

The language of light



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We are all affected by light, with both its presence and its absence able to influence how we feel and how we act. Yet academic exploration of light and its impact has largely been ignored by social scientists. **Don Slater** and **Mona Sloane** explain why the Configuring Light programme is looking to change this.

Light is a fundamental feature of everyday life and the basis for all social experience and interaction. It determines the ways in which we socialise after dusk, how safe we feel in nocturnal environments and how well we are able – or not – to navigate through them. Light influences the types of activities we pursue and, indeed, can make others impossible. Light is an enabler, through which we can create certain ambiances that enhance a sense of place or an atmosphere of safety.

But light is also taken for granted and remains invisible until it fails to work and we are forced to cope with the experience of unexpected darkness.

And there is in fact an increasing topicality to light as a headline “problem”: it plays a prominent role in discussions around environmental issues, health and well-being, safety and security, technological innovation and the arts and creative industries. Light also has a growing profile in urban design, planning and governance, coinciding with a widespread adoption of the most fundamental technical revolution in lighting since Edison – the LED.

Despite this significance, until now light has been overlooked by the social sciences. There is no body of research into what we truly know about what people think and feel about light. It seems as if social science

has not yet found an approach or a language for investigating and articulating issues and concerns relating to light as stuff – as something that we need to make and shape everyday life.

It was against this backdrop that we launched the Configuring Light/Staging the Social programme in 2012 with Dr Joanne Entwistle of King's College London. As an umbrella programme bringing together social scientists and practitioners in design, architecture and urban planning through a variety of projects, Configuring Light is focused on the ways in which light is configured into built environments, and with what consequences.

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It is a particularly exciting time to be taking a sociological look at light. Architects, planners and designers are increasingly mindful of the importance of light in staging urban spaces. Awareness of the LED revolution is accelerating as both cities and the private sector shift to bulbs that exponentially decrease energy consumption and increase longevity. This is only the tip of the techno-design iceberg however. The LED is a fundamentally digital technology that allows real-time control of every aspect of lighting, from switching on and off, through brightness and dimming, to colour. Lighting can now respond to and interact with information for efficiency and for effect, and is therefore at the centre of the hype around smart homes, smart buildings and smart cities.

Thanks to LEDs, light is now a clear point of entry to researching the ways in which information, planning and design are technologically converging. As a consequence, there are a growing number of ways in which light can be used in both domestic and urban spaces and a growing need to understand its effects in order to harness it in the best possible way.

As social scientists we take a clear intellectual approach to the study of light. We are literally concerned with how light as *material* is configured into everyday life and built space. This can be a hard concept to get one's head around. It is not uncommon for people to exclaim when hearing about our work, "But that means looking at everything, doesn't it?" To which we have to respond "Yes it does", but also "No, it doesn't".

Yes, because we opportunistically use light and lighting as a way of introducing sociological perspectives into contemporary urban discourses, particularly around urban design and planning, and discussion around safety and security. No, because we are also using light as a way to dismantle abstract equations and make them more tangible. For example, investigating what "reducing carbon emissions" by replacing all street lighting with LED lights (as is happening in New York City and London) means "on the ground" for different constituents, such as city

dwellers, utilities companies, lighting designers and local authorities, can help us understand mechanisms of global rhetoric such as "climate change".

It became clear how diverse, complex, tangible and, ultimately, rich lighting can be as a social science topic during our first research project, Derby after Dark. Collaborating with lighting design practice Speirs+Major, as well as Derby City Council, we followed the development of a new master plan for the city.

Our brief was not only to pilot social science methodologies for lighting in public spaces, but also to identify how to better integrate social research into both design work and council regeneration planning. Over three months we examined the ways in which people used the city at night in order to suggest a lighting design that would best respond to their needs.

As a small, secondary city, Derby's night-time economy involves just a few streets used by overlapping but conflicting users, for example youth and older people. Through interviews, walkabouts and demonstrations, with policymakers, residents, businesses and visitors, we aimed to identify their key needs and the ways in which lighting could impact on their urban practices.

We initially found that both official and resident discourse on lighting was narrowly framed: people simply wanted more and brighter lighting to make the streets safer. By helping people articulate the wider issues, however, we were able to effect a more expansive discussion on the politics of light and so widen the range of design options that people might consider.

This research also sheds light on a particularly important aspect of urban design and planning in general: visions of a city's future. Whereas some aspired to Derby becoming a hub of creative industries that would attract a certain age group, and so demanded a particular kind of night-time economy and a lighting design that would respond to this, others wanted Derby's nocturnal skyline to

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identify it as a “destination city” for potential tourists. Some simply emphasised the need for future Derby to be made “safer at night”.

