

City Lights

By GWEN WEBBER • May 23, 2013

Feature News



The Bay Lights by artist Leo Villareal.

Lucas Saugen / Courtesy The Bay Lights

Cities rarely stand still. It is in their nature to evolve, expand, and, in some cases, contract. Whichever way they go, cities are always reinventing themselves, often one neighborhood at a time. Outdoor lighting can be a crucial part of this metamorphosis. Across the U.S., urban regeneration projects are stimulating activity in derelict infrastructure, defunct waterfronts, neglected plots of land, and dilapidated buildings. Though not completely erased, the use of fluorescent tubes and glaring security lights has been scaled back and in their place is a growing appreciation for sensitive, appropriate, and considered lighting. The arbiters of this decades-long shift are

lighting designers. Their role in improving conditions to make safer, more accessible cities is increasingly key to urban design.



The Bay Lights transforms this workhorse bridge into a tourist destination on par with its better known sister, the Golden Gate Bridge.

Lucas Saugen / Courtesy The Bay Lights

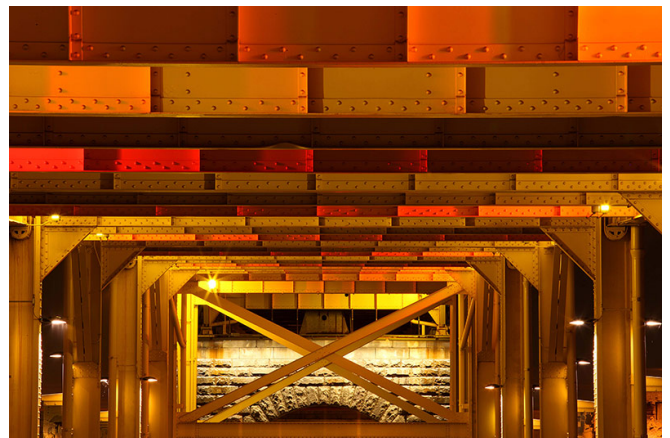
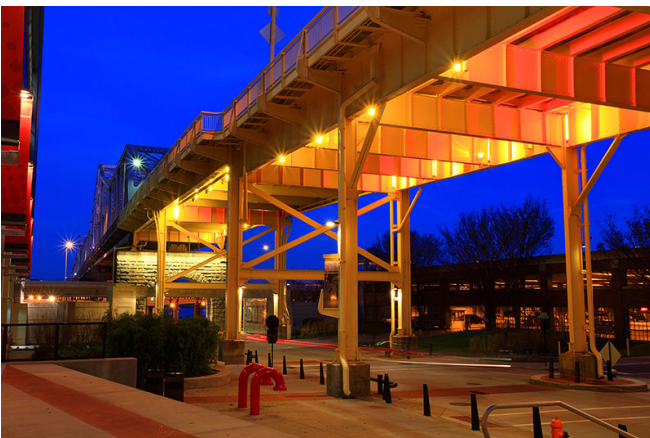
To foster urban growth and economic development, it has become imperative for municipalities to respond to increased numbers of people on the streets, spikes in crime and vandalism, and an understanding that light needn't just be a deterrent for unsavory activity, but can also perform as a catalyst for new appropriations of space and informal gatherings. The most obvious examples of such spaces vulnerable to neglect are those in perpetual shadow: underpasses. **Tillett** Lighting Design's installation under the Brooklyn Bridge, *This Way*, is a response to what studio founder Linnaea **Tillett** interpreted as the neighborhood's "mild nervous breakdown." This breakdown, she said, resulted from the torrent of visitors who were unsure of where to go after descending the bridge, and who had a tendency to urinate in the stairway on finding there were no restroom facilities in the vicinity. "It may not be the most unsafe area, but it gets to feel like that when it's so repellent," said **Tillett**. The fingers of light that now fan out from the corners of the stairway entrance and along the bridge's underside in spark-like formations offer a visual guide—and deterrant spotlight on the steps. Gwen Grossman Lighting Design's *The Wave* in Chicago's outskirts performs a similar service. Composed of a vibrant series of color-changing LED pendants arranged in a row, the installation has transformed a once-uninviting 250-foot-long covered walkway between a corporate building and a parking lot into an agreeable prelude to happy hour.



Gwen Grossman Lighting Design's The Wave in Chicago.

