



Report 4th ESRC Seminar

Light and Sustainability: Concepts, Practices, Experiment

By Joanne Entwistle

The fourth ESRC-funded Configuring Light seminar was held on 30 April, co-organized and hosted by the Sustainable Consumption Institute (SCI), University of Manchester. The theme was light and sustainability, from concepts, to practices and experiments. It was a real pleasure for the CL team (Don, Mona and myself) to travel North and thereby extend the Configuring Light network beyond London as part of this co-badged ESRC seminar series.

The event did not set out to resolve any major sustainability issues but pose questions, raise issues and generally acknowledge the complexity of light vis-à-vis sustainability. Given that light tends to be side-lined or marginal within discussions of sustainability, with the focus on the supposedly more urgent energy issues around heat, we wanted to use this seminar to raise the profile of light to address this marginality. As with the last two seminars, the seminar is an afternoon event organized around two panels. This way we seem to hang onto our 'time-poor' audience of academics and practitioners.

The first panel opened up the theme of sustainability and explored various concepts and issues associated with it. Chris Lowe, Lighting Designer, BDP consultants challenged us to think about light within a much broader historical context and consider the important role of darkness. He argued for a more holistic and human centred lighting design practice that moves beyond the metrics and numbers of standards and which appreciates darkness and natural rhythms of daylight. Such changes in lighting design practice would reduce energy-use attributed to lighting while also creating more pleasurable environments to live and work in.

Saska Petrova, Research Co-ordinator of the Centre for Urban Resilience and Energy spoke to issues of energy vulnerability and the place of light in homes. She argued that lighting deprivation is a social and cultural signifier and drew on her research on homes in Greece. While light tends not to be the focus of research into energy use, it is clear that it has an important place in how people experience their home and make calculations of energy cost with sometimes poignant consequences. Saska gave the example of a grandmother who turns the lights off to save money but worries for the safety of her grandchildren when they come to visit.

Tim Edensor, Reader of Human Geography, Manchester Metropolitan University challenged us to think critically about the sustainability agenda and consider more social patterns and not simply and universally advocate 'turning the lights off/down'. He focused his attention on aspects of social practice, like festive lights and Christmas lights, which, while not energy efficient, are important to maintaining particular social rituals and tastes. Rather than posing a uniform agenda of sustainability across the board, he argued that we need to respect different tastes and practices. We must accept the complexity of light in everyday life rather than try to standardize it.

Martin Green, Lancaster University focused on the fascinating socio-political history of daylight saving in the post-war era. Daylight saving was introduced in the UK as an 'experiment' which continues even today, and Martin explored the various political discourses and the different stakeholders tied to this experiment. He demonstrated forcefully and clearly the socially constituted nature of our relationships with time and daylight and the implications these have for energy demand.

John Hindley, Head of Environmental Strategy at Manchester Metropolitan University spoke to the introduction of new lighting schemes around the campus of MMU and described how different lighting problems were resolved in both the buildings themselves and the surrounding external environment. The focus of his presentation was on the introduction of

CONFIGURING LIGHT

staging the social

www.configuringlight.org

LED lighting systems and light sensors that have already significantly reduced energy-use, saved the University money and have received positive feedback from students and staff.

Rosa Urbano Gutiérrez, Lecturer (Assistant Professor), Liverpool School of Architecture showed the various design-led initiatives using ceramics to demonstrate how this cheap and highly versatile material can be utilised to create more sustainable lighting environments in a range of different social spaces. Rosa drew primarily on her work in the Environmental Ceramics in Architecture Laboratory (ECAlab) and on the project 'Illuminating through Ceramics'.

We are really grateful to Cary Monreal for taking the lead in organizing this event and bringing together two really interesting panels!