

# Why the Office Needs Social Infrastructure with Eric Klinenberg (S5:E8)(Transcript)

**Chris Congdon:** Have you ever lingered a little too long after a meeting and thought “I have to quit wasting time”? Well my guest today says that’s actually a good thing

Welcome to Work Better a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I’m host Chris Congdon and I’m here with producer Katie Pace.

**Katie Pace:** Hi Chris. I am the queen of lingering. I love a good social catch-up after the meeting!

**CC:** I think we both have been caught lingering! Today’s conversation is a replay from our very first season with author and professor Eric Klinenberg and it’s one of my all-time favorite episodes.

**KP:** Me too.

**CC:** Eric’s work has been foundational to how we approach workplace design at Steelcase to be more like some of the best neighborhoods and communities where we live.

**KP:** Eric is a professor of social science and director of the institute for public knowledge at NYU. He’s the author of many books, including *Palace’s for the People*, a fantastic book that argues the places where people gather and linger strengthen personal ties and interactions across groups.

**CC:** Eric joined us from his car – don’t worry – he pulled over first. And he talked to us about loneliness, libraries and lingering.

**KP:** If you’re as inspired by this conversation as we were, I remember to like it and share it with a friend or colleague. Here’s the conversation.

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**CC:** Thanks for joining us Eric.

**Eric Klinenberg:** It’s good to be here. Or wherever here is? I don’t even know where here is anymore.

**CC:** Well, let’s talk about that a little bit more. Your work has really been a strong influence on our thinking about the future of the workplace. Particularly, your work around social infrastructure. I’ve talked to a lot of people about your ideas and I’ve shared a lot of stories. One of the stories I share is the two neighborhoods you studied in Chicago that went through a catastrophic weather event. And, I was wondering if you could share that story in your own words.

**EK:** Thanks for asking that question. The first book I wrote was a book about a heat wave in Chicago that happened in 1995 and killed more than 700 people and when I started work on that project I drew a map of who died and where they lived which neighborhoods were most affected. And I noticed something popped up right away that no one had really seen before and that is that the map looked more or less like what you would expect it to look like in terms of which neighborhoods were most affected. It wasn't super interesting even though it was politically important to say that the neighborhoods that were most affected were poor and segregated and suffered from a lot of problems. But what I saw that people hadn't seen is that there were a set of neighborhoods that were paired like these matching pairs where you had 2 neighborhoods next to each other with the same demographics. You know, same age structure, same level of poverty, same identity for the most part and yet despite all their similarities, they had dramatically different death rates. I called attention to a couple pairs of neighborhoods. 1 is a neighborhood called Englewood on the south side and the neighborhood next to it called Auburn Gresham that's right next door and again if you looked at them on paper, you would think that they were identical kinds of places that they had very similar experiences but in reality what happened is that Englewood wound up with a death rate that was 10 times higher than Auburn Gresham and I wanted to understand why.

**CC:** Wow.

**EK:** Wow is exactly the right answer. It didn't seem to make a lot of sense. I started spending time in the neighborhoods. I noticed that despite the similar numbers. The neighborhoods were different and in some really important ways. Englewood as a neighborhood felt really bombed out. It had a lot of abandoned homes. It had a lot of empty lots. It had very little street life and few parks and playgrounds. Few neighborhood libraries and community institutions in the 1990s, it was a really depleted place and Auburn Gresham even though it was right across the street didn't have those abandoned properties. It didn't have empty lots. It had a whole set of small commercial outlets, little parks and a big church that provided a lot of services and I came to think of the difference between those 2 neighborhoods as differences in the social infrastructure.

Englewood had a depleted social infrastructure. Auburn Gresham had a really robust dynamic one and when I say social infrastructure. What I'm referring to specifically is the set of physical places that shape our interactions: physical gathering places like a good sidewalk or a neighborhood library or a playground. The neighborhoods in Chicago that were very poor and very vulnerable but also had strong social infrastructure did much better than the neighborhoods in Chicago that were poor but didn't have social infrastructure and I came to realize that this thing - social infrastructure. It's not a luxury good. It's essential for a good city. A good neighborhood. In a crisis, it's the thing that makes the difference between life and death.

