

What's light got to do with it?
Thoughts on Dignity, Mood and Magical Thinking

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How the brain works

How the body moves

How the site conditions mood

How the realm conveys the rules

How context shapes experience

How fears multiply and disappear

How the fireflies survive

THOUGHTS ON DIGNITY: A short history

In the late 1980s, in a somewhat naive and possibility arrogant move, I attempted to apply design lessons I had learned from my interior lighting design practice in museums and high-end residences to what I saw as the more pressing issue of nighttime conditions in the underserved community of East New York. In my volunteer work there, I had seen firsthand how overused security lighting had created stretches of deep shadow and cast the neighborhood in lurid gloom.

I went in search of theories, conceptual underpinnings, texts that could inform such a shift in practice. What I uncovered was that lighting design was a cannon-less waif. No body of principles was accepted as axiomatic or universally binding. No comprehensive list of texts deemed relevant to the field. There was practice, lots of practice. Some practitioners had taken the time to document and present their work to the benefit of our and neighboring fields. However, there were no tools for transforming the lessons learned from individual lighting practices into a formal knowledge base that could be reapplied in other contexts.

There are scholarly volumes and popular texts that address issues relevant to lighting design, but they are rarely written by lighting designers. William Lam is a notable exception.¹ But Tanizaki is a novelist; Wolfgang Schivelbusch and David Nye are social historians; Henry Plummer is a philosopher and poet, as is Gaston Bachelard.

¹ William M.C. Lam, [Perception and Lighting as Formgivers for Architecture](#) (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992).

In a field that has only recently succeeded in identifying itself as a viable discipline, the lack of a conceptual framework was understandable. Until very recently, there has been little support for scholarship in the field. The economics of consulting make it extraordinarily difficult for designers to find the time or resources to conduct post-installation evaluations, or to frame their results in a way that might form the basis for such a canon. I was left rooting around for a discipline in which to plant myself, a study that would resonate with or move me so that I might use its discourse, its conceptual framework, its significant propositions, in a manner that would help to shape my thinking and my practice.

My intuition was that psychology needed to play a large part in my education. My visits to the communities at the edge of our city transit system—Far Rockaway, Red Hook and, most especially, East New York—had taught me that there was a profound psychological character to the experience of walking these streets at night. It was not simply that the streets were alternately dark or overlit, but rather that they *felt* awful. They felt abandoned by the greater city with all its hallmarks of a vivid nighttime life—its culture—its urbanity. There were no orbs of glow on the streets, no emphasis on important cultural institutions—small as they might be—such as the library, community center or church. There was no attention to the quality of the nighttime experience that could be compared to how one might feel walking down a residential city street in downtown Brooklyn or uptown Manhattan.

Yet a clinical education in psychology seemed too deeply rooted in the laboratory as a model and classical analytical psychology models were too focused on the personal at the exclusion of the environment. But then a friend lent me a foundational article in the field of Environmental Psychology called “The Environmental Crisis in Human Dignity” by Harold Proshansky. Writing in the early 1970s, Proshansky proposed that there were not one but two distinct environmental crises emerging. The first environmental crisis, as we know, is the accelerating crisis in the physical environment. But the second, according to Proshansky, “lies not just in the overuse, the misuse and the decay of physical settings but far more significantly how we conceive of the individual in relation to any such settings.”²

² “In the design and organization of physical settings, the human properties of the individual are ignored, oversimplified, or implicitly assumed, because of the influence of such socioenvironmental values as scientific-technological progress, urbanism, pseudoprogress (novelty and change), and the value placed on an ever increasing acceleration of technological change. Spaces and places are improperly designed not only in physical terms; designs overlook human needs for privacy, territoriality, freedom of choice, etc., and the conceiving of the individual as a simple “machine man.” Unintended consequences are often ignored and no attempt is made to evaluate just how well the setting actually works. The danger is that the person will adjust and at the price of a continuing erosion of the properties that make him distinctively human. It is imperative that as behavioral scientists turn to the systematic study of man/environment problems they recognize the need to maintain the contextual reality and integrity of any such problem as it evolves, develops, and becomes modified in the time framework of a complex society.” Proshansky, Harold. “Environmental Crisis in Human Dignity.” *Journal of Social Issues*. Vol 39, Issue 4, pgs. 207-224.

In the design and organization of physical settings, Proshansky continued, “the human properties of the individual are ignored, oversimplified, or implicitly assumed” in our pursuit of technological progress and novelty. The results are spaces that are not only improperly designed in physical terms but also overlook human needs for privacy, territoriality, freedom of choice, the need to be creative, to have aesthetic experiences, and to relate to others in complex ways. The danger, Proshansky stressed, is that people will adapt to these flawed environments “at the price of a continuing erosion of the properties that make [them] human.”

