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In early 2014 our research team, Configuring Light, from the London School of Economics (LSE) and King's College, London, spent three months in the small Midlands city of Derby, in the UK, following the development of the Speirs & Major lighting masterplan. This research, supported by the Derby City Council City Centre Regeneration team, was a unique opportunity both to follow the planning process and also to pilot the use of social science research within lighting design. Our approach was qualitative, involving interviews with many stakeholders within the city, from Council members, to marketing, crime and safety teams, and a range of city dwellers and users.

Derby is only *just* a city with a population of *c.* 250,000. Telling a story about Derby therefore means telling a story about “secondary cities” as opposed to the historically resonant or mega cities like London, Tokyo or New York we usually focus on. In particular, the diversity of social groups that have to be accommodated within a small physical space, combined with the need to ‘brand’ such cities in order to secure their growth, may pose specific problems to lighting and planning. Our story of Derby is one where lighting has a strategic place in both assembling as well as understanding such cities.

Derby's character largely relates to its manufacturing sites and is generally articulated with reference to an industrial heritage that stretches back to the world's first factory (Derby's Silk Mill, 1717); through its nodal position in Enlightenment science and engineering (Benjamin Franklin visited several times, and Joseph Wright of Derby documented the local Lunar Society); through to Derby's current significance in engineering and transport (Rolls Royce and Toyota have headquarters in Derby; Bombardier continues Derby's previous dominance of railway engineering); and on to a projected future in high-tech engineering and creative industries (a stretch of the inner ring road was named Lara Croft Way, honoring her local creators, Core Design).

At the same time, the city is divided along several axes. Its industrial past has left a legacy of considerable inequality: engineering and corporate professionals give Derby the second highest average income in the UK but they largely live in surrounding rural upmarket enclaves, and shop and dine in neighboring cities like Nottingham and Leicester. This leaves the central city to a poorer and increasingly ethnic population, as well as a huge student population at the University of Derby making up nearly 10% of the population. Add to this a large weekly influx of commercial visitors, plus younger creative industry professionals seeking livable conditions (above all, property prices) outside London—all of whom find the Derby “offering” of leisure and entertainment a bit slim.

The central city area of Derby is socially and physically divided in ways that partially reflect these distributions. It is a small area, clearly marked off by a ring road boundary,

which contains very little residential zoning (and restrictive zoning for commercial and office properties), and largely comprises two areas: St. Peter's Quarter and Cathedral Quarter, linked by a commercial high street which was pedestrianized in brutal brick in the late 1980s and was generously described by a Council member as an "engineering solution" to urban planning. This was often described as a "no man's land," because there was no real connection between the two. Large sections of this small central city are effectively empty and unused in the evening; indeed, one immediate issue raised by stakeholders is that the extreme lighting of the commercial high street makes the surrounding streets seem cavernous and off-grid by contrast. In addition, a third area, along the riverside, is largely unlit and sits in stark contrast to some of the brightly lit streets of the St. Peter's and Cathedral Quarter.

Cathedral Quarter largely monopolizes the city's social and cultural capital: a few picturesque streets with views leading up to the Cathedral, down to the river, and incorporating the market square and the indoor Guildhall market; it has independent retailers and nice restaurants. Regeneration plans therefore aim to retain the upmarket engineers and commercial visitors for evening dinner and leisure before they leave for home. The area also has a limited nighttime economy of clubs and bars serving both local young people and crowds of students coming in on specific nights: bars, clubs and music venues are interspersed with boutique restaurants and therefore so too are constituents who are fundamentally at odds with each other.

St. Peter's Quarter has a working-class based and older clientele (the supermarket on the high street claimed that most of its clientele were over sixty). More decisively, this area of Derby became home to the first Westfield shopping mall in Europe in 2007, a huge (200 unit) mall largely hidden behind older façades that constitutes a kind of hidden city within the city. This indoor space is a parallel universe of retail cinema and restaurant chains used by young people and the working class for destination shopping, and by others for functional shopping, and with little connection to the surrounding area (it is more likely to be accessed by the ring road car park than from the commercial high street). Years later, there is still constant reference to the "Westfield effect": the closure of shops and restaurants in ripples outwards from Westfield, reaching to Cathedral Quarter, and their replacement with some downmarket and ephemeral traders with glaring signage.