**CC:** Most of us think about infrastructure you know in a traditional sense. We think about transportation systems and bridges and roads and those kinds of things. But I'd love you to talk a little bit more about social infrastructure like what was it that defined those kinds of places. What did they do that's very different than when we think about traditional infrastructure?

**EK:** Well, you know social infrastructure is not a metaphor. It's just as real as the infrastructure for water or for power or for communications. The idea which I write about in this book *Palaces for the People* is that if you invest in social infrastructure, if you design it, if you build it. Well if you maintain it, if you program it, you create an environment, a physical environment that encourages social life in a neighborhood like Englewood or Auburn Gresham Chicago good social infrastructure will draw people out of their homes and into gathering places where they will encounter one another and potentially learn about each other and learn to provide each other with support, know who's who's going to be in trouble when there's a heat wave and who they don't have to worry about. If you don't have good social infrastructure, it makes you much more likely to kind of hunker down at home, you spend time in front of your screen because why would you go out into a public realm that doesn't encourage other people to be there and so, social infrastructure refers to this set of physical places that truly determines the quality of our public realm.

**CC:** So why do I need a physical structure to do that given all the technology that I have available to me? You mentioned that if I don't have social infrastructure I might be inclined to hunker down on my screen, so why do I need the physical places like why do I need my neighborhood street life?

**EK:** I'm betting that everybody who's listening to this could answer that question by referring back to their own experience in the pandemic these last couple of years. I mean thank goodness we had facetime and Zoom and Skype and all these amazing technologies that allowed us to connect with each other when we were quarantined at home and locked down and gathering physically wasn't safe or possible for so many people. But if I told you right now that I just found out while we're on this podcast that we found a new variant of the coronavirus and this one is going to be significantly more lethal than the ones before and also more transmissible and the only way for us to deal with it would be... Well, it answers your question right?

**CC:** Oh don't even say that.

**EK:** If I said, now we're really going to have to go lock down at home again and we're going to do it for a year this time and we're not going to be able to gather together. We're not going to be able to do it indoors and we're not even going to be able to do it much outdoors but don't worry because you're going to have your technology, you're gonna have your screen. You know you can connect with each other as much as you want on your screen. I think you'd want to tear your hair out, probably worse. And the reason is because you know from your experience in the early part of the pandemic just how insufficient that way of living is.

And you know from having lived through the pandemic in the hardest stages how much we need to be together and how much more satisfying it is to be with other people. Physically how much easier it is to build a relationship, to provide support, to feel some sense of joy in our companionship with one another and I think we all are aware at this point if we weren't before that, yes, it's nice to have technology and screens as a supplement to our face-to-face interactions but it certainly is not a substitute.

**CC:** Yeah, you know there's a great debate, of course, that's been going on throughout the pandemic and you know we're so we're still trying to figure it out I think in terms of work and in terms of working in an office. Because there's a lot of people who would say, now do I really need to physically be with my colleagues, I'm doing just fine? My productivity is fine. But when we started having this conversation, I thought a lot about your work and thinking about social infrastructure and what that might do for us in terms of having people feel like this is a place where I want to come and I want to be with my colleagues and I'm just curious what do you think about the idea of social infrastructure in the workplace or in an office? Like what would that be?

**EK:** I think it's essential and I think some offices have it and some offices don't have it. You know for instance I run an institute at New York University where I teach. It's called the institute for public knowledge and when it's going well it works as a kind of oasis for people on campus. You know for faculty and for students, for people in the community who want to come and engage ideas when we are full and active and busy. We have a blend of gathering places where people can socialize with each other. You know the kind of water cooler writ at large. Those are small seminar rooms and meeting rooms. Those are some open spaces with big tables where people can sit and have meals together or just catch up on things. We have small working tables. We have private offices where people can go and write and not have to be with other people because you don't necessarily want to work in an open space all the time. We have a very open door policy where the institute is accessible to all kinds of people in the University and outside the University, professors as well as students and we encourage people to come and spend time there. And when it's working, it makes the workday more interesting. It means people can engage each other. They can have spontaneous conversations about things that they're interested in. They can follow up on the idea of something presented in a seminar.

