

Extract from the October 2010 issue of "Lighting Journal" — a leading article written by Richard Eastham setting out his own particular views on the night-time economy in many UK towns and cities.

■ Lighting Strategies

The City after Dark – Who are we Lighting for?

Richard Eastham, a director of urban designers, Feria Urbanism, asks some important questions about the development of our urban centres after dark – and outlines his practice's distinctive approach to urban lighting planning



This photomontage produced for the Bexleyheath Night Vision pilot scheme revealed the potential positive impact non-retail uses can have after dark.

In the UK, it sometimes seems that we only use our cities and towns half as much as we could. Unlike many other European countries, there is a sharp decline in activity once shops and offices have closed. While the urban renaissance of the last 20 years has delivered greater levels of city-centre living, all too often this fails to translate into the successful '24 hour' city envisaged by many politicians and their urban planners.

Yet in our work-obsessed and long-hours culture, the evening and night should be a time when can be most free -- a time to be celebrated, a time for exchange of ideas,

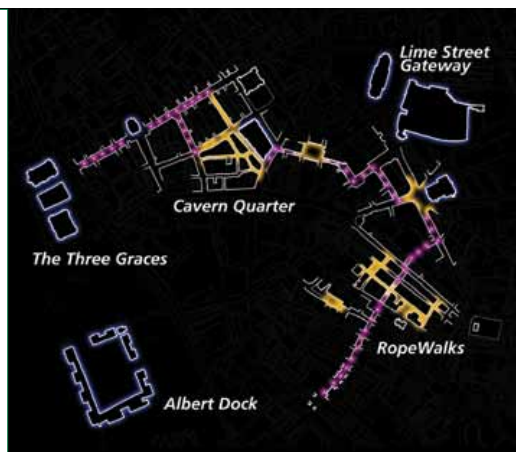
friendships, conversations, interactions and cultural experiences, and a time for being ourselves. Instead, urban centres after dark can be the exclusive domain of young people, associated with drunkenness and violence and therefore 'no-go' areas for large parts of society. Is it reasonable that the actions of a few can deter so many from our civic spaces? How can lighting designers play a more active role in shaping the sort of socially sustainable places we would like to see?

The Changing Picture

The 2006 report by the Civic Trust 'NightVision: Town Centres for All' demonstrated how the rapid growth in the early 2000s of eating, drinking and dancing late into the night and into the early morning took the nation by surprise. The '24 hour' economy was seen by some urban planners and politicians in the 1990s as a way of reviving town-centre economies damaged by successive waves of edge-of-town developments. This positive vision was linked to our increasingly frequent experiences of overseas travel, where the café culture enjoyed in other parts of Europe was seen as a key component of a successful urban revival. Previously, there had been complaints about the streets being too empty after dark; now some centres had more people are on their streets at midnight than at midday.

But the research also showed that variety and choice can be lacking in many town and city centres, essential qualities if we are to create healthy, balanced, safe and vibrant urban centres. Earlier this year, the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) published 'Better Town Centres at Night: Raising the Standard and Broadening the Appeal'. This report uses the results of various pilot schemes to show how a strategic approach to urban centres

Liverpool has some well-defined clusters of after-dark activity, most notably RopeWalks and the Cavern Quarter, but some simple public realm and lighting interventions could help connect these with other areas of the city centre, to create a more diverse experience.



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Ideas for the lighting of the 'Bling Bling' building on Hanover Street in Liverpool. This splash of contemporary architecture is left unlit after dark, yet it sits right above a night-time taxi rank. Lighting it would assist legibility and safety in a city where people claim it is impossible to find a taxi when you need one.

after dark can help create more socially sustainable places.

Feria Urbanism is a Bournemouth-based practice working in urban design, urban planning and public participation. We acted as consultants on several of the pilot schemes referenced in the ATCM report and we recognise the importance of a strategic approach, placing urban lighting schemes within a wider design and planning strategy. We do not like the term 'night-time economy' as we feel it fails to inspire and is too narrowly focused. It also fails to recognise the complex interplay of lighting, land use, licensing, pedestrian activity and built form required to create a successful place.

Feria has developed a positive approach to its after-dark work. This is because we have a genuine enthusiasm for the city at night, but it also helps differentiate us from other practitioners who adopt a more prosaic approach to the night-time city, seeing it as a problem to be solved rather than an opportunity for delight.

Embrace...

