

CHAPTER ONE

A Place to Gather



It's a balmy Thursday morning in the New Lots neighborhood of East New York, Brooklyn, 70 degrees and sunny on the last day of March. The sidewalks have awakened. Small groups of middle-aged men banter outside bodegas and on stoops of the small, semi-detached brick houses that are common in the area. Mothers and grandmothers push strollers and watch over preschool children who hop and skip and revel in the unseasonable warmth. It seems early for recess, but the schoolyards are buzzing. Traffic is light on the narrow residential streets, but occasionally someone honks, a motorcycle engine fires, a truck roars past.

Street life in East New York is busy, but not always congenial. The district is one of the poorest in New York City, with about half

holding photographs and short biographies of Nobel Prize winners; tall wooden bookshelves with new releases, and encyclopedias; an information desk with flyers promoting library events for toddlers, young readers, teens, parents, English-language students, and older patrons. One librarian asks if I need anything. Another stacks books.

I ask to see the second floor, and Edwin, a sweet and soft-spoken information supervisor, takes me upstairs. Here there are three separate universes. A designated children's space, which is worn but, Edwin says, about to get renovated; a set of tables for English-language courses, which are always oversubscribed; and, in the back, a classroom that serves as the library's Learning Center, a place where anyone over age seventeen who's reading below GED level can get special instruction, individually and in groups.

Everyone is welcome at the library, regardless of whether they're a citizen, a permanent resident, or even a convicted felon. And all of it, Edwin reminds me, is free.

I tell Edwin that I'm here for the event in the basement community room, and it turns out he's heading there too. We walk downstairs together and he points out the building's deterioration. The shelves, ceilings, stairwells, and wall panels are wearing out. Wires are exposed. There are rusted toilets and sinks in the bathroom. The doors don't close properly. In the community room there's an aging, cream-colored linoleum floor, glaring fluorescent lights, wood paneling, and a small stage strewn with plastic stacking chairs. I think about the burial ground that was here and I realize we can't be far from the bones.

The community room serves many purposes: theater, classroom, art studio, civic hall. But this morning two staff members, Terry and Christine, will transform it into something unusual: a virtual bowling alley. They've arrived early to set up a flat screen television, link an Xbox to the Internet, clear out a play space, and assemble two rows of portable chairs. It's opening day of the Library Lanes Bowling League, a new program that encourages

the residents living below the poverty line. It's also one of the most segregated. Nearly 95 percent of residents are black or Latino, and only 1 percent are white. Social scientists sometimes call East New York socially isolated, because its peripheral location and limited public transit options restrict access to opportunities in other parts of the city, while people who don't live there have little reason to visit and strong incentives to stay away.

The area is among the most violent neighborhoods in New York City, with especially high levels of homicide, felony assault, and sexual assault. Conditions like these are bad for everyone, but research shows that they're particularly treacherous for older, sick, and frail people, who are prone to hunkering down in their apartments and growing dangerously isolated when they live in inhospitable physical environments. That's not only what I observed in the Chicago heat wave; it's what social scientists who conduct large-scale studies of isolation have found as well.

Living in a place like East New York requires developing coping strategies, and for many residents, the more vulnerable older and younger ones in particular, the key is to find safe havens. As on every other Thursday morning this spring, today nine middle-aged and elderly residents who might otherwise stay home alone will gather in the basement of the neighborhood's most heavily used public amenity, the New Lots branch library.

At first glance, it's an uninviting facility. The run-down, two-story brown brick building is set back behind a wide sidewalk and bus stop, with a beige stone facade at the entry, a broken chain-link fence on one side and a small asphalt parking lot on the other. In recent years the city designated the library site "African Burial Ground Square," because it sits atop a cemetery used to inter slaves and soldiers during the Revolutionary War.

The library is small, and it's already crowded despite the early hour and the good weather. There are two banks of computer terminals with Internet access on the first floor, and patrons, sometimes more than one, at every machine. There's a small display case

and cheerleader, and she's trying to pump them up for the match. Christine, a veteran librarian who wears rectangular glasses and holds a pencil and a phone in her shirt pocket, is the main organizer, having recruited participants from the computer classes and book clubs she leads at the library. Terry and Christine walk around the room and help the participants get into their uniforms, buttoning and pulling them down so they won't snag when it's time to bowl.