Lighting became a central issue at this time: 2007 was also the year Derby entered into a twenty-five-year street lighting PFI (Private Finance Initiative) with the giant infrastructure firm, Balfour Beatty (BB). At the time, this was a conventional and in some respects sensible solution to the problem of making a massive and necessary infrastructure investment in upgrading nigh on 30,000 streetlights across the whole city. The structure of a PFI meant that Derby agreed to this massive investment on the basis of expertise in engineering, street lighting and community safety and security staff. The upshot was ten-meter masts that blast out bright light—on the high streets—up to what is often described as either "motorway standard" or as "prison yard lighting" that flattens all views into contrast-free floodlit zones and, by dint of the contrast, consigns all other streets (lit to merely correct standards) to obscurity and perceived danger. The bad timing of this deal meant that Derby was locked into twenty-five years of this just a few years before the biggest lighting revolution since Edison (i.e. LED and new control systems) and just before it launched a progressive regeneration program. The Council's main challenge is that under the terms of a PFI, BB's investment is entirely up front in the first few years, after which it collects mortgage payments from Derby for the next two decades. In pure financial terms, BB's interests lie in restricting future costs to routine maintenance and from this perspective it would be acting irrationally to agree to any fundamental change in lighting strategy or replacement of underlying technologies.

Our research group entered into this picture in January 2014: Derby Council had worked towards a City Centre Regeneration Framework policy which was finally adopted in 2012 which “links closely” the two outcomes of “a thriving, sustainable economy” and “an active cultural life” (Derby City Council, 2012, p. 1). Both the framework policy and the organizational structure of the regeneration team connected up major building plans with public realm and public art strategies.

In this new context, the Council evinced a central concern for lighting as part of its understanding of urban design: the regeneration team asked several lighting designers to pitch for a master lighting plan for Derby, as well as for three pilot lighting projects and a lighting demonstration. The London-based lighting design practice Speirs & Major (S&M) won the contract. Lighting appeared to perform several roles within the regeneration proposals and S&M’s bid: First, it was re-valued in terms of the aesthetics of place, which included the iconicity and visual branding of place, for visitors as well as for residents. This was frequently legitimated in economic terms (the importance of lighting and atmosphere for sports, retail and leisure sales and security) but documents and discussions drafted by S&M exuded a more holistic approach in which lighting played an exemplary part in a virtuous circle of regeneration. Indeed it could be the beginning of civic virtue in providing the right identity and atmosphere.

Second, lighting was leverage: in being a highly visible intervention and in marking a public departure from the engineering approach that produced the Balfour PFI, lighting could mount a popular argument for design and a more sophisticated sense of urban culture. The regeneration team had a strong esprit de corps, a sense of modernizing civic pride, into which light fit snugly. There was a kind of crafty opportunism born of necessity involved in this: for example, new lighting systems were implemented in the central market square under cover of events and festival lighting, but somehow stayed in place, becoming normal street lighting that replaced the PFI lights.

Finally, in the context of the flexible regeneration team that included designers, community workers, digital regeneration experts, street lighting engineers and a police liaison, lighting seemed able to generate new conversations and educational processes. For example, the “motorway standard” lighting of the high street was the result of a conventional association of more light with more safety, and in fact brighter lights in the residential districts were popular with older residents. The community safety people initially responded to the idea of a master lighting plan skeptically, claiming that lower lighting levels would make CCTV footage unacceptable for identifying criminal suspects in court cases. Shortly after attending the public lighting demonstration and working with the regeneration team, their attitude shifted: they continued to advocate brighter lighting for reasons of security, but now held more complex views of how light relates to nighttime security and contributes to the look and feel of the city.

