

The Potentialities of Light Festivals



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THE POTENTIALITIES OF LIGHT FESTIVALS

In this paper, I consider how light festivals are part of a broader trend that adopts a more innovative approach to lighting design in moving away from homogeneous forms of illumination that flood space with light. There is, increasingly, a greater focus on creativity, an appreciation of the distinctive qualities of place, and a commitment to greater sustainability. I investigate three qualities that are countering standardised, somewhat bland nightscapes, namely defamiliarisation, deepening a sense of place and the production of convivial and festive atmospheres. I provide examples from diverse light festivals, including Durham's Lumiere, staged over four nights in November 2013, and attracting 175,000 people.

Wondrous Light and Disenchanted Nightscapes

The use of illumination to enchant crowds is not new. Craig Koslofsky discusses how, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European monarchs manifested a 'new willingness to deploy and manipulate darkness and night' (2011, p. 276), dazzling subjects with lavish fireworks and theatrical illuminations to demonstrate their majesty and challenge the prevailing power of the Church. This 'nocturnalisation of spectacle' prefigured the wider modern deployment of illumination (Schivelbusch, 1988; Nye, 1992; Brox, 2010).

The sense of enchantment produced by illumination was subsequently extended by the production of what Collins and Jervis call a 'technological uncanny,' particularly in the city, which has been progressively transformed into a phantasmagoric realm, replete with 'the shadowy hauntings of the fleeting and insubstantial' (2008, p. 1). These uncanny dimensions devolve from the ways in which illuminated landscapes are often illusory with depth of field; scale, perspective and distance are often difficult to assess, and architecture loses the appearance of solidity, becoming seemingly mutable and fluid, perhaps appearing to float or resembling luminous sculptures. Accordingly, the modern nocturnal urban landscape is transformed 'into a perceptual laboratory' (McQuire, 2008, p. 114), 'exhilarating and disorienting to its inhabitants' (p. 122).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, familiarity with illuminated space diminished a sense of wonder towards the urban night. The pervasive spread of utilitarian lighting instigated campaigns by the Dark Sky Association, who claim that the particularity of the night has been lost with the diminishing of darkness, which may foster a sense of mystery and make it possible to view the stars in the sky (Edensor, 2013). Moreover, many light designers express disenchantment towards the ubiquitous use of sodium vapour lighting, and its monochromatic 'golden pink light' that gives 'people and things a pale, washed out appearance' (Jakle, 2001, p. 84), producing spaces suffused with an ambient glare devoid of character, nocturnal 'blandsapes' that minimise the efficacy of lighting to enchant space (Edensor, 2014).

Here, I consider how light festivals form part of a developing trend to transcend these bland, unsustainable nightscapes by introducing a cavalcade of novel forms of illumination, re-enchanting space through designs that reinstate the propensity of light to produce fantasy, wonderment and intrigue. Across the world, bewildering varieties of light festivals are emerging. Diverse cities draw upon a growing number of design professionals and artists to transform their nocturnal environs for several nights. These large-scale, capital-intensive, sophisticated and multifaceted events lure thousands of visitors. There is also a plethora of smaller, local

festivals such as light parades and processions, and traditional festivals, often sacred in origin, such as Diwali and Loi Krathong, which are adopting modern design and technology. The range of lighting techniques, forms, installations and fixtures is expanding enormously, and includes light projections, laser displays, illuminated transport, street furniture, animation and multiple hues and tones.

Some critics consider that the large urban festivals produce empty, commodified showpieces. It is true that such festivals are highly organised, tightly scripted and often deploy large, spectacular events, and are motivated by the branding of place, economic gain and desires to attract tourists and shoppers. The creativity of designers may be compromised by the need to attract a large crowd. This emphasis on commercial rationale summons those arguments that insist that we now live in a 'society of the spectacle,' an image-producing society dominated by advertising, entertainment, television and mass media. In such accounts, spectators passively behold seductive, extravagant displays organised by capital and the state that have colonised and replaced 'authentic' life (Debord, 1967). Susik considers how the site-specific projections that are featured at many festivals 'will even more dramatically merge urban space with image space, and hence reality with illusion [...] summoning a much more aggressive experience of "mirage" in the objective world than has heretofore been experienced' (2012, p. 108). Problematically, however, in conjuring up spectators as passive automatons forced to gaze on images and representations created by others, such critics neglect their ability to interpret what they see. Though I do not wish to disregard these possibilities, I focus on the ways in which light festivals can be productive of more optimistic potentialities.

