

L I T E R A R Y H U B



VIA BROADWAY BOOKS

Libraries Are Even More Important to Contemporary Community Than We Thought

And They Should Be Funded Accordingly

By Eric Klinenberg

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Libraries are not the kinds of institutions that social scientists, policy makers, and community leaders usually bring up when they discuss social capital and how to build it. Since Tocqueville, most leading thinkers about social and civic life have extolled the value of voluntary associations like bowling leagues and gardening clubs without looking closely at the physical and material conditions that make people more or less likely to associate. But 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.

It's also one of the most undervalued. In recent years, modest declines in the circulation of bound books in some parts of the country have led some critics to argue that the library is no longer serving its historic function as a place for public education and social uplift. Elected officials with other spending priorities argue that 21st-century libraries no longer need the resources they once commanded, because on the Internet most content is free. Architects and designers eager to erect new temples of knowledge say that libraries should be repurposed for a world where books are digitized and so much public culture is online.

Many public libraries do need renovations, particularly the neighborhood branches. But the problem libraries face isn't that people no longer visit them or take out books. On the contrary: so many people are using them, for such a wide variety of purposes, that library systems and their employees are overwhelmed. According to a 2016 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, about half of all Americans aged sixteen and over used a public library in the past year, and two-thirds say that closing their local branch would have a "major impact on their community." In many neighborhoods the risk of such closures is palpable, because both local library buildings and the systems that sustain them are underfunded and overrun.

In New York City, where I live, library circulation is up, program attendance is up, program sessions are up, and the average number of hours that people spend in libraries is up too. But New York City doesn't have an exceptionally busy library culture, nor is it a national leader. The distinctions belong to other places: Seattle leads the nation in annual circulation per capita, followed by Columbus, Indianapolis, San Jose, San Francisco, Jacksonville, and Phoenix. Columbus has the highest level of program attendance: five of every 10,000 residents participate in library activities there each year. San Francisco and Philadelphia are close behind, as are Boston, Detroit, and Charlotte. New York City trails them all.

New York City also ranks low in per capita government spending for the system. The New York Public Library receives \$32 for every resident, on par with Austin and Chicago but less than one-third of the San Francisco Public Library, which gets \$101 per resident.

When hard times come, libraries' budgets get trimmed first.

Urban library systems in the United States have long been public-private partnerships, and city governments have long relied on philanthropists to fund much of the library's work. Still, it's hard to understand why most cities give so little public support to their libraries. According to recent reports from the Pew Research Center, more than 90 percent of Americans see their library as "very" or "somewhat" important to their community, and in the past decade "every other major institution (government, churches, banks, corporations) has fallen in public esteem except libraries, the military, and first responders." Despite this support, in recent years cities and suburbs across the

United States have cut funding for libraries, and in some cases closed them altogether, because political officials often view them as luxuries, not necessities. When hard times come, their budgets get trimmed first.

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Doing research in New York City, I learned that libraries and the social infrastructure are essential not only for a neighborhood's vitality but also for buffering all variety of personal problems—including isolation and loneliness. And while these problems may be particularly acute in struggling neighborhoods like East New York, they're hardly confined to them. Consider Denise, a fashion photographer in her late 30s whom I met in the Seward Park Library children's floor on a chilly April morning. She's wearing jeans, a long black coat, and large tortoiseshell glasses. As she sits, she scans the room and quickly decompresses. The children's floor might not be a second home anymore, not since her daughter started preschool, but during her first few years of being a mother Denise was here almost every day.

Why have so many public officials and civic leaders failed to recognize the value of libraries and their role in our social infrastructure?

"I live close," she tells me. "We moved here six years ago. I didn't think about what it would mean to live by a library, not at all. But this place has become very dear to me. So many good things have happened because we come here." Denise stopped working when her daughter was born, but her husband, an attorney, didn't. On the contrary, the demands on his time increased, and he worked well into the evening, leaving her in a small Manhattan apartment with a baby she loved intensely but also with a feeling of loneliness beyond anything she'd experienced before. "I had a pretty bad case of

postpartum depression,” she tells me. “There were days when getting out of the apartment was just a huge struggle. I suddenly went from working in this job I loved to spending all my time at home trying to take care of things that really matter but that I didn’t know how to do. I felt like I was in the trenches, you know? You can go crazy like that. I had to get out, but it was hard. And I didn’t know where to go.”

At first Denise tried taking the baby to coffee shops, hoping she’d nap or rest quietly while she went online or read. That didn’t happen. “I’d go to Starbucks and there would be all these people there working or having meetings. It’s a place for grown-ups, right? When the baby starts crying everyone turns around and stares at you. It’s like: ‘What are you doing here? Can’t you take her away?’ It’s definitely not kid-friendly.”

Denise had spent time in libraries as a child in California but hadn’t used the system much since moving to Manhattan. On one especially stressful day, though, she put her daughter in the stroller and brought her into the Seward Park Library, just to see what was there. “An entire world opened up that day,” she remembers. “There were the books, of course. You can’t have a lot of them when you live in a small apartment, but here there are more than we could ever read. And then I discovered that there’s a whole social scene going on between everyone who comes here. The parents, the nannies, the children, people in the neighborhood. The librarians! They are so kind here.”

Immediately, Denise found herself surrounded by other first-time mothers who shared her struggles but could enjoy the fun parts of parenting too. She saw that her baby wasn’t the only one crying when everything seemed fine, refusing to eat or nap. She realized that she wasn’t alone. Denise also found more experienced mothers and babysitters who could answer most of her questions. “You just kind of start chatting,” she explains, “and it’s amazing but you wind up having these really personal, really intense conversations.” I ask if something similar happens in parks and playgrounds, and Denise says that it does, to some extent, but that it’s easier here in the library, especially on the children’s floor. The room is warm and open, the children are protected, and there’s an ethos that makes it easy for parents to connect with one another. “It’s like you become part of the mommy tribe here,” Denise explains, “and

that makes parenting a lot less lonely.” The tribe endures, even when the kids go to school and mothers spend less time in the local branch. Some of the people Denise and her daughter met during those early years in the library remain close friends.