When everyone is outfitted the players take their seats, making small talk and tapping their toes in anticipation. Christine tries to link the Xbox to the machine in the basement at the Brownsville Library, where their opponents, invisible to us but no doubt sumilarly composed, have put on their own uniforms and settled in for the match. It worked perfectly in practice, but this time there's something wrong with the connection. Christine calls Browns-ville. Yes, they're there, just working on the Wi-Fi. In a few minutes, the machines are in sync and the game is on.

Brownsville goes first and the team watches the ball roll up the side of the alley, taking out a few pins but leaving most upright. There's some tumbling and a bit of nervous laughter coming from the seats. It grows louder when the next roll leaves the opponents' frame open. Everyone knows they can win.

Jesse bowls first for New Lots, and she's not fooling around. "Come on, Jesse!" Terry shouts. Her teammates clap enthusiastically. "Let's do this now!" Terry calls out again. Jesse approaches the screen and stops at the designated spot about fifteen feet in front of it. She seizes the hand control, raises her right arm to the sky until the Xbox registers her presence, and reaches out 90 degrees to take the ball. On screen, the ball rises to show that she's ready. Jesse reaches back and sweeps her arm forward, as if she were rolling a ball up the alley. It's a powerful roll, and at first it seems on target but it winds up too true to center and three pins stay standing. Some in the group applaud. Some sigh in exasperation. Jesse looks incredulous. "You got this!" Terry yells. "You

older patrons in twelve libraries in Brooklyn to join local teams and compete against neighboring branches. Nine people at New Lots signed up to play, and after weeks of practice, they're about to take on Brownsville and Cypress Hills.

Branch libraries offer something for everyone, but the extra services and programming that they provide for older people are particularly important. As of 2016, more than twelve million Americans aged sixty-five and above live by themselves, and the ranks of those who are aging alone is growing steadily in much of the world. Although most people in this situation are socially active, the risk of isolation is formidable. A fall, an illness, or the inevitable advance toward frailty can render them homebound. If older friends and neighbors move away or die, their social networks can quickly unravel. If they get depressed, their interest in being out in the world can diminish. Street crime discourages everyone from going outdoors and socializing in public, but it's particularly intimidating for the old. In neighborhoods where crime is high or the social infrastructure is depleted, old people are more likely to stay home, alone, simply because they lack compelling places to go. New Lots has its library, though, and today the doors open at 10 a.m. Soon after, ten patrons, eight women and two men (one who's here to watch) ranging in age from fifty to nearly ninety, walk downstairs. Among them are Miss Jonny, who sports wrap-around sunglasses, tall red boots, a black-and-red polka-dot scarf, and a gray newsboy cap. There's Suhir, in a seafoam sweat suit and a white hijab. Santon, a soft-spoken man from Guyana, dons a blue baseball cap and loose-fitting green trousers. Una, Bern, Salima, Miba, Daisi, and Jesse round out the crew. They greet one another warmly. Some women hug. A few clasp hands. Daisi gives Una a gentle high five that turns into a longer touch and a smile.

Terry, an ebullient library information specialist with big eyes and a dazzlingly bright smile, hands each player a royal blue bowling shirt with a white public library logo on the front pocket and TEAM NEW LOTS in yellow on the sleeve. Terry is the team's coach

good." Jesse approaches the ball again, looking determined. She lifts, rolls, nails the spare. The room erupts.

