Tillett Lighting Design

By AARON SEWARD • October 21, 2009

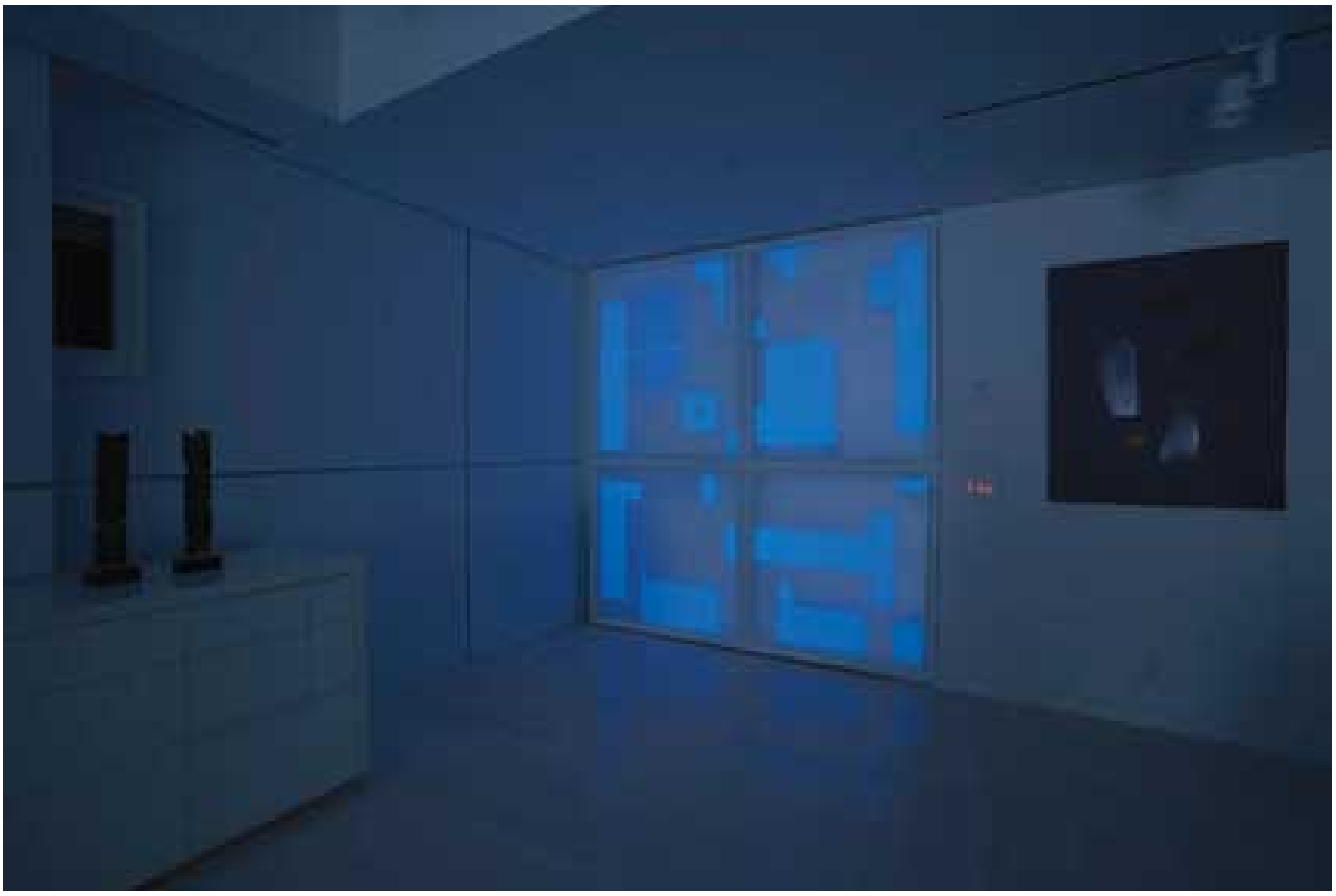
Feature News

Syracuse Connective Corridor, Syracuse, New York

Courtesy Tillett Lighting Design

Tillett Lighting Design has been around since 1983, when founder Linnaea Tillett parlayed her theater background into a practice for lighting private fine art collections. In the past ten years, however, her firm has become known for the civic and landscape work it has produced in collaboration with such high-profile talents as Maya Lin, Toshiko Mori, Michael Van Valkenburgh, and Lebbeus Woods.

“I was raised in New York City,” said Tillett, “and have always been interested in the urban environment and what makes a safe-feeling street.” In 1990, she put her firm on hold and entered a graduate program at City College, studying the fundamentals of perception and, over the course of the next decade, earning a PhD in environmental psychology. “I wanted to learn more about how we understand our environment, how we understand fear, and the difference between fear and excitement. I was trying to get to the bottom of the psychological effects of lighting in a space.”