Atmospheres of Conviviality and Excitement

Festivals break up the usual routines and rhythms of everyday life, marking out a temporary departure from these usually unreflexive practices during which ordinary conventions may be suspended and participants allowed greater expressive, creative and improvisational licence. Crucially, festivals are ludic events that are occasions for pleasure and fun. This seduction of people into a convivial disposition towards others signals how a focus on the playful can prioritise a non-instrumental, more-than-rational disposition and heighten affective belonging. This means that though festivals are not necessarily experienced passively, neither are they synonymous with a romantic opposition to the established order, for as Woodyer claims, 'the politics of playing are primarily bound up in experiencing vitality rather than strategic oppositional endeavour' (2012, p. 318). Festivals foreground the improvisational, the sensuous and the peculiar. Such practices highlight how light festivals, like other festivals, possess the potential to produce dissonant, disruptive meanings and experiences at variance with everyday habits and normative forms of 'common sense.' Critiques that focus on the commercialisation and alienating propensities of festive spectacles neglect these ludic dimensions. Such playfulness is part of the production of festive atmospheres, which I now discuss.

Atmospheres are difficult to define but all too palpable. Gernot Böhme contends that atmospheres 'imbue everything, they [...] bathe everything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions' (2008, p. 2). Böhme considers that atmospheres 'can come over us [...] [take] possession of us like an alien power' (2008, p. 3) and orient us towards particular actions and expressions. Yet while they may be depicted as 'a certain mental or emotive tone permeating a particular environment,' they are also produced by the subjects immersed within them (Edensor, 2013). An atmosphere attunes the participant's mood but is also extended by it. Accordingly, festivals entangle participants in immersive atmospheres but these atmospheres are also fuelled by peoples' dispositions and their anticipation about engaging with festive time and space (Edensor,

2012). Duff (2010) distinguishes between ‘thick’ atmospheres saturated with intense modes of sensual, emotional and affective involvement and ‘thin’ atmospheres which involve a weaker sense of place and event. I contend that many light festivals are suffused by thick atmospheres.

Now atmospheres are produced by a host of elements within the affective field: the weather, sounds, the time of day, other people, architectural forms, incidents, representations, sensations and interactions. Thus the affective potentialities and capacities of atmospheres emerge as part of a distributed relationality, and rather than constituting a durable condition, atmospheres flow as a sequence of events and sensations, successively provoking immersion, engagement, distraction and attraction. As I have insisted, this flow is also generated by the ways in which people respond to and communicate about such effects through the affective transmission manifest through movements, gestures, voices and faces.

As Laganier and van der Pol (2011) discuss, light designers are well aware of the imperative to stage atmospheres for the users of illuminated spaces, exemplifying Böhme’s contention that stage production techniques set ‘the conditions in which the atmosphere appears’ (Böhme, 2008, p. 4), creating ‘tuned’ spaces with tones, hues and shapes. Illumination varies in colour, intensity and animation, qualities that continuously change but also tint surrounding materialities and spaces, ‘projecting their qualities outwards and colouring the environs’ (Thibaud, 2011, p. 211). Cochrane identifies how ‘lighting can reveal texture, accent, spatial transition, visual cues, security and perception of security, moods, cerebral temperature and drama in the city when abstracted from daylight’ (2004, pp. 12–13), radiating diverse qualities of sparkle, glow, glare, highlighting and diffusion. Thus we can see how light designers contribute to the production of what Alphonso Lingis calls ‘levels’ of light and colour, an ‘incessant composition of qualitative, differential spatial, and temporal “tunings”’ that ‘constitute an incessant, diffracting, patterning of matters and senses’ in space (2009, p. 327). In bestowing diverse moods or tones of feeling in environments, festive lighting is particularly conducive to the production of thick atmospheres that stimulate responses which may be variously nostalgic, expressive, sensuous and playful.

Shared atmospheric events can foster conviviality, described by Koch and Latham as a force ‘toward nurturing the capacity of individuals to thrive in combination with others’ in an attitude of openness to difference (2011, p. 521). An ‘absorption in the festival atmosphere as a socially integrative, interactive and emotionally engaging experience’ (Stevens, 2007, p. 3) can be inculcated by the transformation of the often utilitarian functions of everyday settings into festive spaces that invite shared play and a suspension of rigid performative public conventions.

This conviviality is profoundly evident during the biennial *Moonraking* festival in the small Yorkshire town of Slaithwaite, which takes place on an evening in February, as the town is transformed by the occupation of usually quiet streets by the throngs of people who participate in a lantern parade. The festival was devised to celebrate an incident early in the nineteenth century when a group of Slaithwaite men profited from smuggling illicit alcohol via the Huddersfield Narrow Canal that passes through the town. One night, two excise men caught them in the act of fishing out the barrels of liquor. Pretending to be inebriated, one of the men replied that the moon had fallen out of the sky and they were raking it out, fooling the officials into thinking they were merely drunken fools. In celebrating this example of local cunning, the festival commences with a large paper lantern designed in the shape of the moon being hoisted out of the canal by crane. Subsequently, the moon is carried at the head of a procession that makes its way around the village. In 2013, the theme of the festival was time, and hundreds of participants of all ages devised lanterns resembling grandfather clocks, alarm clocks, egg timers, pyramids, clock towers and other figures.