The New Lots bowlers kill it, extending their lead frame after frame. They are old, and some are enfeebled, probably too weak to hold an actual ball. Only one player had ever participated in an old-fashioned bowling league, the kind that requires gutters, slick shoes, and a shiny wood floor. Robert Putnam famously lamented the demise of these leagues during the late twentieth century. Their disappearance, he argued, signaled a worrisome decline in social bonds. But here a group of people who could easily be at home, cut off from friends and neighbors, is involved in something greater than deep play. They're participating, fully and viscerally, in collective life. The mood is electric. Turn by turn, the players stand, boosted by their teammates' applause and the librarians' exhortations, salute the screen, and demolish their digital targets. "I'm feelin' for Brownsville right now," Terry exclaims. "*But not too much!*"

The team's confidence is soaring when the second match gets going, but it doesn't take long to see that Cypress Hills is for real. The opponents go first and it's a strike. Jesse responds with a strike of her own. Then Cypress Hills rolls another, and Terry makes fish lips, popping her eyes in disbelief. Suhir makes a spare. New Lots is in it. But then Cypress gets a turkey, three strikes in a row, and Terry is incredulous. "There's some funny business going on here!" she insists. "That's Walter," the Cypress Hills librarian. "I *know* that's Walter. I'ma call him out."

She doesn't, though, and the Cypress Hills team gradually pulls away despite strong performances from most of the New Lots players. The game goes by quickly and the mood, naturally, is more subdued. When it ends there's a short pause and a little confusion about what will happen. "We should ask them for a rematch," Christine says. "I think we can beat 'em."

Christine jumps on the phone, a landline attached to the wall, and reaches Walter at the other library. She ribs him a little: "That

wasn't you bowling, was it?" She smiles for a beat. "Uh-huh. Right. Well, hey, it's still early, you guys want to do another?" They did, and in a few moments they're back at it again.

This time New Lots takes nothing for granted. Terry, who's decided that if Walter is playing then she is also, jumps in and knocks down everything. Santon hits a spare. "It's all you, Miss Jonny!" Terry shouts, and Miss Jonny makes her first strike of the morning. Bern follows with another perfect roll, then Una does the same, and now New Lots has its own turkey and a sizable lead. Terry is ecstatic. She screams out encouragement and struts around the room in circles with each strike or spare. When Jesse seals the victory with a strike in the tenth frame, the entire group is joyous, like Yankee Stadium after a play-off win.

There are team photos, high fives, and hugs all around. Christine tells the players that there will be trophies for the top teams and a giant trophy for the library that wins everything. Miba, feeling bold and full of swagger, suggests that they just engrave New Lots on it now and bring the trophy over. Her teammates are in hysterics, their smiles as deep as a lifetime.

The celebration lasts just a few minutes. It's noon, the players are hungry, and there are hours of sunshine ahead. I congratulate the team and wish them good luck on the season. "Thanks," Terry says. "We gonna be *fine*."

I leave feeling uplifted by the cheering, the camaraderie, the joy of watching people who hardly know one another turn their neighborhood into a community. It was a rare moment of what the great French sociologist Émile Durkheim called "collective effervescence," and I hadn't expected it, not at the library.

Today, we may have every reason to feel atomized and alienated, distrustful and afraid—and the demographics are as challenging as the politics. There are more people living alone than at any point in history, including more than a quarter of Americans over the age of sixty-five, who are at particular risk of becoming isolated. That's worrisome, because, as a large body of scientific

research now shows, social isolation and loneliness can be as dangerous as more publicized health hazards, including obesity and smoking. But some places have the power to bring us together, and the kind of social bonding I witnessed that morning in Brooklyn happens in thousands of libraries throughout the year.

Libraries are not the kinds of institutions that most 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 twenty-first-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 overtaxed.

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 ten thousand 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.

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.

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 kinds 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 fash-

ion photographer in her late thirties whom I met in the Seward

Park Library children's floor on a chilly April morning. She's wear-

ing 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.

"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 attor-

ney, didn't. On the contrary, the demands on his time increased,

and he worked well into the evening, leaving her in a small Man-

hattan 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 so-

cial scene going on between everyone who comes here. The par-

ents, 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 con-

versations." I ask if something similar happens in parks and play-

grounds, 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."

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.

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

on weekends and who can't afford childcare. They give families confidence that their kids are in good hands.