This compelling notion of restoring environmental dignity gave me a way to orient my thinking and shape my practice. It had the added advantage of addressing some of the immediate challenges I faced in East New York. I enrolled in the Department of Environmental Psychology and the DOT funded my dissertation efforts to study and re-light sections of East New York. Proshansky’s concept of environmental dignity gave me a tool to analyze the problem with the street lighting in East New York. By focusing exclusively on security lighting as a response to the crime rate, the existing street lighting emphasized only one fact about the community—high crime—while suppressing all the other facts: families live there, children are raised there, a community attends church and uses their library with great devotion there. They have hopes, dreams, moments of creativity, aesthetic appreciation and reverie—just like people in the high-end neighborhoods. But if you light everything as if it were a prison, then you suppress those aspects and qualities that make it a home, a neighborhood and a community. Lighting that was responsive to the community’s full dignity was what was missing from East New York, not just “more lighting.” What I did in consultation with local community groups was to cut the lurid glare, softly focus lighting on their cherished institutions, and install the same kind of graceful, elegant street lamps that define well-heeled neighborhoods in uptown Manhattan.

THOUGHTS ON MOOD

Proshansky’s notion of environmental dignity was a jumping off point but there are other key propositions of environmental psychology that have continued to directly shape my practice—now, fifteen years after graduation. One of the key principles is this:

An environment has psychological as well as physical properties.

I am, first of all, designing environments *for* psychologically complex individuals whose richly textured inner lives cannot be ignored or oversimplified. This means that the environment shares the psychological properties of those who partake in it. In fact, our environments cannot be properly understood without this dimension. At the same time, individuals partaking in the environment are shaped by its physical and social properties. It is a transactional—one might even say, dialectical—relationship. While Environmental Psychology recognizes the psychological character of environments, it has been my practice that has sensitized me to the wide palette of differences and nuances in the complex discourse of our emotional lives.

Emotions

Western neurologists identify four core emotions—fear, anger, sadness, joy. Insistent and demanding, sometimes called the passions, these core emotions are an outward communication of internal states. They are experienced throughout the body and brain system. They are simple yet powerful reactions to complex stimulations from both inside and out. They may or may not be appropriate to the circumstances—often they are not—yet their intensity and the way they color one’s perceptions of one’s surroundings is unmistakable. As Bachelard wrote: “In our civilization, which has the same light everywhere and puts electricity in its cellars, we no longer go down to the cellar carrying a candle. But the unconscious cannot be civilized. IT takes a candle when it goes to the cellar...”

As a lighting designer working in the public realm, I am constantly asked to add lighting so that residents will not be afraid. But I cannot treat the unconscious or the social facts of fear. What I can do is modulate the nighttime lighting so the experience of a place is not dominated by the fear of falling or the fear of what’s lurking in that shadow. I can humanize the environment and hopefully make space for other more nuanced reactions.

Feelings

Feelings are more complicated. They are emotions mediated by expectation, desire, past experience and reflection—less direct, more nuanced, often evading simple naming. Feelings are often one-of-a-kind, arising in resonance to the unique qualities of a specific place or time. They’re the stuff of poetry—complex, unprecedented, full of nuance and texture and beauty. In poetry, light has always been the prevailing metaphor for how the world connects to our inner lives. American poet laureate Billy Collins, casually reviewing a hundred poems, found the dominant metaphor to be the connection between light, a feature of the environment, and an inner state—an emotion, feeling or mood. In my practice, I have found that it is the manipulation of the quality of light that is the key to activating light as a link between our civic life and our feelings. Light’s warmth or coolness, the play of light and shadow, and the designer’s ability to modulate the relationships between spaces and things and balance their claims on our attention are essential elements of what makes a space feel right, not just look right.

Mood

Mood is the most delicate and complex to describe. Mood sits at the intersection of temperament and place. Less private, more pervasive, and yet more subject to change. It is the most significant unifying element in my design work. If I say it is most successfully achieved by a play of contrasts—shadow against shimmer, water against stone, the flicker of a candle against cool silk—it is because mood is, in an important sense, relational. It is psyche and her surroundings—physical and social. If my lighting designs succeed in affording multiple individuals access to their unique and individual feelings in relation to the same physical setting, the result is what we call the mood of the place. For my purposes, mood names the psychological properties a particular environment sustains.

THOUGHTS ON MAGIC

Lighting technology has disarmed the magician and taken over his tricks. These days children's sneakers flash on and off, bunnies and trees can glow in the dark, and pathways can be painted with phosphorescent paint to glow like Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. What used to be considered magical has become ordinary. Yet I would submit that true magic is precisely that which cannot be controlled, manipulated, flipped on or off. We as lighting designers have to look for magic in other places. I'm not looking for it in color changing LEDs. For me, it is more powerful, mysterious, and ultimately magical to allow spaces to be open-ended, half-seen, ambiguous so that we can prime the imagination and construct our own images out of unfinished form. I don't want lighting to freeze the environment in one dimension.

CONCLUSION

If I make a final return to Proshansky, it is to argue that we are now seeing the two environmental crises he identified merge and blur, and the concept of environmental dignity has the freshest of applications. Looking with horror at events in Syria, where drought attributable to climate change led to failed crops, mass migration to the cities, strained resources, prompted unrest and eventually war. Now hundreds of thousands are fleeing for their lives—over seas, across borders—looking for safe shelter but ending in camps without dignity and with no choice but to adapt. The refugee camps, as *Dezeen* noted last week (24 November, 2015), are “the cities of tomorrow” and the biggest challenge that architects and designers have faced in a generation.