Brett Gardener

In some cases, light is used as a way to anchor unremarkable places to their broader context. Leni Schwendinger Light Project's design for the Second Street Bridge underpass in Louisville, Kentucky, juxtaposes dimmable red and amber hues that nod to the bourbon warehouses on Whiskey Row with a rhythmic pattern of LED flashers (the same as those used on the Eiffel Tower). "I believe in surprise and anticipation," said Schwendinger. Illuminating the underside of the bridge's steel carriage, Schwendinger adapted a Digital Addressable Lighting Interface (DALI) control system—most commonly used in commercial buildings—to develop exterior lighting sequences in a series of energy-efficient fluorescent tubes filtered with colored glass. "I wanted the heavy structure to undulate, to breathe," she said. The area below the bridge, conceived as a plaza, bathed as it is in changing light, now elicits delight as opposed to a sense of unease.



In Louisville, KY, Leni Schwendinger Light Projects turned an uninviting area under an old bridge into a

pleasant passageway in an emerging nightlife district.

Ted Tarquino

An increasingly familiar approach to such spaces is to wash them with colored light, but the complexity lies in how much light and whether it should be a stand-alone feature or part of a wider program. Like many designers, Charles Stone, President of Fisher Marantz Stone, deals in contrasts. “Without dark, you don’t have light,” said Stone, whose first move in the design of the St. Clair Street Bridge in Indianapolis, Indiana, was to cast the surrounding area into darkness. Amid the gloom, a series of computer-controlled, color-changing LED fixtures floodlight the bridge’s underbelly and pathway. The color changes are synchronized to a sound installation that accompanies a historic interpretive display lining the curved walls.



Fisher Marantz Stone used computer-controlled LEDs to wash the St. Clair Street Bridge in Indianapolis, Indiana with changing colors of light.

Courtesy Fisher Marantz Stone

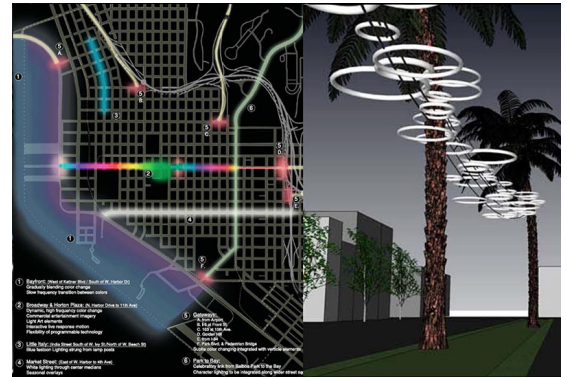
Connections above ground can be equally foreboding in the absence of illumination. In 1970, after decommissioning the High Bridge aqueduct, part of the Croton drinking water system, the steel and masonry passage linking the Bronx to Manhattan was closed due to vandalism. Recently, the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation has begun to restore the span, hiring HLB Lighting Design to develop a scheme. The firm’s design accentuates the delicate steel lattice structure and its arches and integrates new LED technology into Parks’ uniform fixtures. “We are experiencing a shift, recognizing that quality of light is more important than quantity of light,” said Barbara Horton, a partner at HLB. In her experience, lighting has a lasting residual effect, “creating pride and identity and a destination.”



HLB Lighting Design's scheme for the soon-to-reopen High Bridge in New York.

Courtesy HLB

A good example of this is Fulton Street Mall in Brooklyn, where neglected maintenance of the dated street lighting led to vigilante solutions. Local businesses installed security lighting wall packs (the glaring box lights that are used to flood ATM machines), making the streetscape look more like a prison yard than a commercial thoroughfare. HLB intervened with custom-designed light posts that curve like a row of trees along the street, evoking a Parisian allée. The double-source posts feature one compact fluorescent lamp at 14 feet high and a metal halide lamp at 30 feet high. The posts were so successful at transforming the atmosphere of the mall that they are now being considered as standard fixtures for the city.



Four lighting master-plans for downtown San Diego, also by HLB.

Courtesy HLB

It is generally accepted that people feel safer when they can perceive space and recognize other people along the way. “I live in a city that believes that brighter is better and I don’t quite believe that,” says Jim Baney of Chicago firm Schuler Shook Lighting Design. “I do think that in an urban area you have to start with good lighting as a base line for people to feel safe.” The imminent development of Navy Pier in Chicago has put into question the safety and comfort of an increased number of visitors to the lakeside area. Baney has been pondering the details of a pedestrian flyover to alleviate this pressure and provide a more welcoming promenade. His work on Midway Crossing for the University of Chicago with artist James Carpenter and BauerLatoza Studio resulted in an elegant solution that transformed a once frightening route to campus. To help realize Carpenter’s vision of a light bridge, Schuler Shook designed a series of handrails embedded with horizontal and vertical lighting, striking a fine balance between intimate and secure. In addition to the handrails, non-traditional 40-foot-tall light masts act as a visual cue to demarcate the crossing. Baney is aware of a delicate balance in his work. “I feel like there’s a tension when we’re talking about exterior lighting,” he said. “We want to keep as much light out of our sky as possible, but to get those vertical light levels you need something with a presence. Often we use the architecture as a surface that we want to highlight, which we can illuminate better than ever with LEDs. Some still goes into the atmosphere but a lot less than 10-to-15 years ago.”