Our findings were fed back to Derby City Council and Speirs+Major, who incorporated them into their master plan. The benefit, however, was not all one way. The collaboration enabled us to understand and intervene in complex political processes that, as researchers, we normally find difficult to access. The results are a first step in enabling us to develop a more detailed “vocabulary of light”.

The importance of public lighting and lighting master plans for cities is a theme that has re-emerged from project to project. It was this focus on urban lighting which led us to co-hosting a public panel discussion at the Seventh World Urban Forum in Medellín, Colombia. Co-organised with Despacio, an NGO founded by LSE alumnus Carlosfelipe Pardo [see ‘Alumni viewpoint’], “Configuring the Urban Night” explored the role that urban lighting can play in improving livelihoods, increasing safety and fostering sustainable environmental policies for cities. Participants, including representatives from anti-light pollution initiatives, the local utilities company EPM, social researchers and members of the public, discussed the possible parameters for new public lighting initiatives in Medellín.

It became clear that the issues around public lighting that need to be addressed in Colombia’s cities are quite different from those we would assume from cities in the Global North. We simply cannot apply the same parameters to Global South cities like Medellín as we do to a city like London. The issues that Medellín’s informal settlements are facing with regards to implementing, or failing to implement, a cohesive and structured lighting design, for example, are different from those that planners in London are aiming to address by replacing all its streets lights with LEDs.

There is clearly an urgent need to understand local particularities in places that are “to be lit”, in conjunction with new lighting technologies that become available (such as LEDs) and global policy priorities that appear to dictate trends in urban lighting design and infrastructure planning, such as the need for sustainable energy consumption. We plan to build on the discussion that began in Medellín, and are currently developing a comparative research project focusing on urban lighting in cities in Nigeria, Vietnam and Colombia.

Funded by LSE HEIF5 funding and with technical support from iGuzzini, Configuring Light recently collaborated with Peabody and the Social Light Movement to bring together an international group of architects, planners, social scientists and lighting

design professionals at Peabody’s Whitecross Estate in Islington, London.

Through five days of practical workshops, we examined both the estate as a social space and its lighting scheme, explored the ways in which change could be effected, and worked together to suggest new lighting interventions to improve the space and lives of Whitecross residents. The aim was not only to create a practical lighting design which would improve the outdoor spaces on the estate, but also to use a social research toolkit to underpin our findings. This will provide lighting designers with social research methods to better understand the social spaces in which they intervene. The results of the Urban Lightscares/Social Nightscares project will be showcased with an exhibition at LSE in February 2015, as well as online at www.socialnightscares.org

As a programme, Configuring Light continues to grow and is currently in the process of seeking funding for its core operations. It has been an intense and exciting start to the programme. Practitioners, academics and members of the public are beginning to develop a sense not only of the importance of light and lighting, but also of the dynamic potential role that social science research can play in mediating between city users, designers and authorities.

What has been particularly fruitful for us as researchers is that this has not been a top-down training process but one of mutual learning. It has been important to ask how we can learn from designers and the approaches they take to understand the environments affected by their designs, as well as to ensure that the conclusions we reach are communicated to the people working in the field.

As we continue to examine the issues, and continue to assemble an interdisciplinary network of academics and practitioners of various disciplines, we hope to develop a shared language of light which will, ultimately, enrich us all. ■

The Configuring Light/Staging the Social team is led by Dr Don Slater and Mona Sloane, LSE, and Dr Joanne Entwistle, King’s College London. For more on the programme and future projects, see www.configuringlight.org



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ALUMNI VIEWPOINT



At Despacio.org we are interested in conducting research to promote quality of life in all stages of the life cycle. Simply put, we want, based on the Slow Movement philosophy, to develop and implement

projects to make people feel good. This means focusing on what we really want and simplifying what seems complex in all aspects of life.

Light is a complex issue. To create humane and sustainable urban spaces we must also consider the positive aspects of the night – the right to dark skies and issues of light pollution. The relevance of lighting in the urban context as a factor that can improve safety, reduce energy consumption and generate greater quality of life for urban areas needs to have greater prominence in discussions about public policy.

This is why we agreed to hold an event with LSE’s Configuring Light programme to discuss these issues during the Seventh World Urban Forum in Medellín in April, with support from private industry (ARUP) and co-organised by local institutions (Parque Explora and EPM). I was very excited to be able to work with the team of Configuring Light – our local knowledge was complemented by a very interesting approach to light as an object and its relevance in urban areas in theoretical and practical ways. It was surprising to see that discussions which related to abstract issues, such as the nature of light as a wave and a particle, could be discussed in such a way that participants could understand how it had direct relevance to their daily lives.

We are now looking at the potential ways in which we can continue to use this collaborative experience to support urban development policies directed at light. Hopefully, the coming years will bring greater focus on the issue of lighting as an area where improvements can (and must!) be made in order to increase the liveability and livelihoods of urban areas.

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