



by Nathalie Rozot

'Think globally but act locally' is a useful mantra for lighting professionals hoping to better engage in social issues

I borrowed this column's title from a book by Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr, the founders of Architecture for Humanity. It expresses discontent, which is fitting with my long-standing frustration with the paucity of social discourse and engagement in lighting design practices.

Ideological and social movements are part of design history; the last century alone saw the grand modernist reconstruction vision in the aftermath of World War II, grassroots engagements with communities in the '60s and '70s, and an ongoing humanitarian movement for global causes to serve underprivileged and disaster-struck populations. Architects with a social conscience have now organized and institutionalized public-interest design work through many activist practices such as Public Architecture—which was created in 2002 to recruit pro-bono design work and by 2008 had grown to a network of 400 firms—Architects Without Borders, Open Architecture Network, urbaninform, Design Corps, Designmatters, Architecture for Humanity, Habitat for Humanity, etc. It is time for the lighting design community to incorporate more social consciousness and engagement in its education agenda and engage in activist practices beyond the comfort zone sated with aesthetic pleasures driven by “starchitecture,” technology and energy correctness.

Admittedly, for practitioners, working pro-bono is a personal and business choice, but professional and academic institutions should aspire to provide leadership in social issues related to light by facilitating design-build and research projects. Effective, targeted social engagement is especially important because celebrated social causes

and the broad needs of “underserved populations” frequently result in generic solutions that fail to respond to specific contexts and constituencies. With participatory models, as opposed to projects based on naive idealism or top-down prescriptive processes, expertise is intricate and authorship a team effort; design encompasses program, process and project, and it is developed and vetted collectively. In our discipline, expertise has taught us to be wary of stakeholders’ “more-and-better” prescriptions where more is assumed to mean better and safer.

Just as I was reviewing case studies for this column, the news came of a \$210 million plan to reduce violent crime in New York City Housing Authority developments which includes a \$1.5 million lighting budget for the procurement of 150 light towers in 15 of the agency's highest-crime sites as a temporary solution to light up dim areas while permanent lighting is being developed. Alternatively, quality designs that in the short-term would engage constituents more effectively than light towers and be more sustainable in the long-term might better serve public interest in such crime-ridden low-income housing programs. This is not a simple task, but what it would take is exactly the kind of problem that motivates the team of the Social Light Movement (SLM).

SOCIAL LIGHTING: A NOTION IN MOTION

I have collaborated with one of SLM's founders, Isabelle Corten, through Concepteurs Lumière Sans Frontières (CLSF, a.k.a. Lighting Designers Without Borders), the nonprofit we are both active members of and for which she currently serves as president. In 1997, Corten was

working in lighting and studying urbanism, and for her final project she explored safety issues at night in a low-income housing neighborhood in Brussels. Her encounters with Swedes Jöran Linder and Eric Olsson, Brits Sharon Stammers and Martin Lupton during a PLDA workshop in Liverpool in 2007, and with Italian Elettra Bordonaro in a 2008 workshop in Copenhagen ultimately led to a 2010 meeting during which the founding team articulated SLM's title, vision and mission. SLM aims at "improving lighting for people: particularly those who are unlikely to have access to good quality illumination within their environment." Its manifesto reads: "to demonstrate and to design well lit environments for social and underprivileged housing areas and people, to encourage other designers to work in similar environments and use similar methodologies, to involve the community in the actual design of their own environment, and to persuade people that they have the right to expect good lighting."

The SLM model is focused on urban lighting, in contrast with the limited contributions that lighting designers can tag on to architectural projects with a social agenda. The process starts with a client who either comes to the organization or is approached with an unsolicited proposal. A partnership between a public agency and industry sponsors is then established to provide a public-private financing mechanism. Lastly, SLM organizes participatory workshops that strengthen the social consciousness of design participants and educate project constituents and stakeholders about quality lighting design.

To date, the organization has done workshops in Liège and Stockholm, and this

year's project will be in London. In 2015, SLM is hoping to conduct a workshop in New York with the South Bronx-based nonprofit "The Point:" it has been in the planning since 2013 but is still pending funding.

For Corten, the workshop model is a great tool to prove to stakeholders and designers that "it is worth it," but she is surprised that engaging both sides is so difficult. SLM is well "liked" on Facebook and this is encouraging, but it also needs more active engagement.

GIVING WELL

I have long advocated for lighting design education to engage more actively in social issues. Even though I could not gain interest in the lighting press nor secure grant funding to develop this educational effort, my independent study of urban lighting in informal settlements and disaster areas eventually led to an elective course at Parsons, and now I am expanding it in a project with CLSF for informal settlements in Haiti.

In charity work, all the financial and intellectual capital counts because waste is tragic and consequential; the use of typically scarce resources requires rigorous diligence. Criteria for "giving well" is somewhat of a philanthropic controversy, but our CLSF mission does show how donations for programs that integrate training and research can have significantly higher ROI than for designer-led projects that serve limited populations and do not use resources optimally. Because in Haiti we work under the umbrella of Fokal, a local NGO with a strong hold in the community and partnerships with high-level government (it is part of philanthropist George Soros's network the Open Society Institute), this

project is structured, user-centered and intended to serve about 800 families. Conversely, myriad NGOs and design and engineering schools have embraced worldwide humanitarian lighting and produced a variety of portable solar-powered lighting products and projects. However, the benefits of well-meaning, low-quality gadgets with unsustainable supply chains and high-cost solo missions are not backed by evidence: Many do-gooder projects start with good intentions and a poor research practice, and result too often in reinvented wheels at best and almost always in an ineffective use of time and money.

Documenting and sharing the institutional knowledge acquired over time is critical to expand best practices, from social processes to projects. The Berkeley National Laboratory's Lumina project and the NGO Lighting Africa have started consolidating humanitarian lighting initiatives in open-source databases and resources, and developing techniques and standards to evaluate products. Academic programs could also contribute research to build and communicate relevant knowledge that would support effective project-based educational programs.

Coincidentally, in the process of writing this column, I am also initiating a public program on social lighting in the context of the upcoming "International Year of Light 2015" to present the work undertaken by CLSF, SLM and PhoScope at Parsons' School of Constructed Environments next spring. I am hopeful that it can act as a motivational tool for greater civic engagement in the lighting community, and that it can attract foundational support for new educational endeavors.

EDUCATION

Many users need programs, and all projects need cash and in-kind support. If social causes that are related to lighting design interest you, then you need to get involved and give.

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