

Reflections on Configuring Light

Closing keynote at Tackling Inequalities Launch on 12 May 2016

By Mark Major,

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Good evening. My name is Mark Major. I am a Principal of a lighting design practice – Speirs + Major. Whilst I am not an expert in the field of sociology, after the best part of thirty years in lighting design I hopefully know one or two things about the use of light – and darkness, and in particular in the public realm.

Given this, and my passion for urban design, it was only natural when I first met Don Slater in 2012 through Ricky Burdett of LSE Cities, that I was very interested to hear about his ideas – and equally as keen to get involved.

For me the vision that he described was fascinating. That there might at last be some serious research carried out into the positive benefits that good lighting design might bring to both individuals and communities within the urban context.

I say that as myself and my colleagues in our nascent profession had been aware for some time that to produce a truly responsible approach to public light we needed not only to address the economic advantages of illuminating our cities and towns but also to understand the social benefits that good lighting can bring. Of course, whatever we do we need to consider the environmental consequences of our actions, but above all we know that there is little point in using any light at all if it proves to be ineffective for the very people it is intended for.

You see common sense dictates that good illumination can produce positive economic results. If we need evidence of that we need not look any further than the positive role that lighting can play in the growth of the night-time economy.

We also know that there is an increasing amount of time, money and effort now going into understanding more about the biological, environmental and ecological issues surrounding the use of light. Whilst it is still early days definite progress is now being made in that area.

At the time that Configuring Light was formed however, as far as I was aware, nobody in the UK – perhaps even worldwide – had fully grasped that without better understanding the needs of people – who let's face it are the very reason that we are all engaged with this subject anyway – that we were at risk of constantly falling short of expectations. Indeed I would argue that if you look at the way that much of our urban fabric is lit at the moment that the very reason the current paradigm is broken is because of the failure of those who are collectively responsible for providing public light – and by that I not only mean the lighting designers and illumination engineers but also clients, urban designers, architects, planners and so on – to understand or think sufficiently about the end user. As a result, not only did it mean that it was unlikely that lighting might ever be taken that seriously as an urban tool but more importantly that things were simply not going to get any better.

You see I think it is fair to say that until Configuring Light started into this area of work that lighting designers like us had been slightly guilty of working in a vacuum. I say 'slightly' for as committed

designers we obviously understand that we are there to provide solutions to people's needs. Despite that we could be as guilty of assuming what was required rather than necessarily knowing. Hoping that what we did was right rather than being certain.

Of course there is a long way to go yet – but suffice it to say what Configuring Light have managed to establish in such a short space of time is not only a pioneering approach but also, and most importantly, a real vision as to how we may all work together.

By setting up Configuring Light to carry out proper social research in the field of public lighting and then managing to bring together such a wide range of stakeholders through their 'Tackling Social Inequalities in Light' programme they have managed to break entirely new ground. In inviting practitioners such as ourselves to meet up with developers, housing associations, the police, safety consultants, environmentalists and representatives from a very wide range of different interest groups and charities they have not only managed to greatly raise the profile of public lighting but also fostered true collaboration between groups of people that should be talking together about this subject – but unfortunately rarely manage to do so.

So when I was invited to deliver this short key note to conclude this evening it occurred to me that the best way to summarise the benefits of the various seminars that they have so successfully put together, that I might highlight the things that I have taken away with me. There are many I could discuss but in the interests of time I want to conclude with three key words that have been left rattling around in my brain from the experience I have been through:

1. The first of these words is 'Community': I would say that the sessions I attended have greatly increased my understanding of what this word can mean to different groups of people. It is a word that we all use all the time but there is a good deal of complexity surrounding it. I have heard about how community can mean one thing to a group of people moving back into affordable housing that has been renewed, refreshed and re-invigorated – but where there are still memories of the past. I have also better understood how important that word is for people that, through no fault of their own, find themselves homeless – and what good lighting can mean to them. Also whilst we have all long understood that we are ultimately there to serve communities we have now also learned that those of us concerned with the development of public light are a community as well – and a much larger and more diverse one than perhaps we had realised. Also that lighting designers are an important part part of that community.
2. The second word I want to focus on is 'Integration': In my experience lighting is often treated as a cosmetic add-on. I have come to realise through the sessions that is largely because its role is not fully understood. Designers often think they know what people want. The people we work with perhaps do not always relate to the potential that we can see. People that work together with only limited horizons will always create mediocrity. Rather we have learned that we can move forward by walking a common path, led by a unified vision and collective understanding. So whilst we would like to see lighting better integrated into urban design what we have all been figuring out is how best to do that – and who better than to help us understand that than the people who the lighting is for. We know that if we can find a way to properly engage with the end users alongside all the key stakeholders then the lighting design will become effortlessly integrated into everyday thinking.
3. Finally, 'Education' – Don Slater and I have often discussed the respect that exists between academics and practitioners. At Speirs + Major we look at Configuring Light as the very best in their field – great thinkers, writers and researchers able to use their skills to really dig down and unearth incredibly valuable materials and experiences. I know from what they have said that they look at

practitioners like us in a similarly benevolent way knowing that we are there at the coal face agreeing briefs with clients, coming up with concepts, developing designs and helping deliver finished solutions on the ground – and within tight budgets. That same degree of respect similarly extends to all of the colleagues and friends who have been so successfully brought together by their programme. Now whilst this mutual admiration is heart-warming the most important thing it leads to is the desire – in fact I'll call it passion – for each and every one of us to educate each other – and in turn to be educated. By doing this we all become empowered to take that education out into the wider community such that our collective knowledge can be properly shared. So education is certainly a word that is central to our joint enterprise – and can there be a word that is more fitting to use here at the LSE?

By necessity this address has been mercifully short. I know that I am gasping for another drink and I am sure you are all too. But hopefully this brief summary has given you some insight into how a practitioner like me has benefitted from Configuring Light and from their 'Tackling Social Inequalities in Public Light' programme.

Don, Jo, Mona and all at Configuring Light. Many congratulations for what you have achieved in bringing everyone together – and for the terrific research you have carried out. I know we are all only at the very beginning of this journey but what you have achieved so far is amazing – and I know that I speak for the lighting design community in thanking you for raising the level of debate – and most importantly showing us all the way to better configure light – and of course darkness – for people...

Thank you very much.

Mark Major

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