This positive approach begins by demonstrating to politicians and urban planners the importance of the after-dark city, not just in economic terms but its social and cultural value too. This is the

embrace stage. Too often, there is no acknowledgement by decision-makers that the after-dark city has any significant contribution to make. In part, this is because most decision-makers are of an age when they tend not to use the city after hours — perhaps something that reflects this very lack of variety and choice. Ensuring a widespread understanding of the value of the evening and night-time is

critical to the success of any project, as this will inform strong leadership and the will to implement change.

Preston is one of the cities featured in the ATCM report. Working with a range of partners, Feria developed an urban design framework for the city, with different urban quarters each playing a different role after dark. A large retail-led mixed-use regeneration scheme is proposed for the city, bringing with it a cinema, restaurants and bars, and it was this that galvanised the local authority into thinking strategically about the city centre after dark. The framework noted how existing retail areas may go into decline following new retail investment elsewhere, but this may allow non-retail uses to appear in parts of the city traditionally dominated by shops. This shift may extend opening hours, increase after-dark footfall and make areas currently perceived as too quiet much livelier. The street lighting in these areas should also then be reconfigured to reflect these changing hours of use.

In Weymouth, where Feria are currently working, the town is looking forward to the attention it will receive as host of the 2012 Olympic sailing events but it is aware that their town centre after dark is too focused on alcohol-led venues, with a lack of quality restaurants. Feria has identified how noise and disturbance from bars and clubs by the waterfront is deterring further investment by restaurateurs in what is a unique heritage setting. Therefore, a key output of the project will be an after-dark spatial plan, to help get the right use in the right place, which in turn can be supported by an appropriate lighting design that responds not just to setting but to land use too.



Ideas for how new pedestrian friendly-traffic junctions and creative lighting on landmark buildings in Bexleyheath could encourage new investment and create a more positive gateway to the town centre.

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Enhance...

Once the politicians and urban planners have grasped the opportunity the after-dark city offers, there is a need to establish a vision. This is the enhance stage. Liverpool offers a great night out but, following its success as Capital of Culture 2008, it wants to be more welcoming to a wider variety of people. Feria has run workshops in the city with a wide variety of stakeholders, including planners, health workers, businesses and the universities, to determine how the city can better play to its strengths. One area of focus has been the RopeWalks quarter, a hotspot for crime and disorder following a rapid colonisation by super-sized 'anywhere' bars and clubs in recent years. These have eroded the distinct identity that made the area so attractive to the creative industries that brought about its acclaimed regeneration in the 1990s. The city is now coordinating the work of land owners, urban planners, licensing authorities and lighting engineers to create a safer, more exciting and more diverse city quarter.

Diversity was also important in Bexleyheath, where Feria advocated the limited introduction of non-retail uses into the pedestrianised high street. The subsequent activity and light spilling onto the street after 6.00pm in the evening would help break down what is known locally as the 'dead zone' where fear of crime is high. This work was instrumental in securing funds from Transport for London to help implement the ideas.



The urban design framework for Preston comprised a series of urban quarters connected by streets and spaces.

Enjoy...

With the enhanced urban centre, one that is safer and more diverse, should come celebration. This is the enjoy stage. What is the city at night for? Who will use it? Large-scale events after dark, such as 'Light Nights', where big cultural institutions, traditionally closed in the evenings, stay open late, can be a success in our larger

cities. But what of smaller towns? In Weymouth, Feria has promoted the idea of an 'Inside/Out' night, where local activities such as Latin dancing, choir practice or chess clubs can be brought out into the streets, supported by temporary or ad-hoc lighting events. Inexpensive and for one-night only, these low-key festivals of the unexpected can help change perceptions and reveal the potential of a place.

The Future

So while urban lighting strategies have become more commonplace in recent years and fulfil a valuable role, they are often divorced from any vision for the place after dark. Urban lighting strategies can coordinate the aesthetic and technical elements, but they tend to respond to established planning policy rather than inform it.

Lighting can contribute much to a positive urban experience. Improved perception of safety is the obvious benefit but consideration of urban lighting in the context of how the contemporary city functions at night – the uses and activities, the streets and spaces, the users and the non-users – can give an urban lighting strategy a more important role. It will be interesting to see how lighting designers, urban planners and urban designers develop this type of collaborative approach in the future if we are to create places that work all the time, not just half the time.

For more information go to www.feria-urbanism.eu



Mapping Liverpool at night. This diagram shows in white the ground-floor land uses associated with the night-time economy, including bars, clubs, pubs together with other licensed premises, such as restaurants. It reveals the distinct clustering patterns that can be found in many towns and cities in the UK.