

Social Light Revolution
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"Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided."

Le Corbusier, *Vers une Architecture*, 1923

The Open Architecture Network disagree. They say Le Corbusier had it wrong. *"One billion people live in abject poverty. Four billion live in fragile but growing economies. One in seven people live in slum settlements. By 2020 it will be one in three. We don't need to choose between architecture or revolution. What we need is an architectural revolution."*

We think the same applies to lighting design. It too needs a revolution.

At the Professional Lighting Design Convention in 2009, the French designer Roger Narboni stated: 'Architectural lighting is dead' meaning that our move forward as lighting designers should no longer be about being part of city beautification but social lighting: improving people-orientated lighting, not building-orientated lighting. He passionately believes it is time we turned our attention to creating beautifully lit spaces for the people who do not venture into the city centre but live in the 'sodiumised' world of social housing.

Architectural Lighting for its own sake needs a radical thought revision. For years we have been improving city squares and retail areas. We have been lighting the facades of town halls, churches and museums; all for the greater good of the nighttime exterior environment. Whilst helping to facilitate economic regeneration, this lighting has affected a minority of visitors as the majority of people don't live in these spaces. Our move forward as a profession should include moving away from the city centres to the periphery where people actually live: lighting for people, not buildings. This is the social light revolution required.

The kind of places and spaces within which lighting designers work are mostly heritage sites, city beautification and high end residential or leisure developments. And when we get it, urban regeneration work doesn't often cross over into housing. It's rare that we get a chance to use our skills to make the everyday world a better place. What of the mass of ordinary people and their home environment? Surely that's the first place we should be improving before moving on to the places we share. The lighting design that we do affects such a small minority of people. Why does a town square, barely peopled at night deserve to be better lit more than a housing estate that is always peopled at night? Of course, it boils down to hard cash. What is chosen as the showcase and 'face' of a place would be seen to be more deserving of a 'lighting makeover' than a housing estate that no one from out of town would visit. Of course, lighting design doesn't come cheap. Social housing and other disadvantaged communities have so many demands to meet that lighting is low on the agenda and almost universally utilitarian.

"We are all staggering around in the dark when up at the South Bank its all bright and fancy – well someone should tell 'em we don't live there, we are all down here" **Honor Oak Estate SE4**

City centres have become such the focus of lighting aims that it has led to the development of a whole sub-category of lighting design; the urban masterplan. Masterplans look at the lighting design of a city centre in a cohesive way incorporating all elements of architectural lighting, road lighting, street lighting and sustainability but rarely cover the outlying elements of a city. The global rise in creating 'Festivals of Light' in the last few years have also focussed on city centres. These events are largely commercially driven and used to boost nighttime economy.

Let us consider the current state of lighting within Social Housing areas.

"There is a housing estate next to where I live that I walk through often by day when taking my son to school. The housing is well built, there are playgrounds and planting and I never think twice about our safety. At night, it is another story. It's poorly and sporadically lit in sodium (of course) taking on a threatening character and I would never set foot within it. I am lucky; I don't have to walk through at night but what if I lived here? What if I actually had to pass through these spaces with dark and terrifying alleyways to get to my front door? What if I had to hold my breath each time someone walked past because the light levels afforded no chance for facial recognition? With so little attention paid to the night time appearance and design of my environment, why would I want to look after it? As a lighting designer, I can see that it would only take a small intervention in terms of lighting to drastically improve the night time appearance, help it feel safer and generate pride in the area, so why when money is being poured into urban regeneration, is this a standard description of a social housing estate found anywhere across the UK?"

There is a wealth of research that shows the link between lighting and crime. I.e. better lighting reduces crime and aids the perception of safety. A recent study by Brandon C. Welsh & David P. Farrington 2008 (Effects of Improved Street Lighting on Crime) includes an overview of thirteen studies, eight in the US and five in the UK. It showed that the positive effect of improved street lighting has been greater in the UK but more importantly concluded that improved street lighting is also efficacious because it increases the feeling of pride, and thereby also informs social control in the neighbourhood.

"The theory is that when local government chooses to improve conditions in our neighbourhood, for example through improved street lighting, they send a signal that they care about us. This might lead us to have a more positive image of our neighbourhood, and our neighbourhood will moreover appear better cared for. This in turn strengthens community cohesion and pride. When we become more proud of the place we live, we also become more observant of each other on an everyday basis. We feel that public space belongs to us all. We develop a greater sense of responsibility and this leads to more social control and reduced night-time and daytime crime in the neighbourhood."

Public or social housing was originally built and operated by councils to supply well built homes at below market rents to the local population. As of 2005, 20% of the country's housing stock is owned by local councils or housing associations. This figure doesn't sound like much until you consider that accounts for over 12 million people. Social commentators first began to report on social housing in the large cities during the Industrial Revolution describing squalor, sickness and perceived immorality. Current reports show not much has changed stating that the majority of social housing is home to the elderly, those in poverty, migrants and the mentally vulnerable with estates perceived as a location of high crime. Those living in social housing are a stigmatised sector of society.

Recent consultation on one particular estate saw residents asking for improvement measures that decreased crime and antisocial behaviour, increased community safety measures, increased the attractiveness of estates and created an overall healthier environment. Lighting can do all this.

So join the Social Light Revolution. Join the Social Light Movement. The Social Light Movement is a philanthropic movement and has been founded in order to create a network for lighting designers and other interested parties to collaborate on the issue of improving lighting for people: particularly those who are unlikely to have access to good quality illumination within their environment.

Read the manifesto at:

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=119999748015980>