Palaces for the People
Review By Lucia Shuff-Heck

Often when we think of infrastructure, our minds jump to transit, roads, bridges, and the other hard infrastructural elements that make up our cities. These systems are necessary components of a network that keeps our daily lives running smoothly. Equally important, however, is a slightly more abstract concept: that of social infrastructure. Palaces for the People, by Eric Klinenberg, explores this concept, through its history, and its effect on schools, neighborhoods, libraries, and other elements of public life.

Klinenberg argues that we have neglected social infrastructure to the detriment of our communities. The idea of the “third place,” or space to gather outside home or work, has persisted as a requirement for a vital and thriving public. Unfortunately, despite numerous benefits, the amount of free and accessible public space has been in decline. Many of the public spaces in cities are privately owned businesses, such as coffee shops and restaurants, and thus are not ideal gathering spaces, as they require payment for access. Meanwhile, publicly funded institutions, such as libraries, are the first to be subject to cuts in the city budget.

Biophilia also factors into Klinenberg's vision for creating more equitable, healthy spaces. Klinenberg highlights the Philadelphia initiative to remediate vacant lots in lower-income pockets in the city, an effort which has noticeably reduced crime and created healthy, maintained green spaces for communities that have traditionally been marginalized in the exploration of greening initiatives.

Attention to social infrastructure can also be incorporated into the more material projects that are desperately needed to address the growing threat of damage from climate change. This includes plans such as Kate Orff's Living Breakwaters project, as well as Singapore's attention to public spaces designed to respond to water inundation.

Palaces for the People is a comprehensive, in-depth look at how communities benefit from shared space, and even how it can increase resilience in the wake of disaster. Through the lens of interconnection, Klinenberg explores how prioritizing social infrastructure can benefit our cities, communities, and enrich our individual lives.


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Weathering the Decades with Wisdom
Review By Jamie Trost

Three and a half decades on Sprin's work remains instructive and relevant

Thirty-five years after its initial release, Anne Whiston Spirn's The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design reads with a wisdom that seems as timeless as the elements of air, earth, and water the book is framed around. A series of contemporary case studies lends the book squarely in the early 1980s, but the underlying reasoning for much of Sprin's nature-based urban design has roots in sources as ancient as the Bible, Hippocrates, and the Code of Hammurabi. The infusion of modern science and age-old custom gives The Granite Garden the holistic, tactical feel of the Art of War. As Sun Tzu says of battle, Spirn echoes in city planning—"Know the ground, know the weather; your victory will then be total.”

Chillingly, many urban and environmental strategies advocated in The Granite Garden seem to have gone largely unheeded in the ensuing decades. This seeming neglect of good advice, combined with the divergent, science fiction-esque visions of the "Infernal" and "Celestial" Cities of the future Sprin closes the book with, give the book the ominous feel of a dark prophecy. But hope is inspired by the fact that, however late, many of the natural design elements Sprin suggests are appearing in cityscapes. Perhaps the more recent research on the psychological effects of nature on humans has compelled a re-visitation of the more environmental and physiological focused planning The Granite Garden proposed. In any case, there's still much to be done, as Sprin herself lamented during a 2015 interview in The Dirt, “We need to truly reimagine the way we design cities.”

Resources:


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