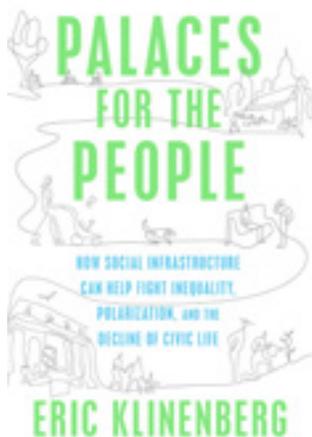


## AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIC KLINENBERG ON HIS NEW BOOK: *PALACES FOR THE PEOPLE*

As Research Director of the Rebuild by Design Competition, Eric Klinenberg was, and still is, integral to the innovative research process and community-centered approach of Rebuild by Design. His newly published book, *Palaces for the People*, makes an impassioned argument for the value of our shared spaces—libraries, childcare centers, bookstores, churches, synagogues, and parks—and shows how this ‘social infrastructure’ is helping to solve some of our most pressing challenges.



*Eric Klinenberg is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University, where Rebuild by Design is based. In this role, Klinenberg regularly collaborates with Rebuild on research and programming.*



**Q:** What was the inspiration behind creating this book?

**A:** I've been thinking about social infrastructure since writing about the 1995 heat wave in Chicago that killed more than 700 people. The discovery was that vulnerable neighborhoods were not just those that were poor, segregated, or violent, but those which had degraded social infrastructure. In comparison, some neighborhoods with similar socioeconomic conditions were incredibly resilient, and what made them so was the dense and vibrant public and commercial life, with walkable sidewalks, active libraries, and more. Since then, I've been interested in how the built environment and public institutions can create more robust social infrastructure.

**Q:** How did you choose the title *Palaces for the People*?

**A:** “Palaces for the People” is a phrase from Andrew Carnegie, who by no means was a saint or a hero. But he was a great philanthropist who believed deeply in libraries, calling them “palaces for the people.” He funded many around the country, including dozens in New York City. Places like libraries have become vital parts of social infrastructure and can give people the resources and dignity we all need as human beings. It's unfortunately quite the radical idea these days that the public sector would give free things with great value to support people. That's an old idea in American culture.

**Q:** How, if at all, did your experience with Rebuild by Design impact your approach to this research?

**A:** When I became the Research Director for the Rebuild by Design competition, I advised the teams to think about the specific ways that their climate security projects could double as social infrastructure. Working closely with these incredible architects, landscape architects, engineers, and planners taught me so much about the potential to create and enhance social infrastructure through design and the built environment. In fact, my experience during the competition was a big inspiration behind this book. It forced me to work and think from an entirely different perspective.

**Q:** In your book, you demonstrate that built infrastructure and planning can enhance and expand social infrastructure in a given community/city. Can you give us some examples?

**A:** Social infrastructure is just as real as the infrastructure for water or power or transit. When it is robust it can have multiple benefits, strengthen, and protect a community. For example, the Rebuild by Design Living Breakwaters project reduces wave energy to make storms less destructive, but also has an ambitious program for developing the coast into vital social infrastructure, places where people can interact and build their connection to the ecosystem in a more meaningful way. This hard infrastructure project also has cultural and educational components.

**Q:** How have your ideas on social infrastructure changed in the 16+ years since publishing *Heat Wave*?

**A:** I started my work as a sociologist as more of a Jane Jacobs enthusiast. I believed that most of the time, planners, regulators, and state bureaucrats would impose top down solutions to communities in a destructive manner, and I was generally skeptical about government intervention in the urban form. But I now firmly believe that we're not going to get the social infrastructure we need without smart urban planning and policy making. We have an urgent need for government at all levels to make sure we build appropriate social infrastructure and understand the great risk that well intentioned policies may have on lessening a given community's social connections. For example, we all care about resilience and protecting communities, but if we enhance the built environment in a community and don't devise solutions to deal with rampant gentrification, we may actually reduce social infrastructure, and that would be a terrible irony.

**“Social infrastructure in a disaster can make the difference of life and death”**

**Q:** What role can social infrastructure play in addressing the impacts of climate change?

**A:** What happens in extreme weather events like Florence or Maria, Harvey or Sandy, is that the hard infrastructure breaks down. Power goes out, transit breaks down, water may not run. Social infrastructure in a disaster can make the difference of life and death. To add to that, social infrastructure can also play a major role in mitigation. When we build good social infrastructure for biking and walking for example, we can bring down carbon footprint and lessen the need for cars. Social infrastructure is essential as we start investing in flood protection and keeping cities cool.

**Q:** What lessons would you like Rebuild's design community to walk away with?

**A:** The design community is a core community for me. I feel honored to have participated so much in it over the last few years. Social infrastructure is still a somewhat new concept and it is still not in many designers' vocabulary. I would challenge designers to always consider how they can advance social resilience through the built environment. Every infrastructure or public space presents an opportunity to connect people and strengthen communities. This perspective will allow us to design cities that deal with 21st century challenges - and there will be a lot of them!

**Q:** As director of the Institute for Public Knowledge at NYU, what role do you think the academic community plays in addressing the challenges you highlight in this book?

**A:** Universities can play a central role in helping different communities process new ideas and recent events. For instance, at NYU we launched the Superstorm Sandy Lab after Hurricane Sandy, where we organized a series of panels to bring a diverse group of people with a wide variety of expertise. In most cities, I don't think there are institutions other than universities that do this on a regular basis. We've also had a wide range of scholars that have worked hand in hand with local communities to better understand the complexities of rebuilding from disaster- from 'managed retreat' to environmental inequity. I'd like to see academics take our civic responsibility seriously. We need to look for ways to collaborate, learn from, and teach professionals in a variety of fields, from designers to policy makers. Of course, we need to learn from local residents too. That means becoming better listeners. I can't think of a more important challenge.