Milne-Ojito Residence, New York, New York

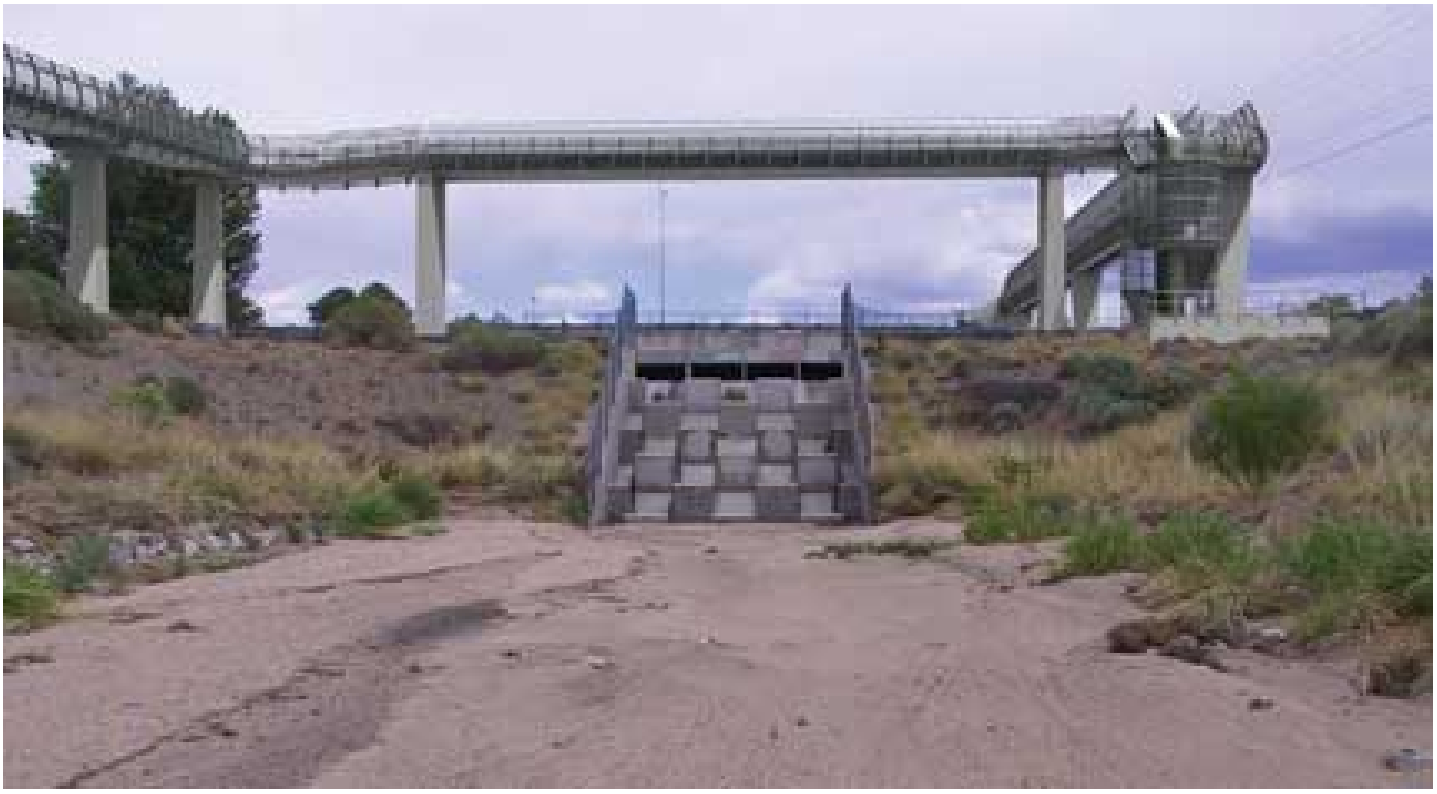
Tillett got a chance to put this training into practice in the late '90s, when she answered an RFP issued by the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT). The DOT was looking for designers to light a neighborhood and study its effects. Tillett chose a particularly desolate stretch of New Lots Avenue in East New York. Using inexpensive decorative fixtures, the firm lit a path from the elevated subway to the area's two main landmarks: a church and a library. In the year following the installation, library attendance and circulation increased, and pedestrians reported increased comfort while walking home at night.

One of the most important lessons that Tillett took away from the East New York project was that too much light can be a bad thing. The "crime light" typical of such underserved neighborhoods–glaring floodlights more suitable to lighting a stadium than a streetscape–can end up working against residents' sense of comfort. "We now ask the question, 'Why light?'" said Tillett. "That's a question that doesn't get asked enough. It's not just a question of energy, but of why do it at all? We want people to meet outdoors at night in a civilized way, to create a sense of enchantment that will draw people to a place and keep them there. Maybe in certain cases we need to take away lighting."

Bear Canyon Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Tillett is currently working on two civic projects that take the approach of using as little light as possible. One is a pedestrian and bicycle bridge that crosses a six-lane freeway in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Tillett is installing LED strips at the edges of the pathway that will wash the expanded metal mesh tube enclosing the bridge in a peachy, watermelon-colored glow inspired by the color of the sunset on the nearby mountains.

The firm is also involved in a Federal Aid project to revitalize Syracuse, New York, by reinforcing the five-mile-long connective corridor between downtown and Syracuse University. Tillett has proposed coating specific nodes along this path with highly reflective material that will be illuminated with one watt of light, creating a series of bold markers along the way that highlight pedestrian spaces, bike paths, and public transportation.



Bear Canyon Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Tillett Lighting Design has not given up its private clients. The firm supplements work in the public realm by lighting hospitality and residential spaces. “The private work gives a flow and stability to the office,” explained Tillett. In addition to the financial benefits, these projects feed the civic work both creatively and technically. “You can work more freely with private clients,” she said. “There are no codes or bureaucracies to deal with, and they often ask naive questions that lead to really innovative outcomes.”

For the Milne-Ojito Residence, a Soho loft, the clients needed a divider between their living room and sleeping area. Working with artist Joan Waltemath and architecture firm I-Beam Design, Tillet created a sliding glass door coated with phosphorus powder that glows cerulean blue. LED strips embedded in the door’s framing feed the phosphor, while mirrors and iridescent material in the glass further augment the lighting effect. “The difficult thing with phosphorus is color, but the technology is getting there,” Tillett said. “The next question is how to use it in a public space.”