

Attracted by Light

by Christina Lanzl / August 22, 2011

<http://www.architects.org/news/attracted-light>



Lighting design is closely intertwined with the built environment. Magical illuminations of nighttime environments and inspired, lit interiors enchant—our memories are imprinted with indelible impressions of light. They may be of permanent installations or temporary displays, ranging from simple projections to entire festivals. Important, ongoing conversations in the field focus on environmentally responsible [outdoor lighting](#) and [daylighting buildings](#), though these topics are beyond the scope of this article.

Festivals of light are blossoming in cities around the world, and an ongoing calendar of events can be found at [Luminapolis.com](#). In Cambridge, MIT's astounding, recent [FAST Light](#) festival of art, science and technology in celebration of the university's 150th anniversary or Illuminale Boston at the occasion of the Rose Kennedy Greenway inauguration in October 2008 come to mind.

Light sculptures have been designed since the 1920s by pioneers such as László Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus. Each new technical development has inspired creative applications pushing the boundaries of the medium, such as Dan Flavin's minimalist, neon-colored installations beginning around 1960. By

1968, Flavin's light installations had grown to room-size environments. Generations of lighting designers have pushed boundaries to ever-more complex, controlled light environments since then. Artificial light has long passed the simple notion of an electrical tool to brighten the dark.

[Stephen Antonakos](#) and [Keith Sonnier](#) are among the best-known designers of large-scale light-art commissions in architecture. Particularly their installations in transportation facilities—Boston's Back Bay Station or Germany's Munich airport among them—have set new standards for quality of life in transitory environments.



The contemporary “[lightpaintings](#)” by Stephen Knapp take the genre to another level. The designer has developed a process of coating irregularly shaped pieces of glass that reflect projected light with intense luminosity. His large-scale wall installations, such as *Luminous Affirmations*, commissioned by Lights on Tampa, or *First Symphony* at Ball State University are symphonies of colored light planes.

Rapid technological advancements enable new expressions. Beginning in the late 1970s, [Jenny Holzer](#) became the first and most well known artist incorporating light-emitting diodes (LEDs) to express words and ideas in public space. Around 1990, liquid crystal display, or LCD, technology launched the digital projection industry. By the mid-1990s, the Holzer studio staged performances of time-based word-art projections on landmark architecture and public structures that continue to mesmerize audiences around the globe.

Slide and video projections emerged as a medium in the 1980s, pioneered by Krzysztof Wodiczko's politically charged images on architectural facades and monuments worldwide. These artistic explorations went hand in hand with commercial applications. Lighting design is booming.

Low-energy LEDs and the application of software technology to drive light installations continue advancing the field at lightning speed. The overabundance of lit advertising during the second half of the 20th century has given way to new standards in today's building design. A culture of carefully composed lighting plans creates memorable permanent environments that may offer a calming, breathtaking or otherwise unforgettable experience. Today's lighting plans cover buildings, masterplans, infrastructure, public spaces, landmarks and artworks of all kinds.

Outstanding contemporary lighting design in public space is produced by Leni Schwendinger in her often dramatic [Light Projects](#). Through her work she intends to “energize architecture, landscape and infrastructure with the ultimate objective of connecting people to each other and to their surroundings.” Her Seattle Center's Marion O. McCaw Hall is a masterpiece of blues and reds flooding the space; extraordinary also is Brooklyn's Coney Island Parachute Jump or her illumination in Unna, Germany, where the reenacted blue lightwaves of the buried local river bounced off both the built environment and visitors in her 2003 temporary projection, *Glowing Waterway*.

Among architectural lighting designers, [Lam Partners](#) ranks high on the list of notable firms. From his beginnings around 1960, Bill Lam's motto of "lighting by design, not engineering" targeted architecture that lacked good lighting. Trained as an architect, he developed best building lighting design as a specialty of architecture. The Chattanooga 21st Century Waterfront Park in partnership with landscape architect Hargreaves Associates transformed the space into a popular attraction of the South. Noteworthy are Boston interior civic spaces, such as the 1.2-million square feet of Terminal E at Logan International Airport with its cool hues of blue back-lit panels complementing the airline monitors below and perfectly corresponding to the browns of the rear atrium wall. At the John Joseph Moakley United States Courthouse, Lam Partners perfectly staged the series of color field paintings in collaboration with painter Ellsworth Kelly, which are audaciously installed below the glass dome along the round interior designed by TRO Jung | Brannen.

High aspirations of quality for public spaces, be it a temporary attraction or a lasting work, always transcend the ordinary experience and turn it into a memorable event. The spiritual quality of light elevates the illuminated space to a higher plane, setting the tone for culture realized at its highest potential.

Top image:

Leni Schwendinger/Light Projects, *Dreaming in Color, a 3-Dimensional Color Field*, Marion O. McCaw Hall, Seattle. Projected lights, software, programming and woven metal mesh, 30 to 50 feet wide (variable), 35 feet high, 350 feet long

Images 2 and 3:

Stephen Knapp, *First Symphony*, Ball State University
Projected light, glass, stainless steel, 23 feet high x 40 feet long x 1 foot deep

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