identical population, across the street, had 1/3 the crime, and had stayed trouble-free throughout the years, and remained fully occupied. In Caru Square Village, each row house contained just a few families, all of whom could identify one another as neighbors and friends. They shared a semiprivate outdoor area. The residents maintained and controlled these areas, which they recognized as their own. The public areas and gardens allowed informal surveillance through "eyes on the street." In contrast, Pruitt-Igoe was such a large complex that it was impossible to tell a resident from an intruder. The buildings had no doorkeepers or resident superintendents, as middle class high-rises do. So the people were not at fault. It was the building design and structure.

When news got out about this study, cities throughout the country started repeating the program of re-mediating large areas with good results.

Other studies showed that the more green spaces around building, the lower the crime, and people in general had less interpersonal aggressive feelings and behavior. Read about how natural environments increase many measures of health and well being, in my article in the archives about [Nature Fix](#), by Florence Williams.

Schools are also great opportunities for developing social spaces, especially if schools are smaller, and have open outdoor spaces where parents and children can gather. After reducing school size in New York at Erasmus High School the graduation rate went from 40% to 90%. Hallways and cafeterias in the smaller schools were safer and more relaxed.

The American Society of Civil Engineers gave the U.S. a report card on physical infrastructure in 2013, and again in 2017, and both times it gave it a D+. It does not score health infrastructure, food infrastructure, or social infrastructure, but I would guess all 3 would score close to a D+ also, because these other infrastructures often follow the physical infrastructure.

Communities that have more civic organizations and higher rates of voting are more insulated from the opioid crisis than more fragile communities. Socially isolated people who use drugs are more likely to die from them. The Swiss government established heroin maintenance zones, places where addicts, counselors, and medical professionals interacted regularly, and from 1991 to 2004, overdose deaths dropped by 50%. The number of new users dropped by 80%. Heroin related property crimes decreased by 90%.

Another threat to public health is the lack of availability of healthful foods. In 1980 the Englewood area of Chicago was at the heart of Chicago's food desert. According to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, living in a food desert is associated with obesity and a host of diet – related chronic diseases. Residents are more likely to drink sodas and eat processed foods high in salt, sugar, and artificial chemicals, related to diabetes, cancer, and a host of other chronic illnesses.

In 1992 Les Brown, who founded the Chicago Coalition For the Homeless, started advocacy for urban farming. By 1998 his colleague, Harry Rhodes, started Growing Home. They persuaded the city of Chicago to let them use a vacant lot for agriculture, at the crossroads of 3 gang territories. Today, thanks to Growing Home and other civic organizations, Chicago has 800 community gardens and urban farms. Gardeners not only provide healthful food but encourage social interactions within and across generations, resulting in more social cohesion, civic participation, and neighborhood attachment. Cordia Pugh, who lived in Englewood for 5 decades and encouraged Les Brown to start the movement, says of the neighborhood gardens, "We even get people coming from other neighborhoods because they get so much pleasure from going outside working the land with other good people." She added, "They are safe havens. Even the gangbangers respect what we are doing. When there's a conflict, they tell everybody to stay off our block now. They know we're doing something good here. And there's a chance their relatives will be out here too!"

Now Englewood's Growing Home's two farms produce a steady supply of produce and have weekly farmer's markets with cooking classes. In September 2016 a Whole Foods and a Chipotle opened. Is this the end of the food desert?

One of the main policy recommendations of the American Public Health Association is, "Community gardens should be considered as a primary and permanent open space option as part of master planning efforts; gardens should be developed as part of land planning processes rather than as an after thought in neighborhood redevelopment projects."

Athletic fields are areas that build social capital. "Consider how many parents forge lasting relationships on the sidelines while their children practice and compete on the diamond, field, or court." Learning to lead or work with teammates on the field helps players to develop skills that transfer to other aspects of social life and the community.

Our social infrastructures, like the physical infrastructures, are failing. Funding is being cut for libraries. Bookstores close due to online competition. Many small communities are destroyed by gentrification. The Internet and social media take people away from face to face interactions and real social connections. The move to larger and larger corporate mergers and big box and online retail suffocates small local retail stores where people know each other, customers and owners.

Plans for building physical infrastructure need to include food, health, and social infrastructure. Often the experts are out of touch with the real needs of the people.

Democracy in action needs to include input from all local communities before the next shovel is lifted.

We need to raise public awareness of this often hidden treasure that is taken for granted, and we often don't realize its importance until it is gone. And we don't often see the connection between the loss of social infrastructure, and the problems we face, like crime, poor health, disaster un-preparedness, and the opioid epidemic. We need to pay attention to the unglamorous and necessary frameworks of our society and to pay less attention to those things that glitter but fail to produce. The solid social connections are a necessary part of a safe, vibrant, healthy, growing community.