

The Urban Designer's Next Frontier: Night Time Design

Leni Schwendinger introduces an approach to collaborative design

According to Philip Black, urban design was established as a new design discipline in 1956 emanating from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Similarly, I encourage urbanists to consider the young and essential discipline of night time design.

Is night a place? Would consideration of night time as an experiential place encourage planners to incorporate dusk-to-dawn city conditions with seriousness and sensitivity? Does this period of darkness affect our understanding of *genius loci*?

Urban and architectural disciplines imagine tomorrow through a day-centric lens. Visual and rendering background

canvases are predominantly white. Sketches depict people enjoying future improvements in sunlight. Exceptions tend to be sunset scenarios and entertainment districts. While day and night don't represent distinct physical locations, after dark expectations and perceptions are entirely different.

Sunset to sunrise, temporal atmospheres and conditions over the course of twenty four hours do not change geography. However, in darkness, social dynamics and economic and civic realities impact the neighbourhood *genius loci* – and merit the statement that night *is* a place, with all the gravitas that merits after dark placemaking and

placekeeping proposals.

With a hybrid identity – as an urban lighting designer, artist and community organiser – being a 'night time designer' is my combined title. This perspective means considering a wide variety of issues such as safety and walkability, night as a cultural environment, and night shift labour. These night-linked issues suggest that the urban designer needs to expand their purview to the after dark concerns of transportation and transit planning, public space and street design, the burgeoning global night culture movement, and the experience of graveyard shift workers – cleaners, medical staff, delivery bikers or



Myrtle Beach, South Carolina: NightSeeing Light Walk. Copyright: Keith Jacobs

security guards – among other relevant night-centred subjects. In addition, the night time designer needs skills in community outreach and participation in order to inform real change. An around-the-clock mindset ought to be fused into the urban designer’s approach.

A number of model international examples of programmes that address night-oriented policy, justice issues, and social and economic aspects exist. Two exemplars are the *Sydney 24-hour Economy Strategy* by the Australian state of New South Wales, and London’s growing set of policies and interventions by the Greater London Authority which began in July 2017.

Night time design aims to enhance neighbourhood safety, economic development and public health with outcomes such as:

- Prioritising walkability and improving pedestrian safety through interdisciplinary design collaboration
- Increasing business open hours by creating active, adjacent public space
- Encouraging sociability with sociable spaces of decreased fear
- Utilizing citizen engagement by providing hands-on events
- Reducing energy costs with better and adaptive lighting
- Reducing of citizens’ complaints through community buy-in and pilots.

Night walking and spontaneous light-making

Walking at night is the key to building a language of light in city environments. Two programmes that launched this awareness included Guerrilla Lighting, which was set up in 2008 as a low cost, high impact way of demonstrating the impact of well-designed lighting through hands-on workshops and engagement. This method sparked

many groups and cities to follow Light Collective’s UK Guerilla Lighting guide *How to Organise Guerilla Lighting*. Essentially the process includes the gathering of local people and lighting designers to create surprising, temporary light installations at night. Only handheld, battery-operated illuminators, such as torches and LED dots are allowed.

Meanwhile in Japan, Lighting Detectives was initiated by designer Kaoru Mende. Lighting Detectives was founded ‘to review the present state of urban environmental lighting to physically go out with our own feet and eyes to observe lighting in actual use instead of relying on theories, ideologies and preconceptions.’ Most recently the focus has been on lighting quality including over-lighting, or too much illumination.

At the time of writing, a recent Lighting Detectives website post is from a project in Manila. A poll to rate the quality of environmental light asks readers to vote on images as heroes or villains. ‘In cities worldwide there are all types of different lighting environments, some are exciting, romantic or relaxing and some are outright shocking or unpleasant. Vote Hero or Villain for this month’s pick. You be the judge.’

NightSeeing, a methodology

NightSeeing™ is a global programme which I have been running for more than 14 years. The goal is to reveal participants’ perceptions through active learning in an experiential, eye-opening group context. The subtext is to seed advocacy for night and light in neighbourhoods. NightSeeing is a real-time travelogue through the culture of urban lighting to encourage recognition of the unnoticed vistas that characterise our environments. Guy Debord’s 1958 invention of *dérive*, or drifting, ‘involve[s]



Bogota: NightSeeing Light Walk. Copyright: Mario Castillo



Boston: NightSeeing Light Walk. Copyright: Shanklevision



playful dispositions and an awareness of psychogeographical effects [which] are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll’.

NightSeeing is a backgrounder to wandering after dark, proposing a parallel approach for twenty-first-century urban ambulation: a *dérive* through vernacular, under-designed atmospheres. Psychogeography emphasizes the perceptual; moods – cheer, fear, confidence, nonchalance – shift throughout the ‘Shades of Night’, a framework to measure the hours of urban darkness.

The complexity of the city night landscape often remains invisible



NightSeeing workshops involve collaborative activities. Photos by Don Slater

to the untrained eye. My theoretical path originated by a startling moment of realisation in Paris; after viewing the 1985 Centre Pompidou's massive exhibition *Les Immatériaux* with its historic and contemporary kinetic and light-based works, I was filled with wonderment. Walking home, I discovered a streetscape phenomenon, the double shadow. Cast shadows are perceived as dark patterns, and enigmatically, when one shadow is overlaid by another, the intersection of these shadow-forms defines a deeper darkness. This moment culminated in an overwhelming question, 'What *is* darkness?'

Since then, I no longer perceive cast shadow as a reductively singular plane but rather an artful, yet unplanned temporal pavement *chiaroscuro* composed of tree leaves, twigs, bike racks, scaffolding and fences, that transcends the centrality of electrical 'light points', to use the technical phrase of designers and engineers. This occasion was the precursor to developing the 'NightSeeing: Navigate Your Luminous City' programme.