The parade inscribes a circuit of the town by inhabitants and enacts a collective identity in space, binding participants together in a carnivalesque and loosely scripted performance.



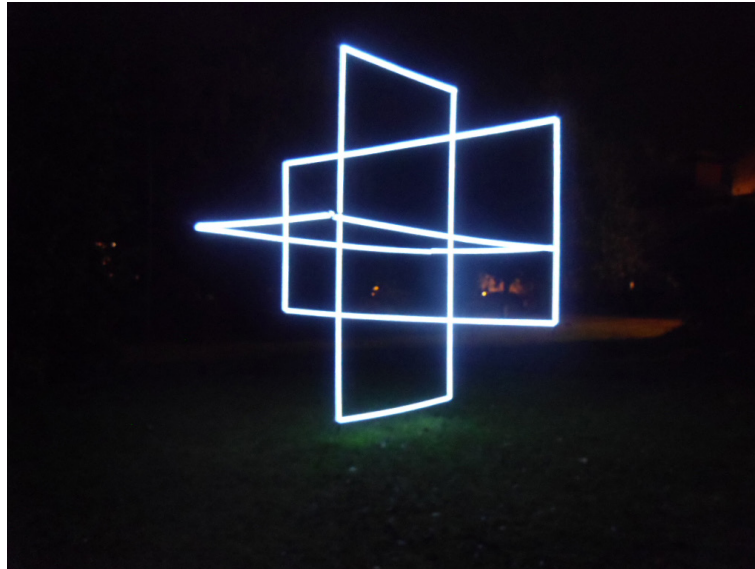
Parade of Lanterns at the *Moonraking* festival, Slaithwaite, 2013.

Brass bands add to the playful occupation of streets normally used for shopping, going to school or walking dogs. The lanterns act to catalyse the energies of the streets traversed. The making of the route is key here, with stopping points, points of congregation, places where the road narrows, where there are bystanders, where the road goes under a tunnel, past local landmarks, suitable starting and stopping places. As the procession passes, the key elements in the local landscape – the canal, bridges, the church and town hall – are illuminated by the light from the lanterns. A dark passage underneath a railway bridge is particularly charged by this illumination, and this encourages an increase in the volume of the bands' music and the shouts and singing of marchers. Bystanders line the road or lean out from the windows of adjacent houses, noisily cheering and waving to marchers. And the drinking, dancing and other festivities that follow the end of the march supplement the production of an enhanced topophilia towards the town, consolidating collective belonging. The atmosphere thus ebbs and flows along the route. Walking along a dark stretch bordering the canal, which reflects the glow of the lanterns, the parade becomes quiet with the stillness pressing upon participants. Under the railway bridge, the lanterns cast their light in the gloom and the noise of the marchers reaches a crescendo, intensifying the mood. As the parade reaches its end, the noise gathers once more in excited anticipation of the drinking and dancing activities that will ensue. The atmosphere is also stoked by the banter between onlookers and marchers.

At Durham's Lumiere, the crowds were less directed in their movement around the city but flowed in many directions. The 27 various attractions were scattered around the environs, though many were concentrated in the areas in and adjacent to the World Heritage Site. Thus the routes chosen and the attractions sought were decided upon by individual visitors and groups, and the anticipation of diverse experiences shaped by illumination fostered a generally excitable interaction, as thousands of people surged through the narrow, cobbled streets of the old town, transforming the usually quieter nightscape. Nevertheless, the atmosphere fluxed along these pathways and stopping points, and at certain stages, it manifestly intensified. At the narrow junction between Elvet Bridge and the Bailey, crowds stopped to gaze upon an animated elephant, *Elephantastic*, situated at the entry to the bridge, creating a blockage that impaired the progress of others who flooded uphill, and thus causing a swell in atmospheric intensity. By contrast, the large crowds who gathered on Palace Green to gaze upon *Crown of Light*, the spectacular projection of the Lindisfarne Gospels on the façade of the cathedral,

were collectively mesmerised by the onslaught of sound and light. A jollier atmosphere emerged around *Greenhouse Effect*, four cars that had been transformed into illuminated greenhouses on Old Elvet, their interiors stocked with various artificial plants, while a far more subdued ambience devolved around *Platonic Spin*, a shifting composition of three interlocking glowing rectangles sited in the quiet, dark Crown Court Gardens.

The Defamiliarisation of Place



Platonic Spin, Lumiere festival, Durham, 2013.

Everyday routine performances by inhabitants, workers, students and visitors characteristically undergird perceptions of familiar places, and common-sense notions of their meaning and function. In temporarily challenging, augmenting or revealing the overlooked capacities of place, light festivals are occasions that offer opportunities for practising, representing and apprehending place in ways other than through usual habitual experience.

