

## PROJECTS

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# Light and the Urban Nightscape

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The design of nighttime environments that instill feelings of both safety and enjoyment is of critical importance to the economic and cultural vitality of urban centers around the world. This has been broadly recognized in Europe for several decades, but has only recently been seriously addressed in North America. The following considers lighting design for the urban nightscape through the examination of two progressive urban lighting projects, organizations like the Lighting Urban Community International (LUCI), the City-People-Light program, and the role of lighting festivals and workshops in advancing urban lighting design.

## In the Field

New York-based lighting designer Leni Schwendinger, responsible for numerous award-winning urban lighting projects, is no stranger to the demands of designing for public space. Central to Schwendinger's methodology is an appreciation for the historical and cultural context of each project. Often presented with sites that have fallen into disuse, Schwendinger begins with research and exploration, seeking something about the environment that engages her on an emotional level, allowing her to turn around her own perception of the place.

Approaching urban projects with an awareness of the public arena "as special and important to daily life," Schwendinger strives to add meaning and value to the environment. For example, one of the primary aims of Schwendinger's project *Dreaming in Color* (2003) for Marion McCaw Hall in Seattle, was to "connect the city fabric with the landscape and the cultural fabric of the Seattle Center." In response to both the surroundings and the new performing arts center, which is home to the Pacific Northwest Ballet, Schwendinger created a 300-foot "promenade of color" out of nine 30-foot-tall metal-mesh scrims. These scrims serve as "musical instruments," upon which various colored light compositions are projected; creating a "truly immersive program" that engages McCaw Hall patrons, Seattle Center visitors, and pedestrians alike in the theatergoing experience. *Dreaming in Color* also serves as a magnet for local inhabitants, who now use the promenade as a preferred route in and out of the Center's grounds. Schwendinger sees these kinds of lighting programs as an indication of the potential of urban lighting. Having identified what she terms "the shades of night," which correspond to the uses and needs of public space at different locals and times, Schwendinger proposes that "lighting be keyed into these changes" so that lighting responds intimately to use, people, and the environment, reflecting the true meaning and purpose of public space.

Also based in New York City, Linnaea Tillett and her firm, Tillett Lighting Design, similarly explore the connection between people, light, and the urban environment, using a "social approach to lighting design." As Tillett describes, "we don't see lighting as the determining factor in what makes a place work," but rather as one element in a complex set of factors that support a social space. Other significant elements include the local culture of walking, and the presence or absence of a destination. Tillett says, "You do not want to invite people to do something they have no interest in or are unable to do. Similarly, you don't want to use lighting to direct people to nowhere."

Using this methodology Tillett aims to support ordinary life and encourage social interaction through contextually integrated lighting programs. With *Ecliptic/Rosa Parks Circle* (2001) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a project developed with architect and sculptor Maya Lin, the goal was to create a "participatory landscape" that would assist in bringing local residents and college students back to the nearly abandoned downtown. The concept of an ice skating rink illuminated from beneath the ice, reflecting the constellations corresponding with Grand Rapids, evolved from the city's original concept of commissioning a sculpture by Lin. The lifting of automobile restrictions, which allows visitors to park adjacent to the skating rink, was critical to the success of the park, as was the donation of skates by the Grand Rapids Griffins Youth Foundation, which enabled free rentals. It is the sum of these factors that resulted in the success and vibrancy of this space today. For Tillett the role of the lighting designer is not to go into public spaces and "create spectacles, but to really understand what's needed and how we can support that, in a total and sensual way."

## Advocating for Urban Lighting Design

Today urban lighting design is supported by international organizations and manufacturers through forums and workshops that bring together lighting designers, architects, landscape designers, and municipal and government bodies, to share ideas, insights, and experiences. The Urban Community Lighting International (LUCI), arguable the premier association for urban lighting design, was formed in 2002 under the auspices of the City of Lyon, France, with the goal of creating an international network of "Cities of Light." With over 60 city members, LUCI facilitates dialogue through a series of events and forums centered around four international commissions: Urban Strategy and Lighting (Liege, France), Urban Culture and Lighting (Glasgow), Technological Prospects and Trends (Shanghai) and Environment and Lighting Economics (Pécs, Hungary). To encourage the creation of and bring attention to urban lighting in developing countries, LUCI and

To encourage the creation of and bring attention to urban lighting in developing countries, LUCI and United Kingdom lighting company Thorn, announced the "Light Links" grant during Light + Building 2006 in Frankfurt. The program teams a high-income "partner-city" with a "project-city" in a low-income country, and together they are asked to prepare an urban lighting scheme for the project city. The winner (yet to be determined for the 2006 grant) will receive Thorn lighting equipment (5,000 Euros worth), 30 hours of design support, and membership in LUCI.