Libraries may be the textbook example of social infrastructure in action, but other places and institutions do similarly vital work connecting people who need a hand. The Harvard sociologist Mario Small has looked at how the organization of different childcare centers shapes relationships among parents, particularly single mothers. In centers that encourage parental involvement, even if only at drop-off and pickup, mothers build friendships even when they're not looking for companions. These institutions, he writes, "are also spaces for interaction, buildings with halls, stairs, and lobbies where mothers certainly have an opportunity not only to make friends but also, when friends do not emerge, to see each other and each other's children repeatedly, becoming part of the daily marches from home to center to work to center to home that organize the habits of many working mothers." Through repeated encounters, mothers whose children attend these institutions develop high levels of trust in one another, and that quickly yields bonds of friendship and mutual support. The centers become critical sites of social activity, yielding play dates that give one mother a few extra hours to work or rest, information about schools and scholarships, tips about available jobs, and the kind of last-minute emergency help that every parent occasionally needs.

Not all childcare centers promote this level of support and solidarity. Donna, one of the mothers whom Small interviews, recounts her experience at a day care center in a downtown financial district, one that's set up to serve a busy corporate clientele. The center has a rolling drop-off and pickup schedule, designed to match the parents' long and erratic workdays, and as a consequence the

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 do them only 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

parents didn't interact regularly or get to know one another's children well. The schedule is not the only issue. The space is compact and the environment is professional, in keeping with the neighborhood. There's not much room for parents to relax and hang out. For their part, the teachers make little effort to get parents to linger and play with the kids when they are in the building. The result, Donna says, is that there are "no parents sitting down and chatting or anything like that." The center offered reliable childcare when her son was in the building, but it didn't help her develop the relationships she needed in the rest of her life.

Most debates about education focus on the relationship between school quality and individual student achievement. That's sensible, since schools play such an important role in determining people's fate in modern societies, even in those where inherited privilege matters more for success than merit or hard work. But educational institutions do far more than teach individual students. From childcare centers to research universities, schools create social worlds that shape and sustain entire communities. They're our primary public institutions for establishing democratic ideals and instilling civic skills. Schools are our modern agoras, gathering places where we make and remake ourselves and develop a sense of where we belong.

Schools are organizations, but they're also social infrastructures. The way they're planned, designed, and programmed shapes the interactions that develop in and around them. For students, teachers, parents, and entire communities, schools can either foster or inhibit trust, solidarity, and a shared commitment to the common good. They can also set boundaries that define who is part of the community and who is excluded. They can integrate or segregate, create opportunities or keep people in their place.

Schools, of course, are particularly important social spaces for children. They're the physical places where students make the friendships that shape who they become. In fact, there's a considerable body of psychological research showing that peer groups and school social environments affect child development far more than parents do. Since the advent of social media, however, the Internet and the mobile phone have challenged the primacy of schools—and not just schools, but all other physical places where people meet for face-to-face interaction, from pubs to playgrounds, churches to community groups. Whether and how this affects social isolation and human connection are two of the most difficult questions of our time.

The Internet and social media have unquestionably made it easier to meet new people and maintain contact with friends and family. They allow us to share all kinds of information, from the most mundane to the most intimate, with huge numbers of people, in real time. (After all, there are more than two billion monthly Facebook users alone.) Today, as Aziz Ansari and I learned when we were doing research for *Modern Romance*, the Internet is where Americans are most likely to search for and find their spouse. It's where people go when they want to find out where to protest or rally. And, of course, it's where they go to post photographs of their children, their family vacation, their breakfast, themselves.

It's common, these days, to hear that the Internet, and particularly social media, is making us lonelier and more isolated than ever. These claims may well feel true to those who long for simpler, happier times—but there's no good evidence that they're accurate. Indeed, research by the Berkeley sociologist Claude Fischer suggests the opposite: drawing on forty years of social surveys, Fischer's work shows that the quality and quantity of Americans' relationships are about the same today as they were before the Internet existed. The most reliable behavioral data available show that using mobile phones, the Internet, and social media has a

positive effect on both the size and the diversity of people's personal networks. For most of us, Facebook friends and Instagram followers are supplements to—not surrogates for—our social lives. As meaningful as the friendships we establish online can be, most of us are unsatisfied with virtual ties that never develop into face-to-face relationships. Building real connections requires a shared physical environment—a social infrastructure.

