

TRANSFORMATIVE URBAN LIGHTING

When Beauty Becomes a Necessity

By Ellie Naikan



Illumination of Queen Elizabeth Theatre for 'Drum Calling Festival' as part of Canada 150 Celebration. A dynamic sound and light installation.

WITH THE RAPID CHANGE OF CITIES, DAYS AND NIGHTS HAVE different functions more than before. Today, 54 per cent of the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 66 per cent by 2050, according to a UN report. Mega-cities — those with more than 10 million people — are increasing in number, and rural populations are expected to decrease as urban populations continue to grow.

This demographic change has led to a change in urban life after dark, driven by rising 24/7 economies. The streets and exterior public spaces don't serve only to bring pedestrians or vehicles safely from point A to B. They have become the unseen mesh that connects cultures, groups and individuals together. With most people spending the majority of their time in enclosed spaces during the day, life after dark in public places may be their only encounter with open spaces in a city.

Lighting should reinforce urban design so a city can function after dark as well as by day. The majority of city planners currently focus on their designs for daytime use, with the nighttime function and lighting of building facades, streets, public spaces, transportation, and landscapes often neglected. Whereas city life may be vibrant by day, by night it transforms to dark or over-lit streets, alleys, and plazas; the commercial buildings change to cold

masses of steel, stone and glass. The colours and textures of the city fade away with peculiar shapes and shadows rising from the darkness. We are not able to build new cities, however we have the opportunity to rebuild our cities. It is tremendously important to address the night life in our urban centres, and skilled illumination is one of the main pillars for contributing to this context.

One of the biggest issues in modern city night life is isolation — a lack of community and sense of belonging. The ability to walk on your own through the city at night, yet not feel alone is the result of successful lighting design in urban settings. The beauty of illuminated architecture, streets and structures accompanies you. The high quality lighting design of public spaces offers places for individuals to connect, walk around and maintain healthy lifestyles, or relax and recharge.

Creating holistic lighting designs for vitality and inclusivity at night is the key. Illumination should be designed for people and not for vehicles alone. A vibrant city encourages people to get out of their cars and walk or cycle. What pedestrians see and where they look are completely different from motorists' perspectives, and lighting should serve the purpose of making public spaces more attractive to pedestrians. The concept of 'brighter is better' also needs to be challenged; instead, designers can think about the skilled use of contrast at night. Uniform lighting can be replaced by carefully curated lightscapes that utilize a combination of ambient lighting, focal points and colorful accents. And many overhead lighting concepts can be transformed to enveloping lighting concepts by



lighting from above, underneath, and all around us.

Although restrictions in energy codes and concerns about light pollution are important considerations for designing sustainably and responsibly, immense changes in LED technology and lighting controls open new possibilities for illuminating our cities with no compromise on the quality and beauty of our urban night life. New technology for smart cities has also revolutionized urban lighting design to another degree. It can change urban lighting from ambient to dynamic, from dynamic to responsive and from responsive to interactive now, providing endless possibilities to integrate lighting into the entire urban structure of cities at night.

Studies have proven the healing power of art and beauty. The brain connects art and beauty to emotional and hormonal changes, which result in reduced stress and anxiety. By using light as a medium for creating beauty and art, public spaces and structures are elevated into mesmerizing and healing environments for the public.

One-size-fits-all lighting solutions need to be exchanged with concepts that celebrate diversity in lighting

our public spaces. As developers, architects and city planners start to re-evaluate how spaces are experienced at night, the role of lighting designers becomes more critical in rebuilding the urban night life.

Light has the ability to connect individuals and cultures together. We see examples of this during the Christmas season when light is used as a respite from the long, dark nights of winter, and to set the mood for holiday festivities. There are also illumination festivals, such as the Festival of Lights in Lyon in winter and the Celebration of Light in Vancouver in summer, where the powerful medium of light brings communities together.

Imagine how beautiful would it be if your night walk on the streets or in public spaces brings you the feeling of walking in a gallery of skillfully illuminated pieces that only reveal themselves in the dark. Lighting has become the element that connects cities with citizens now. [DQ](#)

Internationally recognized for her award-winning lighting design, Ellie Niakan (CLD, LC) brings more than 17 years of experience to Integral Group in Vancouver, where she leads the Integral Light Studio.

Lighting design for Telus Garden in Vancouver B.C.