LUCI also partnered with Philips in 2003, developing the International City-People-Light Award to recognize cities that utilize lighting to add social and cultural value to their municipalities while remaining sensitive to the environment. In 2006, seventeen international cities competed for the award, with first prize given to Vienna and second prize going to Leipzig, Germany. In addition to its annual award, the City-People-Light program, which Philips initiated a decade ago with a series of multidisciplinary workshops, strives to "take into account the emotional aspect of lighting, rather than just the functional," according to Clara Powell, design solutions manager for Philips Luminaires North America. This past year Philips and LUCI hosted a new series of workshops held in Hamburg, Lyon, Philadelphia, and Shanghai. Based on their European success, the Philadelphia workshop was the first City-People-Light workshop to be held in the United States, and is a part of Philips' desire to change the company's perception in the North American market from a technology-based manufacturer to one focused on lifestyle and design. The visionary results of the recent City-People-Light workshops have been captured in sketches and the results (and pending publication) will be announced at the European Lighting Designers' Association (ELDA+) conference in Rotterdam in May 2007. Philips is also currently developing a family of primarily outdoor luminaires for the U.S. market around the idea urban regeneration, which will include their new "LED Linear"—a product characterized by its sustainability and invisibility (size). Both the City-People-Light program and Philips' new product portfolio support and encourage a more holistic approach to urban lighting design.

### Exploring the Future of Urban Lighting

Lighting festivals also serve an important role in the advancement of urban lighting design. Perhaps the most famous of these is the "Festival of Lights" held early each December in Lyon, France, and attracts roughly four million spectators annually. The four-day festival involves the energies of the entire community and temporarily transforms nocturnal Lyon into a luminous participatory environment. Smaller in scope, but no less ambitious, is the workshop-based festival, "Lights in Alingsås" held every October in Alingsås, Sweden. Each year internationally recognized lighting designers are asked to create temporary urban lighting installations with the help of design students, who are given a valuable "hands on" experience with full-scale outdoor projects. The design and installation process takes place over the course of a week, and the illuminated environments remain on view for a month. The festival, resulting from a partnership between the Municipality of Alingsås and ELDA+, provides an important forum for experimental illumination within the public realm, exposing local residents, international visitors, students, and designers to new approaches in urban lighting. The United States has recently begun to recognize the significance of these types of festivals and in November 2006 Acuity Brands Lighting hosted a four-day "Festival of Lights" in Conyers, Georgia modeled after the much larger event in Lyon. Acuity's festival, the fifth time such an event has been held, included lectures by leading U.S. and international lighting designers, product exhibits, and the illumination of select spaces and architecture in the historic section of Conyers. Additionally, in 2008 ELDA+ will be sponsoring a practical lighting workshop for the first time in the United States. The workshop, taking place in Gainesville, Florida, is based on the successful European ELDA+ workshop program and brings together established lighting designers with students to develop and realize temporary lighting projects around Gainesville.

Taking inspiration from such festivals and workshops, lighting designers, urban planners, civil engineering departments, public utilities, and civic leaders can reexamine their own urban environments and ask how lighting affects the experience and perception of their cities. For lighting to become truly integrated into the fabric of the urban environment, all parties must work together and hold as a common goal the desire to create harmonious, environmentally, and contextually sensitive lighting. As Tillett describes, "We are going to have to pay more attention to what is going on all around, to how we are contributing to the total context, not to the ten degrees that is in front of us—it's not what you're staring at, but how you feel about the space." If lighting can engage public space on a human level through mindful design, then the public perception of the role of urban lighting may break through that of mere functionality or security. This is perhaps the biggest challenge facing urban lighting design in the United States. With the help of programs like City-People-Light and a greater awareness of the workshop and lighting festival resources, it is possible that we may soon see the transformation of America's urban nightscapes and the creation of vital and vibrant nocturnal environments.