Sherry Turkle, an eminent psychologist and scholar of science and technology at MIT, is particularly interested in the way social media affect the quality of our interactions. According to her research, the incessant electronic messaging that's so common among young people is crowding out time for face-to-face conversation. That matters, she writes, because conversation is "the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. . . . It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection, the conversations with ourselves that are the cornerstone of early development and continue throughout life."

If in-person conversation is humanizing, online discourse can too often be the opposite. Apps like Tinder and OkCupid allow people to start electronic conversations with large numbers of strangers, but as Aziz and I found in our research for *Modern Romance*, these exchanges often devolve quickly, with people treating one another more rudely and crudely than they would in face-to-face interactions. In interviews, even well-meaning people confessed to feeling that the people they meet online sometimes seem more "like bubbles on a screen" than flesh-and-bone human beings. What's striking about this behavior is that it happens in forums where people are looking for love and intimacy. On other parts of the Internet, from Twitter to Reddit, the discourse can be even more venomous.

Making social life work well with the Internet isn't easy, and, as Turkle recognizes, people throughout the world are growing

Frustrated with the excesses of Internet culture, Turkle calls for us to turn away from our screens and "reclaim conversation," focusing on the people and places in front of us. Doing so requires searching for commonalities in those who are different and for humanity in those who disagree with us. It requires recognizing that communications technologies work best, and fulfill us most, when they direct us to physical places that everyone can access. Consider, for instance, the social group that's most often accused of shunning face-to-face interactions in favor of electronic communication: teenagers.

According to research by danah boyd, director of the research institute Data & Society, young people spend so much of their social time online because adults—from helicopter parents to hyper-vigilant school administrators and security guards—give them few other options. Despite higher crime rates, teens in previous generations had more freedom to roam around their neighborhoods and local public spaces than today's youths. They had more unstructured time after school and on weekends; they even had more free time during school, and far less surveillance. "Increasing regulation means that there aren't as many public spaces for teens to gather," boyd writes. "Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace are not only new public spaces: they are in many cases the only 'public' spaces in which teens can easily congregate with large groups of their peers. More significantly, teens can gather in them while still physically stuck at home."

The teens whom boyd interviewed insisted that they prefer hanging out in person to messaging on smartphones, but adults have restricted their mobility so thoroughly that they have few alternatives. The Internet has become young people's core social infrastructure because we've unfairly deprived them of access to other sites for meaningful connection. If we fail to build physical places where people can enjoy one another's company, regardless of age, class, race, or ethnicity, we will all be similarly confined.

Libraries are precisely these kinds of places, and in many neighborhoods, particularly those where young people aren't hyperseduced in formal after-school programs, they're as popular among adolescents and teenagers who want to spend time with other kids their age as they are among older people and new parents. That's a claim that should be easy to verify: simply go into the branch library closest to you a few minutes before the school day is out, and watch as a steady stream of students pours in and settles down for the afternoon.

Why are libraries such popular places for young people? One reason is that, as public institutions, they're open, accessible, and free. Another is that the library staff welcomes them; in many branches, they even create special places where teenagers can be with one another. To appreciate why this matters, compare the social space of the library with the social space of popular commercial establishments, such as Starbucks or McDonald's. Commercial entities are valuable parts of the social infrastructure, and there's no doubt that classic "third places," including cafés, bars, and restaurants, have helped revitalize cities and suburbs. But not everyone can afford to frequent them, and not all paying customers are welcome to stay for long. Spending time in a market-driven social setting—even a relatively inexpensive fast-food restaurant or pasty shop—requires paying for the privilege. Inside almost every Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts, or McDonald's, particularly those in neighborhoods where there are teenagers, poor people, or old people around, there's usually at least one sign that says No Loitering. And it's not just a suggestion.

Some New York City McDonald's franchises impose time limits of twenty or thirty minutes "while consuming food" that, depending on the client, management may or may not enforce. Race matters, but so too do class and age. Groups of teenagers are routinely

asked to leave commercial establishments, even after they make their purchases. In 2014, a group of elderly Korean Americans in New York City publicly challenged a McDonald's franchise whose managers began to kick them out of the restaurant less than an hour after they'd ordered, charging them with colonizing the seats and quashing business.

