



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

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

By Eric Klinenberg

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Jan. 4, 2023 to discuss *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* by Eric Klinenberg. Klinenberg is a sociologist who has studied neighborhood connectedness and why knowing your neighbors makes places safer, healthier and more resilient to crises.

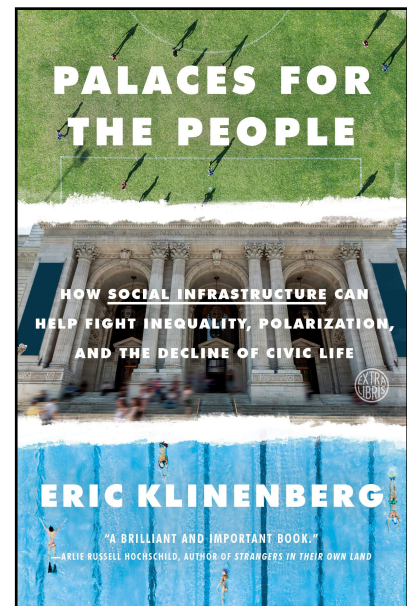
The key, for Klinenberg, is the role of public places that help people meet and know one another. Most of these are provided by government but some are the work of nonprofits or even for-profit businesses. He calls these places, and the activities they engender, “social infrastructure,” as opposed to the “hard infrastructure” of roads, bridges, transit and buildings.

The book explains why connections are important, and how social infrastructure (parks, libraries, community gardens, libraries, playgrounds, churches, YMCAs, bookstores and coffee shops and so on) facilitates people meeting one another.

Four Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are four “big ideas” from *Palaces for the People*:

1. In Urban Atlanta, we should include social infrastructure in the hard infrastructure we build. That is, as we are constructing schools, bridging freeways, creating new parks and so on, we should ensure



- they are as conducive to human connection as they are to education, mobility, recreation and other important goals.
2. In doing this, keep in mind that design alone does not create connections. Connections need events and activities, and that requires people to organize them.
 3. The opportunities for connection do not end with big projects. The greatest gains may come at the neighborhood level, with small parks, playgrounds and community gardens.
 4. Nor do the opportunities end with *new* infrastructure. There are opportunities for using existing assets—like neighborhood schools, libraries, community centers and so on—for creating connections in Urban Atlanta.

Special Note

Though it is not addressed in *Palaces for the People*, we have an issue in Urban Atlanta that could complicate our efforts at building and taking advantage of social infrastructure. The problem: We're not good at engaging people in neighborhoods in planning. As a result, when parks, playgrounds, trails and so on are built, the people closest to them sometimes do not take ownership. When that happens, these places miss an opportunity for volunteer-driven events that create the connections Klinenberg urges. We need to turn this problem into an opportunity by finding new and better ways of bringing neighbors into planning, so that, once finished, these places become *their* places.

Why Do These Things?

Using Klinenberg's research plus their own knowledge of the region, our members explained why Urban Atlanta would benefit from adding social infrastructure to hard infrastructure and making other efforts to connect people:

- It would heal the political divisions and pandemic isolation of recent years.
- Connectedness makes neighborhoods and their cities safer and more resilient to natural disasters.
- Knowing our neighbors strengthens our mental health, and outdoor social infrastructure, such as parks, trails and playgrounds, strengthens our physical health.
- By connecting neighbors, social infrastructure helps make diversity work.
- If we can get more people involved in planning activities for their neighborhoods, from block parties to fun runs, we will build pride of place and self-esteem.
- By using facilities like schools, community centers and libraries in new ways, we make these facilities more valuable and the investment in them more worthwhile.
- Being around others and engaging in activities together brings "balance to life."

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes generate opposition. That's true even something as desirable building infrastructure and programs that connect people. So our members discussed what obstacles or barriers the four big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Where will we get the money to build social infrastructure and the programs and events that make it come alive?
- If we use existing buildings in new ways—say, after-school adult classes or libraries open in the evening for neighborhood meetings—who cleans up? Who assumes the liability? Who provides security?
- Two familiar excuses: "inertia" and "not my job." People usually don't look for more to do; they avoid new responsibilities. So who will be in charge of social infrastructure and its activities?
- Another excuse: This is not a government or a community responsibility. If you want to meet new people, it's up to you.

