Peer Reviewed

Title:
Nighttime Lighting and Community Character [Streets: Old Paradigm, New Investment]

Journal Issue:
Places, 11(2)

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Publication Date:
1997

Publication Info:
Places

Permalink:
http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0n38b75d

Acknowledgements:
This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:
places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, nighttime, lighting, community, character, Brooklyn, New Lots, Schenck, streets, Linnaea Tillet

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Nighttime Lighting and Community Character

It is 5:30 on a winter's evening at the intersection of New Lots and Schenck avenues in East New York, Brooklyn. Residents are making their way home from subways and buses, picking up children from the day care and after school programs at the local community center, or heading to the neighborhood library.

As they walk down the sidewalks past the vacant lots, the transient clusters of families, small groups of older women and batches of young people illuminated by a series of experimental lighting interventions that highlight places important to the community. These pieces are part of a recently implemented pedestrian-lighting project created by the Parsons School of Design Makers in Lighting Program and sponsored by the New York City Department of Transportation's Pedestrian Projects Group.

With resources at a minimum, my colleagues at Parsons and I took an exploratory and experimental approach. For example, although East New York is classified as a high-crime neighborhood, we did not attempt to change that behavior by flooding potential crime spots with light. Nor did we focus light and attention on dark, unused areas. Rather, we worked to support the many positive activities going on in the neighborhood in non-commercial areas.

We lit a well-traveled route to active community destinations and a sand marked church.
Hence, the need for computer simulations, such as this view of Avenue A, to study how lighting changes would change the pedestrian environment. This simulation shows the effect of painting the underside of the elevated subway white and adding uplighting, and of washing a mural on the same wall with light. The original conditions are shown in the rear photo. Simulation by Alistair Kent; photo by Lynn Saville.
We spent hours observing pedestrian behavior and interviewing residents before deciding what routes to focus on, noting that the graffiti-free church, community center mural and library seemed to be cared for by the community. We made computer simulations of our proposals and showed them to community members to get their response. We were seeking to accomplish precise interventions that would make small but significant differences in the daily life of those who walk the streets.

Rather than focus on "making the streets safer for developed populations that face aesthetic and practical considerations as inseparable. Key to this approach were selecting a community that was in the process of rebuilding itself and developing close working relationships with community members and city staff. This allowed us to experiment with unconventional solutions. For example, we installed fragile decorative features that depend on community interaction and vigilance. (Six months after installation one has been broken.) The presence of these features sends a strong message that the community is of value to itself and the rest of the city.

In the coming year we will revisit East New York to evaluate how our interventions have affected pedestrian behavior and people’s impressions of the neighborhood. We hope that our modest project will address some of the community’s needs and point to new ways of lighting all kinds of pedestrian areas.