



Left: Any-Angled Light, Albuquerque, 2013; Right: Linnaea Tillett.

A SENSITIVITY TO LIGHT

Linnaea Tillett founded her firm, Tillett Lighting Design, in New York City in 1983. Since that time she has earned a reputation among the architectural community for innovation through an understanding of the perceptual, behavioral, and psychological effects of light. Recently, Tillett has found herself engaged in a growing number of projects in the Southwest. Her firm just completed Any-Angled Light—a pedestrian and cycling bridge over a freeway in Albuquerque—and is currently working with Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates on The Menil Collection Campus in Houston and on Waller Creek in Austin. AN Southwest editor Aaron Seward visited Tillett in her Brooklyn studio to discuss her approach to landscape lighting and her projects in the region.

Aaron Seward: Your firm does architectural lighting, but most of the work you are doing in Texas and the region is more focused on landscapes and the public realm. What distinguishes this type of work for you?

Linnaea Tillett: Recently there has been this shift of our attention to the idea of climate versus weather. For a long time we could make assumptions about patterns of weather and regional character. Now what we're finding on every project we have is that there are climate events which are pushing the idea of weather off the stage. In New York there was Sandy. We had two projects go under water. In Calgary, we have a project that went under water this season in a freakish flood. In Albuquerque there was a hurricane! The more significant change is that we're all preparing for the next extreme climate event, and that changes how you think about design. It changes what you think about robustness and location. Here, we are beginning to develop protocols for what we think a robust design is. And we have to fight like crazy. There are still these desires that lighting fit in and look a particular way and be hidden in a particular way. We're saying, well you have to think about new protocols.

In more concrete terms, what are you

seeing that you have to do for robustness?

We're thinking increasingly that the ground plane is unstable. Either it's freezing or it's so dry that it's cracking or it's sodden or flooded. It can open up, it can crack. For us the ground plane is becoming, if not a no-man's land, well, you really have to think of whether you can say to a client, "this is a robust location." We are looking to what is working in landscape lighting and amplifying or refining that. How can you make the given more appealing so that it contributes to the environment, how do you look at what is there and massage it and make it impact more specifically to the site. That's another thing we're doing. We're certainly trying to tie our work into infrastructure. The more physically robust a thing is, the more located we are in it, the better chance it has of giving the infrastructure more personality and presence but also it uses those solid forms as a hangar, so lighting isn't just sitting out there in the wind. More and more we go to a site and we ask ourselves, is there something here we need to suppress, rather than add? Is it a situation where there's so much lighting that it's bad? If we made it go away would it be more appealing? Instead of thinking automatically, we need to add more light, let's consider if there's a more sensitive way to do it.

The other thing—and this is the most radical thing that we are thinking of—is that lighting can be carried into and out of environments. Lighting can be portable and be used to make an environment more enchanting for an evening, or be carried through an environment where you need it and then taken out.

Do you find that these are difficult ideas to get across to people?

Well, in terms of robust climate design it's difficult relative to the experience of the client. It becomes more obvious to people when they've had something happen that makes them reconsider what they're doing.

What sort of conditions did you have to design for in Albuquerque?

In Albuquerque we were dealing with a physical environment and a sky that

is so beautiful. There's this incredible watermelon sky and these mountains, then there are these cool neon signs, and they've done a lot about night sky protection. It's beautiful there. They aspire to be the bicycle capital of the Southwest, but it's not necessarily the most inviting environment for biking because you have these huge highways running through. Where we ended up in Albuquerque, where the bike bridge is over the arroyo, there are these men's strip clubs on either side. It's pretty intense. It's an edgy town. But it's so beautiful. And it's so dry, and it's so baking hot. We had to think about that all the time, what would survive.

A lot of public lighting projects think of lighting standing alone and flickering and color changing and this was an opportunity to work with the architect and the engineers to design it as part of the bridge. So we wanted to use as little light as possible, we wanted to have the experience of it change as you were biking through it and also change as you were walking through it. How could you make the bridge more reflective? Well, we could anodize everything. When it catches the sunlight it's so beautiful, so you get experiences during the day. Then as the sun sets you have these beautiful sunsets, and then you have the night condition. The materials were super cheap. It's made out of this expanded metal that's everywhere in Albuquerque. We didn't want to do color changing, we didn't want to have any programming, we didn't want it to be a nightmare for them to maintain, so we went through about a year of going through the possibilities of using these dichroics, testing hundreds of them out on our deck, looking for one that when you went through it the colors would change. Then, when it was done, Albuquerque got hit by a hurricane.

So in going back and fixing it are you thinking about the next climate event?

They're going to bring the fixtures here and we're going to take them apart and look at them. They were designed to withstand a downward rain and they were designed to reflect heat. Now we want to look at what we'd need in an event where the rain was driving across.

How about the work you're doing at The

Menil Collection?

First of all, it's the Menil. It's incredible. The thing that's specific about it is that it's a museum, and it's a neighborhood. And so in just looking at it our entire intention was to maintain the quality of the neighborhood. To amplify, refine, add a bit, and take away a bit. But it has such a particular emotional tone, you know it has these incredibly lush plantings in a soaking wet ground. I would say every single fixture on this project is subject to inquiry as to whether it's necessary or not, whether it serves any purpose. A lot of the lighting that we found when we got there was installed probably in the late 1970s. So the trees have actually grown around it and you have this wonderful dappled quality everywhere. We didn't want to remove that. So we actually started the entire thing by talking about refining the lighting at the bungalows. A lot of them were dark, a lot of them had this incredibly awful security lighting that was blinding. We could add a light to the doorway, then we could use the existing poles and just add a few fixtures to highlight the entrances. And then we began to try to come up with a logic to some of the new pathways that are going to open up, very low key fixtures in all the same family to just add a bit of light. It's about refining and heightening the experience. It's a very thoughtful, meditative environment so we're adding gently as we can.

And the Waller Creek project?

Waller Creek is still in the very early stages and we haven't moved much beyond the competition material. We're looking for opportunities to use paint, maybe some reflective surfaces, and we're looking at portable lighting. Michael (Van Valkenburgh) said, are you saying that people will carry their own lights into Waller Creek? And I was like, well, I'm saying that it's possible. Austin is such a unique place. If you think about it more like a bike share program. If you hung pegs on the wall with lights on them, people could just grab a light before heading into the park. It's very far fetched, but I think that Austin is a great town to try it, because there are so many people there who are thinking about this stuff.

Well, you'd want it to be something that was very cheap and easy to replace, obviously.

Exactly. And easily rechargeable, which is one of the things that we're working on with a company right now. Can you stack 40 of these on one charger? And, in theory, you can. But nobody has bought into this idea except me.

We've also been looking at the whole creek and wondering where would you pop up. It's kind of like the High Line flipped down. A lot of people don't even know it's there. We have to actually create a presence. It's kind of like the New York City subway. You know when you're down on Wall Street and you see that globe in the distance, and you're like, oh my gosh, there it is. We're kind of thinking about it that way. How do we bring something up above ground?