Sometimes we'll have events and then we have time afterwards where people can have a drink or eat. Food and drink is a nice way to convene people together. But if you have to eat it by yourself in a single cell, it's very different than if you're eating it or drinking it with other people in a shared place and so you know offices around the world... were getting adapted before the pandemic hit to work better as social spaces. Why? Because some people believe that collaboration works better when people can be together formally and informally. Some people believe that people enjoy work more and are happier at work and do better work when they can be around other people whose company they like. Some people believe that it's only when you have a shared environment and people can be together that you can develop something like a workplace culture. That helps people learn about the organization that they're in, learn the values of the organization, the practices of the organization and the principles of the organization and often it makes your job more exciting and compelling.

So I think one of the really interesting things that happened in the pandemic is we learned that in the United States especially people were spending way too much time in the office and were feeling like office culture wasn't flexible and open enough and there are ways we can be productive when we're at home or working remotely sometimes. But if you push that too far then you can't have a shared office culture. You can't have a shared work life. You don't make the connections to have good collaboration or creativity that you have when you have a healthy office environment built around good social infrastructure and so it's completely relevant for the office.

**CC:** I love this because we've been talking a lot about this idea about if the workplace drew inspiration from the neighborhood story that you told and about thriving neighborhoods that have that great vibe and the great street life and the energy. And how that would translate to work and 1 of the things that you've talked about a lot is the role of different public places like the library in particular and I just wonder like what, what is it that a library does that you could say if you were going to have the version of a public library at work what would that experience be like?

**EK:** Well you know one of the things about the library that's so special about the public library is that it's built to be open and accessible and welcoming to a wide range of people and 1 of the nice things about the library is that you encounter people who are not exactly like you. And of course offices work according to different principles, now there is some really good research showing that in some and even many, but not all industries, the workplace is significantly more diverse than the neighborhood where people live and people do have a chance in certain office cultures to interact with and befriend, and collaborate with people who have different ethnic, cultural, religious, racial backgrounds and often they have interactions with people who have different political ideologies and so there is a way in which you know the the office can be a meeting ground for people who might not otherwise interact. I don't know if everybody shares this view but it feels to me like we are living in a time of unsustainable polarization and divisiveness and we need to find some way of relearning how to be together without killing each other.

So you can create an office environment that has some of the inclusivity of the library. You can create places where people can explore. You have to build a corporate culture that allows people that time for exploration and has creativity. And some offices do that. Others don't. And libraries are interesting in that they're different kinds of spaces that are programmed differently. The rooms encourage people to do certain kinds of activities whether it's reading a newspaper or periodical or looking for a book or watching a video or using a maker space or you know sitting and having coffee. In offices, similarly, you can have rooms that are programmed to encourage different kinds of activities. So I think an office can't replicate the most beautiful thing about a public library but it can definitely borrow some of the better ideas.

**CC:** Yeah, I love our local library because I feel like it draws in this really diverse group of people. I feel like it's this magnet that pulls all kinds of people together and having that experience at work is really something that I think a lot of people have been missing, that kind of connection with other people.

**CC:** So, Eric I want to go back before you wrote Palaces for the People because you also wrote a book about Going Solo. The title that I think you had started out with was something like Alone in America. But the idea of going solo, I thought was really interesting because you were looking at this major social trend of people choosing to live alone. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that because I want to connect that to this conversation that we've just been having about social infrastructure. Can you tell people a little bit about your research there?