More than 20 years later, while teaching 'Designing the Night time Environment' at Parsons School of Design, The New School, a group of students and I stepped out of the classroom into Manhattan's lower Fifth Avenue evening. Immediately and with intense clarity I began narrating light phenomena observations. This was a spontaneous voice-over pointing out the objects and qualities of streetlighting, utility

sconces, storefronts, building tops, and glints and gleams of reflections from cars and puddles. Simultaneously, a student group led by a future landscape architect, Andres Arcila, coined the term 'night seeing', which became a map for their final term project and was a play on the word sightseeing. After their giant fold-out graphic presentation, 'Night Seeing: Your Guide to New York's Best Night Time Events', they gifted the locution to me.

For urban planning and design initiatives, NightSeeing serves as an introduction to less-known after dark conditions. This is ironic since the period between sunset and sunrise, globally, comprises 50 per cent of our time throughout the seasons, and a shame, given the heightened promotion of 24/7 cities.

The NightSeeing programme is planned for around professional or public audiences, and is an interactive, staged programme in one, two or three parts. The first stage is an integrated LightWalk which provides a platform for the participants to join in experiential learning; this in turn begets exciting discoveries about night and light. Attendees bond with colleagues and neighbours, helping to increase a sense of belonging.

Next, a two-hour envisioning workshop culminates in objectives for the future. Finally, the lighting masterplan provides a holistic, after dark strategy, which should fit neatly into the district's overall masterplan. Here I will focus on the first two stages.

Part 1: The LightWalk

The NightSeeing LightWalk constitutes a process of activating prior knowledge. In other words, people subconsciously take in environmental cues, but in many cases are not aware of what they see. Once this is pointed out, it is recognised. At that moment a typical response is 'I never saw that before', and these moments are turning points that geographer Tim Edensor calls 'defamiliarisation'. With this experience, attendees synthesize the possibilities for future night time lighting and design.

To support this, a figure-ground is turned inside out privileging black over white (night over day) in a radical re-seeing of familiar spaces. The NightSeeing route is orchestrated to allow participants to define and verbalise their observations of the evening's darkened landscape.

The event host (which could be a city council, a school or a conference organiser) is tasked with mapping out a route for a 10 minute walk, and with my narration, this path extends to an hour. Typically, the host selects sites deemed the best designed and illuminated as a kind of best practice lighting sightseeing tour. Building tops, façade lighting and feature markings such as neon signs are typically chosen as significant visual landmarks. However, the criteria for a NightSeeing route are to elevate the commonplace. What is this place like at night, right now, whether designed or inadvertent? For instance, traffic signals are noted as serial figures linearly dotting the dusky street volumes, 'jewels of the night', rather than circumscribed by their traffic control function.

My preferred cartography for a NightSeeing path is zigzag in form. The route selection should be as varied as possible with respect to buildings and

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land uses. Alleyways, lanes and stairways are welcome, and demographic diversity is preferred. The optimal itinerary is frequented by inhabitants of various ages, ethnicities, and economic and social classes to encourage remarks about the social configurations of night. These criteria underscore the contextual message that night is a public place, a space-time in which people live. A quick exercise before we begin the walk is to stop the participants and let them form groups according to their preference to light or dark. Inevitably a small group is left standing in the middle opining that highlight and shadow exist together. The aim of this warm-up is to demonstrate that a preference for light or dark is completely subjective.

Part 2: Workshop

The NightSeeing™ programmes add value to city planning. Key stakeholders may be joined at the workshop stage by community activists, council departments and others identified by the host organisation. The workshop stage builds on the observations and responses made during the LightWalk by inviting participants to imagine night lighting

themes integrated into their district improvement schemes. The envisioning process is facilitated by bespoke picture and word character cards.

The goal is to identify three objectives for future nights. Each group reduces 30 cards down to five and gives three objectives, which might range from ‘soft lighting’ to ‘whimsical and joyous’, and ‘better-illuminated shop windows’. In the end, all of the groups’ objectives are synthesized into three priorities.

Conclusion

Night time design practice is a holistic expansion of urban design. This comprehensive point of view accounts for the global exigencies of life after sundown defined by geography and climate, culture and community. For example, a Global North location and climate, with a particular culture in a specific neighbourhood with particular social networks, differs from a comparable area in the Global South. Each site-specific case merits on-the-ground research and design to plan a night time lighting strategy. Lighting and urban designers in the UK may feel that there

is a new opportunity for design to push back against Margaret Thatcher’s 1987 quip, ‘There’s no such thing as society’. One way is to develop an all-inclusive, community-involved, inspirational field of night time design. ●

Leni Schwendinger, lighting artist, designer and owner of Leni Schwendinger Light Projects NightSeeing™ is a trademark by Leni Schwendinger

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- Guerilla Lighting lightcollective.net/uploads/projects/GUERRILLA_LIGHTING_-_How_To_Guide.pdf
- Lighting Detectives www.lighting.co.jp/activities/lighting and <https://shomei-tanteidan.org/en/>
- Derive, one of many resources <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i174/articles/peter-wollen-the-situationist-international>
- See Chapter 15, Darkness as Canvas, in *Rethinking Darkness Cultures, Histories, Practices*, Nick Dunn and Tim Edensor, (Eds.)
- VibeLab, a research, consultancy and advocacy agency dedicated to supporting creatives and preserving night time culture <https://vibe-lab.org/>
- NSW Government (2020) *Sydney 24-hour Economy Strategy* www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/Sydney-24-hour-Economy-Strategy.pdf
- Mayor of London (2017) *From good night to great night, A Vision for London as a 24-hour City* www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/24_hour_london_vision.pdf



Change to: Temple Bar Dublin: late evening scenes, contrasting streets. Photographs by Damien Eagers