

Participatory Public Lighting Design

A Preliminary Framework for Social Equality in Evening Public Spaces

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A Preliminary Framework for Social Equality in Evening Public Spaces

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Public squares, parklands, and shared courtyards are like islands in the urban landscape, at once places of revelry, recreation, refuge, and last resorts. This duality is particularly true after dark, with evening public spaces embodying both utopian ideals of conviviality and opportunity, and dystopian realities of top-down control and restriction. As public spaces become increasingly privatised, marginalised communities face progressively greater barriers to access, amplifying social inequalities. Conventional approaches to public space lighting design struggle to account for the perspectives of marginalised users as these approaches do not adequately engage with and build from the diverse lived experiences of users.¹ Instead, conventional approaches to public space lighting design are largely driven by the same technical standards applied to roads and motorways.² As such, these technical approaches fail to acknowledge the social context of a space and its users.³ To understand social context, particularly marginalised perspectives, lighting design needs to break convention and adopt co-operative approaches.

research alongside conventional design approaches. These design approaches use social research methods like observation and interview to collect insights on the local social context that will inform the design process. Understanding social context can direct lighting designers towards contextually sensitive solutions, as shown by the 2020 lighting redesign of Brandon Estate in the London Borough of Southwark, UK. Despite visions of revitalising the Southwark area, the mixed-use estate, designed by Edward Hollamby in 1958, has established a notorious reputation for violence.⁴ Following several incidents of violent crime in 2018, the local council installed bright LED lighting in the housing estate grounds. This gave the public realm a bleak, securitised atmosphere at odds with the strong sense of community shared by estate residents and failed to improve perceptions of safety.⁵ In 2020, lighting designers and social researchers from *Configuring Light* worked alongside residents to redesign lighting in one of the estate's public squares. By embracing the social context, the once avoided square became an evening social space embraced by both older and newer residents,⁶ resolving issues created by the

1.

Elettra Bordonaro, Joanne Entwistle, and Don Slater, "The Social Study of Urban Lighting," in *Urban Lighting for People*, ed., Navaz Davoudian (London: RIBA Publishing, 2019), 2–17, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367814588-1>.

2.

Standards Australia, "Lighting for Roads and Public Spaces Part 3.1: Pedestrian Area (Category P) Lighting-Performance and Design Requirements," February 21, 2020, <https://subscriptions.techstreet.com/products/852837>.

3.

Joanne Entwistle and Don Slater, "Light as Material/Lighting as Practice: Urban Lighting and Energy," *Science Museum Group Journal* 9, no. 9 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.15180/180906>.

4.

TP Clarke, "The Brandon Estate: Corridors of Fear and Pathways to Providence," *Street Photography Magazine online*, January 2024, <https://streetphotographymagazine.com/article/the-brandon-estate-corridors-of-fear-and-pathways-to-providence/>.

5.

"Lighting Brandon 3," *Configuring Light*, February 23, 2023, https://www.configuringlight.org/klin_portfolio/lighting-brandon-3/.

6.

Luciana Martinez and Elettra Bordonaro, "Lighting Inequality in an Urban Context: Design Approach and Case Studies," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 1099, no. 1 (November 1, 2022): 012006, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/1099/1/012006>.

conventional standards-driven design of the local council.

While using social research has been shown to improve the contextual sensitivity of design choices, there is inconsistency to the level of participation marginalised users have within lighting design informed by social research. Presently, public participation in social research approaches mostly takes place in the exploration of social context and less commonly in the ideation and development of design solutions – a co-designed approach. Co-design has been shown to combat social exclusion in public spaces,⁷ though the application of co-design in public space lighting remains largely unexplored. For lighting designers to fully support the collective and diverse needs of marginalised users, better understanding of how to facilitate lighting co-design is needed.

This study will present the application of co-design in public space lighting projects to promote the perspectives and needs of marginalised users for evening social connection. Using public space observations, interviews with diverse stakeholders, and small-scale lighting co-design projects, the study will present

preliminary work in developing a public lighting co-design framework. By learning from past experiences and working alongside marginalised communities, lighting designers can break down social inequalities reinforced by conventional design approaches, shifting evening public spaces from reminders of societal division to islands of social connection.

7.

Mark Evans and Nina Terrey, "Co-Design with Citizens and Stakeholders," in *Evidence-Based Policy Making in the Social Sciences: Methods That Matter*, ed. Gerry Stoker and Mark Evans (Policy Press, 2016), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447329367.003.0014>.