**EK:** That book actually was born from my book about the heatwave which was a story about people being very isolated, hundreds of people dying alone at home. Kind of a sad and tragic story that reflected something about the isolation of our time. I started doing work on a book that I had tentatively titled as you said, Alone in America because I thought it was going to be about the rising isolation of Americans and what I learned when I started doing research on this is that it's definitely true that Americans were becoming much more likely to live alone. More people living alone in the United States than ever before in our history or people living alone around the world than ever before. But the surprise from the research I did, which involved hundreds of interviews and analysis of a lot of survey data about our social lives, is that on average people who live alone are actually quite socially active and in fact, surprisingly people who live alone in the United States are more likely to spend time with friends and neighbors than people who are married. They're they're more likely to volunteer in civic organizations. They're more likely to go to restaurants and clubs and bars and music venues and the gym. So living alone is not the same as being socially isolated. And in fact, one of the things I discovered at the end of this project is that it's really our interdependence that makes our independence possible. It's what has made living alone more viable, in addition to the fact that women gain tremendous power to control their own lives, and really changed the story about how people live but so too did the rise of a public realm where people were able to live by themselves but be very social with others.

**CC:** And you had said something that struck me as quite interesting: people who live alone particularly in urban areas tend to treat this city like their living room. If I've got that straight.

**EK:** Yeah I mean the apartment is you know for a lot of people who live alone who are socially active. The apartment is kind of like a launching pad and the urban neighborhood is like a living room. You get a place of your own not because you want to spend all of your time sitting home alone but because you want to be close to things that are important to you right? And so the neighborhood matters and the people around you matter and the amenities matter and in fact, you know what? What I saw in the real estate market when I was working on this book is a lot of real estate developers that were building new developments in central urban areas were trying to go after this market of young professionals specifically by building projects that had slightly smaller domestic private space but much more generous shared amenities like coffee bars and computer rooms and exercise areas and film screening areas and all these things that we may be associated with a college campus. But it turns out people like that kind of social programming and want it even as they get older. And my grandmother, who was living in an assisted facility at the time I wrote the book, and she was in her 90s... The assisted living facility was set up so that she could also have all of these social interactions in shared spaces. And the units were a little smaller than they might be in other places but the point of being there was to have companionship.

**CC:** Right? And it and all of this is an example of social infrastructure right?

**EK:** Very much. It's about building a way of living. You know, building places that encourage lingering, gathering. You know I wrote in *Palaces for the People* that we like efficiency in all kinds of ways in American life. But when it comes to social life, efficiency is really our enemy. Now when you build systems that just allow people to move through them without friction right? Just getting your thing done and moving on to the next place so you can get home faster. I mean I want that when I'm driving somewhere or when I'm on public transit. I don't want to sit and you know linger on the subway but for more social occasions. The lingering really is important and too much efficiency can be a bad thing.

**CC:** Yeah, I love the idea of thinking about places where we linger and where we want to linger.

**EK:** As an aside, I was gonna say, Think about people you know who take a trip to Europe or to Latin America or Asia. They come back and say. Oh. It's so amazing. You know there's this whole street life and you sit in a cafe and you sit outside for hours and people just they hang out in the square like there's not really the sense that you have to buy your big mac and get out in 30 minutes. There's no "no loitering" signs. The whole point of going to a bar or restaurant in Italy is to loiter. You want to sit around because that encourages a kind of sociability that has value and and it's not something I think that we have supported enough in American culture and not something that we value as much as we should because it really affects our quality of life.

**CC:** Well, you know I might get in trouble with a number of business leaders if I start encouraging loitering at work but on the other hand I I have found that it is profoundly productive in a way that maybe people don't think about productivity - but it's profoundly productive when you do have those moments of serendipitous interaction where you get a chance to actually talk to somebody that you might not schedule a meeting with or they might not be in your regular network. But people that you see and end up talking to over a coffee so you do end up lingering a little bit in some of those kinds of places and having conversations that you might not have otherwise had.