At the Brooklyn Navy Yard, **Tillett** back-lit a metal screen to offer a sense of occupancy to an otherwise desolate area.

Chuck Choi

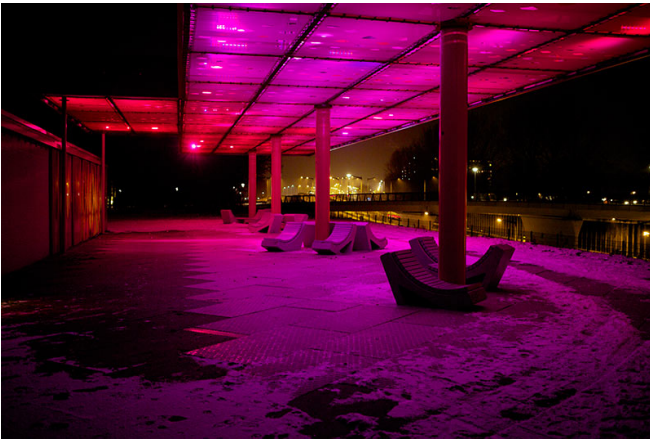
Urban and industrial relics of yesteryear have also become canvases for lighting designers. As cities expand and engulf land that was formerly on the outskirts, and as major industry moves further away, old factory buildings and heavy infrastructure have been retrofitted for new populations of residents. The repurposed High Line in New York, lit by L'Observatoire International, is a case in point. Another is **Tillett's** work at the fast-developing Brooklyn Navy Yard. She subtly back-lit screens in the windows of warehouse buildings to give a sense of occupation to an otherwise desolate area.



L'Observatoire International created a moody installation on the High Line that dramatizes the industrial architecture.

Emile Dubuisson

Perception of how dangerous or hostile a place is can at times be more detrimental to an area than tangible threats. In North Amsterdam, for example, Sophie Valla Architects recently renovated a derelict gas station into a cultural kiosk and arts space as part of a scheme to revamp a nearby park and transit line. To broadcast the old filling station's change in function, the designers fitted lights into the newly paneled canopy. The lighting scheme doesn't by itself provide any greater safety, but the luminous structure and the crowds that are attracted to it like moths around a bulb are testament to the powerful impact light can have on leftover infrastructure.



Lighting turned a disused gas station into a gathering place outside Amsterdam.

Marcus Koppen

Sometimes, just making people aware of their environment is enough to change their perceptions about it. An extreme example of this is The Bay Lights, the recent light installation—the biggest in the world—on the Bay Bridge in San Francisco, which was conceived by Ben Davis and designed by Leo Villareal. “It is transforming the urban environment,” said Davis, Chair of Illuminate the Arts. “Art calls our attention to that that’s already there.” Built only months before the Golden Gate Bridge, the 75 year-old Bay Bridge has never been applauded as an icon like its blushing sister. Davis’ celebration of this workhorse and underdog has changed that. People now gather nightly at the Embarcadero to see the bridge come to life in the flickering light of 250,000 LEDs that are animated by an algorithm to resemble what Villareal calls a “digital campfire.”



L'Observatoire International's lighting design helps to elevate the architecture and infrastructure of the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Facility in Brooklyn.

Emile Debusson

The theatrical blue floodlighting that highlights the gargantuan anaerobic digesters at the Newtown Creek Waste Water Treatment Facility in Brooklyn and the planned lantern-like glow of Steven Holl's library in nearby Long Island City, Queens, are two other examples of unsung features of the built environment that have been imbued with

a greater civic role by lighting. For Jason Neches, office director at L'Observatoire International, making such structures visible is key to improving urban life. "We like those kinds of diamonds in the rough. Gritty and not inherently beautiful, but that can change with an artful use of lighting." This kind of lighting, which doesn't necessarily respond to social ills, nevertheless contributes to the inherent cognitive mapping that takes place inside a city. It creates beacons at night, helping people to orient themselves, an important component of familiarity and comfort. As Charles Stone says: "the reason to live in a city is to see it at night."