To say that lighting can play a role in reassembling the city around new narratives of regeneration immediately raises a range of questions regarding what should be lit and how it should be lit in order to produce a new “Derby,” both in iconic and in practical ways. Lighting, in other words, involves political decisions. For example, returning to the question of Derby’s industrial past, demonstrates how lighting historicizes a place: light makes history visible. Contemporary urban regeneration requires complex engagements with the history of a place, by suggesting a developmental narrative in the body of the city. This could be understood through the idea of “place branding,” but that connotes an almost postmodern reduction of the city to depthless stylistic choices between different iconographies of Derby.

However, this would belie the seriousness of history and the role of lighting in articulating different narratives of Derby. For example, Derby's industrial heritage could be interpreted in the direction of heritage tourism and picturesque past or alternatively in the direction of a future of creative industries and younger generation techies. On the other hand, lighting might articulate a common view of Derby as simply a "nice and friendly" place for commercial visitors and tourists to the Midlands. These narratives mattered to both the regeneration team and to the stakeholders we interviewed; and lighting could be strategic in imagining histories and futures. Asking people what to light and how to light it immediately put out alternative narratives of what Derby was or could be, and of how its past, present and future could connect up.

Our task in Derby was to explore the role of social research in lighting design. Working with both the lighting designers and the Council regeneration team, we asked: What social knowledge and assumptions were structuring the design process? What new social research methodologies might make lighting design a more informed process? And what changes to design organization and processes might better integrate social knowledge into lighting designing?

The first two questions were particularly important in relation to historical narratives: There is pressure to have lighting decisions follow a single consensual vision of the city. By contrast, social research involves disaggregating "the social" into multiple and often conflicting urban forms. Research unsurprisingly took the form of mapping uses of the city by different constituencies—the paths they took for work, leisure, shopping; the visual elements they valued or disliked; their differing priorities in terms of concerns such as safety, cost, atmosphere, conviviality; their sense of how lighting and other urban features might regulate relations between urban residents.

There was considerable diversity, and often clear conflict, between the different uses and images of the city of diverse city users and planners. Upmarket diners overlapped with partying students on the same short streets; planners had a responsibility to retailers whose priorities might differ from young creative industries workers. Equally important, were issues of voice—of whose city uses were articulated and heard—and of voice in relation to official visions of urban development. To give a simple example, different constituencies, including business community and Council, advocated lighting St. Peter's Quarter and the riverside as two of the three pilot lighting projects undertaken by S&M. Lighting the riverside made sense in terms of diverse groups that could be attracted by new facilities. New lighting was crucial for connecting this area to the city center as well as for making it feel safe and hospitable. St. Peter's Quarter, however, was virtually deserted by nightfall; and we could not find city users who would have reason to go there after dark, whatever the lighting. By contrast, interviews with older residents made it clear that their use of the city was severely curtailed by lack of lighting along specific pathways from the bus station to the Westfield shopping mall, a pathway that would have been invisible to younger residents and which bore no relation to official visions of which bits of Derby needed to be commercial and physically developed.

Speirs & Major were open to this kind of questioning, partly because they have long operated in terms of a Kevin Lynch-based design research model: lighting could satisfy Kevin Lynch's (urban planner and theorist) aim of making urban morphology legible and vivid to inhabitants. Lighting needs to respond to and enhance the pathways, views, landmarks, edges and nodes that make a city negotiable and useable; lighting must therefore respond to a real map of the city—the map that is enacted by actual residents through actual urban practices. Lighting must therefore be grounded in social research and analysis.

There are two specific issues that lighting design must grapple with and on which we can conclude. First, in political terms, deciding what to light and how to light it involves a political oscillation between lighting in response to current uses and to planned uses: is the role of lighting in regeneration to enable existing users or to carry out a visionary plan, is it a project of social provision or social engineering?

Second, after social research disaggregates the urban into multiple socialities, the designer must light each particular street in such a way that all these multiple socialities can share and inhabit it, sometimes side by side. In Derby, the tension between using light to articulate either diversity or cohesiveness, politics or image, was intensified by the city's small size. The more we interviewed and observed, the more it appeared that the few streets of the city center had to accommodate overlapping and often mutually exclusive users and uses. Lighting design, at its best, is an informed and creative engagement with social complexity, one that seeks to resolve conflicting aims in a realistic manner and in full awareness that light is only one part of even larger equations that make up an urban assemblage.

References

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