**EK:** In *Palaces for the People*, I write about being a soccer dad and spending my weekends hour after hour after hour on these fields full of people who I would never otherwise encounter in my life and sometimes I want to get on my phone and talk to the people who are in my family or my close friendship group I don't get to see enough but inevitably I wind up engaging all kinds of people who I would never speak to in a different universe. We're there because we love our children. We like this game and we're on a field where we're going to be hanging out for many hours watching a game and we strike up relationships and we do it more when we go for lunch after the match or when we take a trip somewhere for the weekend and I think there's a reason why so many Americans who go to residential colleges build these relationships there that last a long time and have trouble building those relationships when they get into later stages in their lives because they have more unstructured time and because they have a set of gathering places where they can spend that social unstructured time engaging other people and having surprising things happen. It's hard to do that when your whole life is scheduled and organized and everything is efficient and a routine.

**CC:** I think the half hour of video meeting is really taking its toll on a lot of people. Before I let you go today Eric, and this has been a great conversation, I'm so grateful for you taking the time, do you have any last parting thoughts if you're talking to a bunch of people who are thinking about work or thinking about the workplace in the office? Any last thing you want to say to any of us?

**EK:** I just think, ideally the office is a compelling and exciting place where we can go not just to get work done but also to generate new ideas and to recharge and build relationships. And when you work in a good office, you feel all those things and you enjoy going there and when you don't work in a good office, you'd much rather be at home on your own private screen. So especially now when the option of working remotely has emerged and has become a demand for many people at least some of the time, I think it's important for every organization to think about how to make the place work. How do you draw people into the workspace? How do you recruit people who aren't already there? Making it feel like a compelling job. How do you keep people who are in a job growing and developing feeling good about what they're doing and how do you make sure the work is as good as it possibly can be and not just the reflection of what's in 1 individual's solitary mind and the answer to all those questions is — you have to build an office environment that's welcoming and open and accessible and that makes people feel turned on and engaged. It's striking to me that some organizations really get that and do it and we've all seen the images of the big tech company office complexes in Silicon Valley where there's soccer fields and swimming pools and massage rooms and cafeterias with free food and snack bars and all these wonderful things. Unfortunately not for every employee just for the higher level people. That's a podcast for another day. And we've also seen the kind of old fashioned offices that are just rows of people working in solitary cubes and I don't think you can really have a good office today without thinking about social infrastructure. If you do not, you're missing an opportunity to make the experience of working there much better for everyone.

**CC:** I would just like to say to our listeners that I think Eric's work on social infrastructure has given us so much to think about. First of all, if you haven't seen your neighbors or haven't gone to your local library, I would make sure to get out there and make some of those connections. If you haven't gone into the office in a while or you haven't even thought about the office as a source of social infrastructure or social connections, I think Eric has given us a lot to think about about how we can use place to help people not only feel those connections but to feel part of a community at work. So thank you so much for spending some time with us today Eric. It really has been a pleasure to talk with you.

**EK:** For me as well. Thank you and I'm expecting to get some really nice Steelcase bookshelves very soon. It's gonna show up in the mail. I just wanted to show up, what is that giant bookshelf doing honey? I didn't order that.

CC: (laughs)

**EK:** You don't know about my podcast life.

**CC:** We can figure something out there Eric (laughs). So, okay, thank you so much for taking the time and I promise to stop bugging you now.

**EK:** Okay, talk to you soon.



**CHRIS:** Thanks for being us here – can you believe this is the end of our 5th season?

**KATIE:** No way! We covered so much this season. If you missed any of our episodes, go back and listen, they stand the test of time. We talked about creating physiological safety at work, teaching AI-ready students, how we can increase our attention spans at work, why having a beautiful workplace matters, how we can build more brain capital, why AI isn't so scary, and Gallup helped us understand how to navigate all the change we're facing these days.

**CHRIS:** That was a lot – and it was all so helpful.

**KATIE:** If you enjoyed this conversation would you subscribe or share it with a friend? You can also visit us at [steelcase.com/research](https://steelcase.com/research) to sign up for weekly updates on research, insights or design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

**CHRIS:** Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.