The accessible physical space of the library is not the only factor that makes it work well as social infrastructure. The institution’s extensive programming, organized by a professional staff that upholds a principled commitment to openness and inclusivity, fosters social cohesion among clients who might otherwise keep to themselves.

Friendships develop quickly in the library in part because the place sponsors so many shared activities for children and, by extension, for caretakers too. Denise and her daughter did lap-sit classes for early literacy, bilingual song and story hours, magic shows, and classes for music and art. “In those first years there’s a lot of unstructured time that you’re just looking to fill,” Denise tells me. “You can pay to take classes in some places, but it’s expensive, and sometimes you just can’t get there, the schedule that day doesn’t work out. The library is great because you can pop over and there’s always something happening. You just check out the calendar and make it part of your week, or just show up and jump in.”

The core mission of libraries is to help people
elevate themselves and improve their situation.

Librarians, Denise discovered, play an important role helping parents and children feel comfortable in the library. Sometimes, she says, they provide even greater service. “At one point, you know, our cat was not doing very well. I was thinking, ‘Oh my God, my daughter is so attached to this cat. What happens if it dies?’ Our librarian had recommended a lot of children’s books to me, so I asked her for a book that would help my kid understand death. And you know what? She actually had a few books about

pets who die. She knew what I needed! She knew!” In the end Denise’s cat recovered. “She really does have nine lives,” she says, laughing. “But I learned about the kind of resource I have in the library. And I felt lucky to have that help.”

The help at the library made a difference in the way Denise felt about herself as a mother, and eventually she gained enough confidence to return to work. That meant hiring a nanny, and entrusting her daughter to a stranger wasn’t easy. “That’s such a big emotional hurdle,” she says, “but there was this one nanny I saw at the library a lot, and I loved the way she was caring for this little girl. She was really involved and really sweet and really loving. I knew that’s what I needed for my daughter too. I told the nanny I was going back to work and she referred me to the woman who became, like, not only my nanny, but my favorite person in the world.” Denise now calls the library “a lifesaver,” and though that may be an exaggeration, there’s no question that the institution proved valuable in ways she’d never imagined.

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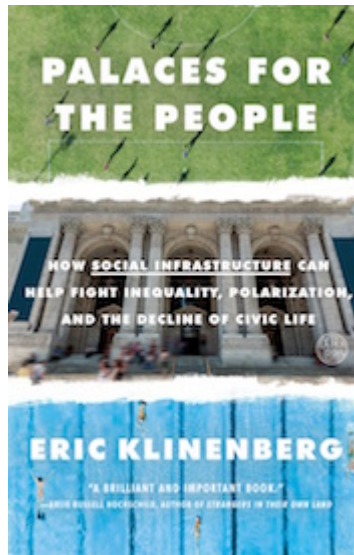
Why have so many public officials and civic leaders failed to recognize the value of libraries and their role in our social infrastructure? Perhaps it’s because the founding principle behind the library—that all people deserve free, open access to our shared culture and heritage, which they can use to any end they see fit—is out of sync with the market logic that dominates our time. (If, today, the library didn’t already exist, it’s hard to imagine our society’s leaders inventing it.) But perhaps it’s because so few influential people understand the role that libraries already play in modern communities, or the many roles they could play if they had more support. In New York, as in cities across the United States and around the world, neighborhood libraries and librarians do all kinds of unexpected things for surprisingly large numbers of people. Their core mission is to help people elevate themselves and improve their situation. Libraries do this, principally, by providing free access to the widest possible variety of cultural materials to people of all ages, from all ethnicities and groups.

For older people, especially widows, widowers, and those who live alone, libraries are places for culture and companionship, through book clubs, movie nights, sewing circles, and classes in art, music, current events, and computing. When Library Lanes scales up to the city level, no old person in the five boroughs need bowl alone again. The elderly can also participate in some of these activities in senior centers, but there they can only do them with other old people, and often that makes them feel stigmatized, as if old is all they are. For many seniors, the library is the main place they interact with people from other generations. It's a place where they can volunteer and feel useful. It's where they can be part of a diverse and robust community, not a homogeneous one where everyone fears decline.

Libraries provide different benefits to young people. They expose infants and toddlers to books and stories that would otherwise be inaccessible. They help youths inch toward independence, giving them library cards and letting them choose how to use them. Libraries offer refuge and safe space to teenagers who'd rather study or socialize than hang out in the streets. Librarians help students with homework and offer after-school programs in art, science, music, language, and math. They recommend books, authors, even entire genres to young people who are searching for something different but can't yet name it. Libraries help children and teenagers feel responsible, to themselves and to their neighbors, by teaching them what it means to borrow and take care of something public, and to return it so others can have it too.

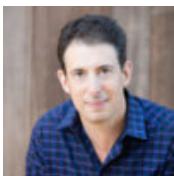
By doing all this, libraries also help families and caretakers.

They provide a social space and shared activities for new parents, grandparents, and nannies who feel lonely, disconnected, or overwhelmed when watching an infant or a toddler by themselves. They help build friendships and support networks among neighbors who'd never met before taking a library class. They teach parenting skills to people who want or need them. They watch children, sometimes very young ones, whose parents work late or on weekends and who can't afford childcare. They give families confidence that their kids are in good hands.



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