- There's distrust at the grassroots level. What may seem like a noble effort to build connectedness may be viewed with suspicion by people in neighborhoods.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers:

- We need to find the champions of social infrastructure. In governments, it could be parks and recreation officials, librarians, school principals looking for closer relations with their neighborhoods, or public health professionals. There may also be nonprofits, like Park Pride or YMCAs, that could become champions of expanding social infrastructure to create greater connectedness.
- These champions need a way of telling their story. And *Palaces for the People* offers a way, through measuring neighborhood connectedness and how it correlates to resiliency. So an early task might be to develop social infrastructure indicators that could be used in any neighborhood in Urban Atlanta.
- Measuring the problem is one thing, but coming up with workable solutions another. A good approach might be to do “pilot projects.” Find a neighborhood willing to participate in a social infrastructure project, and measure its connectedness before the project and after. This will tell advocates whether they were successful. More importantly, with these experiments champions will develop a set of strategies that work.
- And once there are successes, this can form the champions’ stories—that neighborhoods became measurably safer, healthier, happier and more resilient when they add social infrastructure. The message is then simple: We need more social infrastructure in more places.
- Ultimately, the champions must change the thinking of funders, from nonprofits and foundations to governments. To do so, they must, first, help funders recognize the importance of social infrastructure. Second, help them understand how it works, through a mixture of construction and programming. Finally, help them consider the cost not only of constructing social infrastructure but operating the activities that make it valuable. Example: If you open up schools to evening activities, who will be the “night principals” of these places? Who will pay their salaries?
- Finally, as explained above, we must get better at engaging people at the grassroots level, so that residents “own” the social infrastructure in their neighborhoods. After all, a park that isn’t used—one that never hosts a neighborhood festival or weekend farmers market—won’t succeed in connecting people.

A Synopsis of *Palaces for the People*

Palaces for the People is 233 pages, not including notes, acknowledgments, index and study guides. It has six chapters, an introduction and a conclusion.

Klinenberg is a professor of sociology at New York University, research director of a federal infrastructure design completion called Rebuild by Design and author of several books about urban issues.

The book’s main message is that the way we design cities and the public places in them influences the interaction of residents. And these interactions and the relationships that people form can have major impacts on the health of residents, their feelings of safety, their ability to bounce back from disasters, and their ability to learn and earn more.

Klinenberg calls these public places “social infrastructure” because, as traditional or “hard infrastructure” facilitates mobility, land use, communications and public health, these places facilitate human connections. They include neighborhood libraries, community centers, parks, playgrounds, community gardens, walking trails, schools (if they are designed right) and other facilities that invite everyone’s use and do not hurry them along. Most of these are built by governments, but not all. Churches, YMCAs, coffee shops and bookstores can also function as social infrastructure—if everyone is welcome and there are opportunities for forming acquaintanceships.

And acquaintanceships are important, Klinenberg writes, because knowing others nearby makes people feel connected and secure in a neighborhood—and gives them someone to turn to in times of trouble.

It was in one of those troubled times that Klinenberg discovered the importance of social infrastructure. When he was a graduate student in 1995, Chicago suffered a terrible heat wave where temperatures reached 106 degrees. During the weeklong ordeal, more than 700 people died in excess of the summer norm—nearly all as a result of the heat.

But Klinenberg noticed that not all neighborhoods had the same levels of fatalities, even among those with similar incomes, ages, housing stock and ethnic makeup. Some neighborhoods suffered only a handful of deaths, while others saw scores die, mostly elderly people who lived alone. Klinenberg turned his research into the 1995 heat wave, its toll and the differences in those neighborhoods into a dissertation and, eventually, a book called *Heat Wave*.

His key finding: The places where people survived best were those where connections among people were strongest. And what caused those connections? Something in the design of the neighborhood and the functioning of its grassroots institutions.

Palaces for the People expands that thesis to look at what those designs and institutions are and how they bring people together.

In six chapters, Klinenberg looks at places to gather (such as libraries and coffeeshops), “safe spaces” (such as community gardens and other collective green spaces that reduce crime), schools and how their designs facilitate or hinder relationships, healthy places (such as farmers markets, parks and outdoor recreation), “common grounds” that help people meet others (churches, barbershops, basketball courts and neighborhood bars). His final chapter is about how social connections become critical in a disaster, such as a heat wave or hurricane.

In the conclusion, Klinenberg argues that social infrastructure can and should be incorporated into hard infrastructure. This is important, he said, because America will soon start building infrastructure to deal with climate change. At little added cost, he says, these projects could facilitate connections among people, too.

Footnote: The title comes from 19th century industrialist Andrew Carnegie who financed the construction of more than 2,800 libraries in the U.S. and other countries between 1883 and 1929. Asked why he wanted libraries with high ceilings, large windows and beautiful spaces for reading, he said he sought to build “palaces for the people.”

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn’t to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.