Older and poor people will often avoid Starbucks altogether, because the fare is too expensive and they feel like they don't belong. The elderly library patrons I got to know in New York City told me that they feel even less welcome in the trendy new coffee shops, cocktail bars, and restaurants that are so common in gentrifying neighborhoods. Poor and homeless library patrons don't even consider entering these places. They know, from experience, that simply standing outside a high-end eatery or watering hole can prompt managers to call in the police.

You rarely see a police officer in a library, but libraries are places where people attend to one another, regardless of what else they are doing. In a world where we spend ever more of our time staring at screens, blocking out even our most intimate and proximate human contacts, public institutions with open-door policies compel us to pay close attention to the people nearby. After all, places like libraries are saturated with strangers, people whose bodies are different, whose styles are different, who make different sounds, speak different languages, give off different, sometimes noxious, smells. Spending time in public social infrastructures requires learning to deal with these differences in a civil manner.

This is not to say that public spaces are always peaceful and serene. During the time I spent in branch libraries, for instance, I witnessed a variety of conflicts: destitute men arguing over access to the bathroom; unattended children fistfighting during a special event; an unemployed man shouting that teenagers were playing video games on computers that should be for adults only; a mentally ill homeless person disrupting an entire section of patrons by muttering violent threats. According to a security guard at a

branch I frequented, one day a heroin addict collapsed of an overdose at a table and had to be rescued by paramedics, and another day someone defecated on the floor.

These problems are inevitable in a public institution that's dedicated to open access, especially when other institutions, from methadone clinics to homeless shelters and food banks, routinely turn away—and often refer to the library!—the very people who most need help. But what's remarkable is how rarely these disruptions happen, how civilly they are managed, and how quickly the library regains its rhythm afterward. Even in the roughest neighborhoods, branch libraries are not heavily guarded, nor are they staffed with social workers and counselors. Instead, they establish and informally enforce their own norms and codes of conduct, trusting patrons to honor them and getting compliance 99 percent of the time. "You have to try very, very hard to get kicked out of this library," one branch manager told me. "And we're going to do everything possible to find you a place."

Everyday life in libraries is a democratic experiment, and people cram into libraries to participate in it whenever the doors are open. In some ways, American cities are growing more diverse. Immigration is booming, especially in New York City. Today, there are more than three million immigrants in New York, about one-third of whom have arrived since 2000. In cities across the country, you can hear languages, eat food, and find or partake in cultural

activities that weren't much a part of America a few generations ago. The United States remains an open society that, as always, incorporates new people and reinvents itself. In other ways, though, American cities remain divided and unequal, with some neighborhoods cutting themselves off from difference, particularly when it comes to race and social class. Some communities do this by building walls and gates, some by aggressively policing those who look like they don't belong. Others, including some enclaves of affluence in New York City, do it more subtly, perhaps without intent. The real estate gets so expensive that only the wealthy can afford to live there. Shops and restaurants go upscale, attracting a certain clientele. The neighborhood becomes homogeneous and insular, not open and diverse. The social environment grows less hospitable. The architecture becomes forbidding and severe.

The Seward Park Library, a stately red brick and limestone Italian Renaissance building at the edge of the nation's first municipal playground, Seward Park, might look elite and exclusive. It's a gorgeous structure, built from the opulence of a previous gilded age. But the library, which sits at the point of convergence for Chinatown, a mass of public housing projects, and a rapidly developing urban glamour zone for young professionals, has long been the heart of the Lower East Side community. Its doors are open to everyone, and everyone comes.

For the past 170 years, the Lower East Side has been a popular neighborhood for poor immigrants, in part because its location, on low-lying land near the river, made it unattractive for those who could afford a nicer setting, but mostly because—to this day—it has thousands of apartment buildings where enormous numbers of people squeeze into units that look a lot like the tenements that zoning codes no longer allow. In the mid-nineteenth century, Irish immigrants rushed into the area, pioneers whom the established New Yorkers blamed for turning a prosperous neighborhood into an ethnic slum. Then came the Germans, followed by Eastern

European Jews, who stayed in the neighborhood for much of the twentieth century. A few thousand older Jews as well as a handful of small synagogues remain there today. But today's Lower East Side is primarily Puerto Rican and Chinese and, with a 31 percent child poverty rate, is disproportionately poor.

