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The Liveliness of Light

Light brings places to us. Through its abundance we can see and interpret things that are not proximate to our touch, audible to our ears, or evident through smell; light lets us know about things that are remote.

Patterns of light, captured by photography and transferred into networks of ink, allow journals like ours to convey even a semblance of what places are like, how they may affect us and what we can attend to when we live in or visit them.

Places are more, though, than the images we know of them, and light plays a greater role than simple illumination. Natural light, which is modified by the atmosphere through which it passes and by the surfaces from which it is reflected, continually alters what we perceive and can be a handy reminder that we live in the midst of a most astonishing and vital array of reciprocities — of energies transformed in mutual dependencies.

The liveliness of light fills our experience of place with nuance; the traces of time passing or seasons changing as the quality and direction of sunlight shifts, the geometric intricacies of shadow and highlight, the soft modulations and phantom images created by reflections from neighboring surfaces, the subtle fluctuations in value, hue and intensity of color. Perceptions of these fluid, shifting characteristics of light, modified by shaped surfaces, serve as a rebuke to diagrammatic and lifeless design, to things conceived in absentia.

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These nuances deserve our special attention because they speak to the pleasures of being present in a real place in lived time. They contribute to the experience we have in places both public and private; they are also subject to careful, purposeful design. To focus attention on the heritage of designing with light, both natural and artificial, a special section of this issue has been conceived by our guest editors, Richard C. Peters and Martin Schwartz, teachers of architecture who profess the wonders of light.

Light has the advantage, though, that it shifts and moves on, only to be reinvested in another day. Not all the reciprocal relationships with which we must be concerned are so ephemeral; the decisions we make as we invest in the location and character of buildings, roads and public infrastructure have long-term, durable consequence. These decisions and investments establish the framework for how we live.

Just as many architects have learned to anticipate the nuances of light, shaping the forms and spaces of their work to allow it to be both useful and splendid, we must learn to anticipate the play of activities over forms that are made to support public life and to structure places that afford comparable utility and splendor. Good places remind us of another kind of reciprocity, the reciprocity of human interests within which the city is formed.

— *Donlyn Lyndon*



Louis Armstrong Park, New Orleans, at dusk.
Photos by Richard C. Peters.