

## FROM SAFE TO LIVELY STREETS

City lights—those “highly expressive signposts to the nature of urban culture”—what role will they play in the city of the 21st century? We are emerging from an era when urban street lighting—and the city itself—was subsumed by the converging values of the automobile and crime prevention.

Prior to the mid-20th century, street lighting served the dual purpose of urbanity and social control. However, law enforcement officials in the United States dramatically shifted this balance in favor of crime fighting. In 1963, F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover declared, “American ingenuity and productive geniuses have provided the means of eliminating darkness from our streets, parks, playgrounds and other public places.” The installation of high-intensity lights took on the character of a moral crusade against evil, one that would banish darkness, “an ally to crime.”

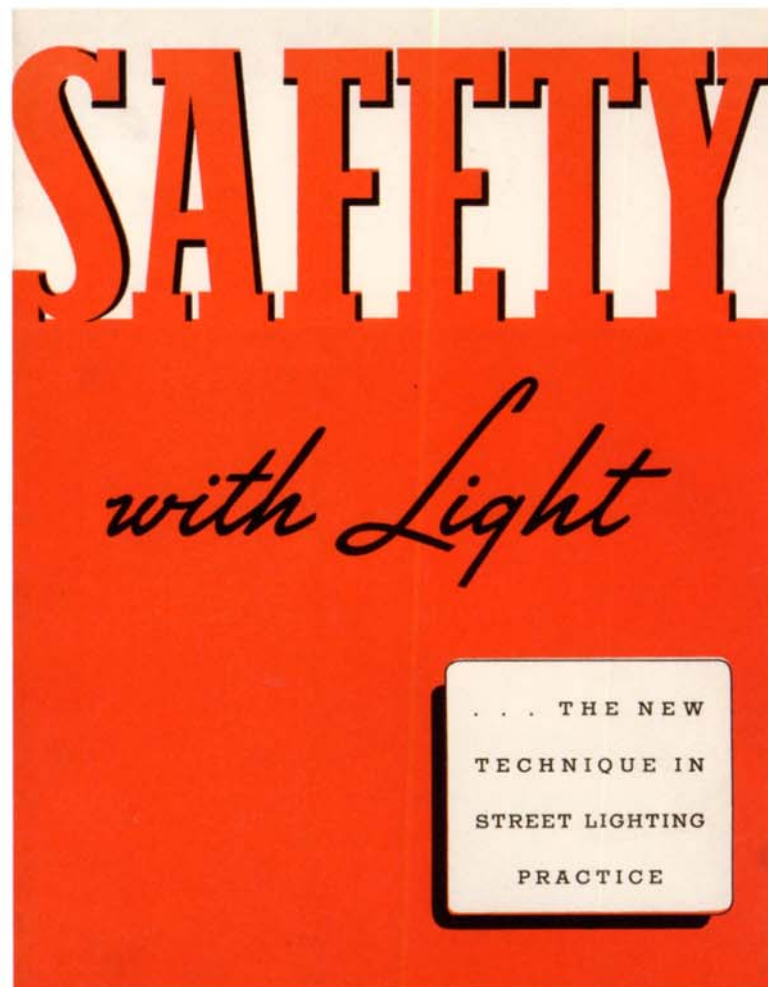
At the same time, the *cobra head*—an efficient facilitator of automobile traffic—became the ubiquitous symbol of the modern metropolis. These uniform lighting schemes fit neatly into the dominant urban planning principles of the period. Communities of every social class were transformed, but poor neighborhoods were most severely affected. Small-scale pedestrian lighting was relegated to an ancillary role, an amenity afforded only to the affluent.

In her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs voiced the growing discontent with the often-disastrous results of urban homogenization. More importantly, she described in nuanced detail the importance of neighborhoods in creating a vital city. By the 1990s, the trend towards homogeneity in urban planning began to reverse. A 1995 New York City Department of Transportation project gave me the opportunity to design pedestrian lighting that took its cue from Jacobs’ premise that a successful neighborhood offers a lively public street life.

Choosing a low-income, high-crime neighborhood, I reframed the design question. Instead of looking at how pedestrian lighting could make the streets safer, I considered how it could increase the freedom of movement and quality of life for people walking on them. Similar to more upscale neighborhoods, aesthetic and practical solutions were treated as inseparable. Studying the daily comings and goings and including community members in the process, I developed discreet interventions that supported positive community-building activities. Post-evaluation studies indicated a feeling of greater security by women on the street and an increase in library usage. Eight years later, even fragile decorative fixtures remain unvandalized.

The significance of this project lies in its methodological innovation, which has been successfully applied to any number of urban situations—from a downtown renewal project to public parks. Approaching city lighting from the perspective of what actual people are doing (or might do) in an actual space seems particularly important as we move into a century in which most of the world's population will live in cities. Of particular concern are cities in Africa, Asia, South/Central America and Eastern Europe, which are struggling to accommodate exploding populations of unemployed and underemployed along with commensurately rising crime rates. An approach to street lighting that develops integrated solutions to support the many vital activities of these developing communities could be a part of creating a sustainable future.

Linnaea Tillett



*Safety with Light: The New Technique in Street Lighting Practice*  
Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company, c. 1939