In the past decade, the area around Seward Park has begun to gentrify. Next door, co-op apartments that were originally built for blue-collar union workers now sell for more than \$1 million. Across the street, the former headquarters for *The Forward*, the leading newspaper for American Jews, was recently converted into a luxury condo building. Down the block there's Mission Chinese Food, the Manhattan outpost of a San Francisco culinary sensation whose chef won a Rising Star award from the James Beard Foundation, an upscale cocktail bar, and, of course, a juice bar. But for now the neighborhood remains an immigrant enclave, and the landmark library, one of the original sixty-five libraries in New York City funded by Andrew Carnegie's \$5.2 million donation in 1901, serves its aspiring residents in more or less the same ways that it has since opening in 1909. It's also sustained its level of activity: Seward Park circulates more than five hundred thousand items annually (about fourteen hundred books and a handful of DVDs each day) and attracts more than twenty thousand people into its programs, making it one of the busiest branches in the system.

I first visited the Seward Park Library on a gray January morning. I took the F train from West Fourth Street to East Broadway, the last stop in Manhattan, walked past a small encampment where a homeless man was getting himself together, and went up the stairway to Rutgers Street. The first thing I noticed was the long string of high-rise red brick public housing projects clustered around the FDR Drive, near the East River. A few years before, I'd toured those buildings with the Rebuild by Design competitors to observe flood damage from Sandy. They'd been inundated with

seawater. The first floors were uninhabitable; the elevators were malfunctioning; the power, phone, and cable lines in the basement were a tangled, corroded mess. The common areas outside were ugly and neglected, with cracked asphalt, uncomfortable benches, small patches of unkempt grass. At the time I hadn't thought much about where the thousands of people who lived in these buildings could go to escape the dreary environment. Visiting the library, it became clear.

When I entered the gates to Seward Park I immediately saw a group of twenty old people, mainly women, all Chinese, dancing for exercise despite the winter weather. A few preschool children were swinging. Small groups of old men walked circles around the path. A homeless man was asleep near the public restrooms, which were locked down and closed until spring.

The library itself, a regal, four-story structure with high arched windows and an imposing, rusticated limestone base, is at the northeast corner of the park, and there's a large public space with long stone benches in front of the entrance. I arrived there a few minutes before 10 a.m., when the library opens, and found fourteen people scattered around the area, some hovering by the door or on the short stone staircase leading up to it, others standing on the asphalt below. There was a young professional couple; he held a paper coffee cup from the gourmet café across the street; she held two DVDs. There was an old Jewish woman, hair wrapped in a kerchief, carrying a small book bag and talking to a gray-haired man in jeans and a parka about Donald Trump. Two heavy-set Latinas in their thirties or forties rested against the rail on the stairway, arms folded, occasionally reaching for a phone. An old Chinese man in a gray hat and a tan overcoat sat on the cold bench. A few college-age students with heavy backpacks stood alone, and four ragged-looking men, homeless or maybe coming from a shelter, clustered by the entrance. One kept checking the time.

At ten o'clock sharp a librarian in an oversize suit jacket

unlocked the front door and held it open. "Good morning," he said, with a warm smile and a nod of recognition for each familiar face, and a kind, welcoming one for mine.

The disheveled men rushed inside. One beelined for the first-floor bathroom, the only one that's officially open to all patrons, even though there are two more in the basement and another for children only on the second floor. One raced up the stairs, and the others dropped their bags on the tables by the big front windows and began to browse through the new books. Most patrons gave the men some leeway, trying to avoid the smell, and then everyone went to their spot. The couple returned their DVDs, grabbed another from reserve, and left. The old woman in the ketchup went right to the desktop computers and started checking her e-mail. The Chinese man took the stairs to the third floor, where, I soon learned, he and two friends spend every morning reading *Mandarin* newspapers. The Latina women walked around the circulation desk to the lounge area, which is open until it becomes part of the designated teen space at 2 p.m., and immediately pulled out their phones.

Once the first wave of patrons settled in I walked over to the library worker who'd greeted us at the entrance and introduced myself. "I'm Andrew," he replied, extending a bony hand that emerged from the long sleeves on his vintage black jacket, and clasped mine in a gentle grip. "How can I help?"

For branch librarians, helping people find more than they're looking for is the essence of the job. "There are few jobs that exist today where you're really just doing good things as a public servant," Andrew told me one day. "You're not screwing anyone over. You're not taking advantage of anybody. You're just offering a free service." Andrew grew up in Los Angeles. He has a twin brother, and

often on weekends their mother, a British immigrant who didn't drive, would take them on long bus rides to either the main branch of the Los Angeles Public Library or the Beverly Hills Public Library. "They were nowhere near where we lived," he recounted. "But the buildings were so beautiful, and she wanted to expose us to that inspiring architecture. To this very day I think about how different it was to visit a library as opposed to everywhere else. Being in them just felt different. That's stuck with me to this very day.

"My father wasn't around much, and the library was a place where my mother could just relax while my brother and I would look through books. The one book that I associate with our trips there most of all is *No Frying, No Biting! I think it's by* Else Holmelund Minarik, and it's illustrated by Maurice Sendak. We must have checked that book out more than, oh God, I don't know, more than any other. There were two siblings involved in it. And my mother would just sort of drolly look at the two of us as she was reading about these bickering siblings. That will be with me forever."

Andrew moved to New York City, where his brother lived, and applied for an entry-level job as an "information specialist" in the library system. It didn't pay well: the starting salary for librarians in the New York Public Library system is around \$48,500, and pay for information specialists, who generally lack a graduate degree in library sciences, is considerably lower. But it was better than Starbucks, where he worked for a while, and it would put him on a career path that felt meaningful, and full of purpose. When he started working, he quickly knew he'd made the right choice. "Here's something I realized once I got here," Andrew explained. "At Starbucks, and at most businesses, really, the assumption is that you, the customer, are better for having this thing that you purchase. Right? At the library, the assumption is you *are* better. You have it in you already. You just sort of need to be exposed to these things and provide yourself an education. The library

assumes the best out of people. The services it provides are founded upon the assumption that if given the chance, people will improve themselves." And, as I observed during my time in libraries, social interactions—with librarians and with other patrons—are one of the crucial ways that this self-improvement happens.

Both children and adults benefit from the relationships they build in branch libraries. "Children," Andrew said, "are still growing and they're still absorbing things. Hopefully adults are doing that too. But a lot of adults who use the library aren't just people who are trying to improve themselves in terms of, say, intellectual capacity. They're trying to improve themselves because they need an environment that's not like every other environment they've ever known, that judges them, that takes advantage of them, that doesn't want anything to do with them, doesn't understand their role in society. They want to be in a place where they can feel this generous assumption of human nature, and they should always get that here." The library is where they feel cared for and connected. It sustains them, especially during lonely times.

The library staff has more autonomy to develop new programming than I'd expected from an established public institution. Managers, it seems, assume the best of their librarians, and their information specialists too. The first thing Andrew introduced at Seward Park was Tea Time, which he held in the corner of the third-floor reference and reading room. "I noticed a lot of people come in early in the morning and never go to programs," he told me. "They're just using the library as a resting place. And I thought, maybe because my parents are British, 'What's more relaxing than a good cup of tea and a newspaper or book?'"

Tea Time quickly became one of the library's more popular programs, attracting a regular group of older patrons and a steady stream of newcomers who were happy to get a free hot drink and biscuits in the morning. It also became a reliable source of social activity: as they sat together, sipping tea, participants also shared newspapers, and then stories, until over time a small and unlikely

community of Chinese, Turkish, Latino, Jewish, and African American patrons had formed. "I like the way the program brings people together," Andrew explained. "But that's not all. The other reason I like it is because Tea Time is one of the best ways that the library can express faith in people. There's a term you don't hear these days, one you used to hear all the time when the Carnegie branches opened: *Palaces for the People*. The library really is a palace. It bestows nobility on people who can't otherwise afford a shred of it. People need to have nobility and dignity in their lives. And, you know, they need other people to recognize it in them too. Serving tea doesn't seem like that big a deal, but the truth is it's one of the most important things I do."