Since light is integral to human perception, and conditions the particular human capacities of vision, this visual perception can be stimulated, challenged and confounded by the various ways in which illumination is deployed. Accordingly, light festivals have the potential to engender what Jane Bennett calls the 're-enchantment' of modern life through encounters that render one 'transfixed, spellbound' not merely through being charmed and delighted but through experiencing the more uncanny sensation of 'being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition' (2001, p. 5).

The production of spectacular, fantastic urban nightscapes can alter the feeling and meaning of familiar realms. New techniques are heralding novel ways in which the aforementioned modern 'technological uncanny' is regenerated as perception is destabilised and we witness distortion, surprise and the unfathomable, recapturing the oneiric dimensions of earlier modern nocturnal space. Because of this challenge to normative visual habits, perception can be revealed as culturally informed when an encounter with a familiar site swathed in light and colour confounds the usual apprehensions. The potential to defamiliarise experience by transforming a well-known place into an uncanny or strange realm, brings home how place may be apprehended otherwise. This can stimulate a reflexive critique towards any conservative attempts to inscribe place with an essential identity and also reveal that human modes of perception are partial and

specific. Constance Classen has written that we perceive the world through culturally located modes of sensory experience and conceptualisation, according to norms which prescribe what is sensually desirable and acceptable, for 'sensory values not only frame a culture's experience, they express its ideals, its hopes and its fears' (1993, p. 136).

These disorienting capacities are exemplified at the *Enchanted Forest*, held at Faskally Wood near Pitlochry in Perthshire, Scotland, in autumn. Initiated in 2002, it attracts around 30,000 visitors each year, who follow a trail through mixed woodland, where the usual sensual and symbolic apprehension of the forest is made strange by an array of lighting techniques, displays and choreographed sound. The event challenges romantic values associated with notions of wild nature, and the usual encounter with rurality after nightfall. Few people are drawn to the darkened moor, valley or forest after the sun has descended and long pervasive mythic associations of lurking danger and supernatural encounter testify to residual fears from an age more familiar with gloom. Consequently, an encounter with an illuminated nature is deeply unfamiliar.

Usually, colours are indistinguishable at night as everything merges into a grey and subsequently black accumulation (Edensor, 2013) but here, lighting transforms what is by day an overwhelmingly green vista, into a multicoloured array, making strange that which is familiar to those who commonly walk through woodland in daylight. Lights flicker high up in the trees, act as a backdrop to forest forms, brightly illuminate particular trees in vivid colours, take the form of fabulous beasts or sculptural shapes, reveal steps and paths, or light up fountains that gush out of the loch in the woods, all effects that render the woodland experience deeply peculiar. Music and other recorded sounds supplement the air of unreality.

Modes of looking in dark space are conditioned by a greater scrutiny to make out what lies around and ahead, take care how to move, and try to ascertain the identity of things, unlike the scanning of the landscape that is mobilised by day, where the eye roams across space and can easily chart the way ahead. At night, by contrast, the eye is typically drawn to patches or points of light that punctuate the darkness. The *Enchanted Forest* is layered with coloured lights that stage a selective, theatrical vista. They give a depth to the scene that is wholly other to the usual night perception of a rural landscape, which is by contrast experienced as the gathering of a dark indistinguishable mass, perhaps distinguished from the play of light in the starry or moonlit sky above.

The lighting techniques in the forest also separate out particular trees. By day, the human eye apprehends the wood as an accumulation of leaves and shrubbery, where each tree melds into the other in a collective effusion, denying the ability to discern the individuality of any one specimen. Strikingly, the architecture of a tree can be grasped in a way it could not ordinarily be perceived by daylight. A single organism can be illuminated against a dark backdrop, highlighting



Enchanted Forest, Faskally Wood, Perthshire



Aquarium, Lumiere festival, Durham, 2013.

form and texture and revealing the shapely uniqueness of any one oak, beech or birch tree.

In urban settings, defamiliarisation can be solicited through the ways in which digital video mapping can transform the colour of a building, or dematerialise, melt, burn, crumble, freeze or evaporate it. In addition, the deployment of peculiar fixtures or surreal images can render place strange. At Lumiere, an obvious form of defamiliarisation was perpetrated by the conversion of a traditionally designed red telephone box in Market Square into a glowing *Aquarium*. This subversion of the purpose of this fixture and the unanticipated vision of a vivid blue scene of live fishes and plants disrupted expectations about the meaning and feeling of space.

Defamiliarisation through the redeployment of everyday objects as luminaires also characterised the plastic shopping bags

that were illuminated from the inside and gathered together to form the *Consumerist Christmas Tree* in the Prince Bishops Shopping Centre, simultaneously provoking concerns about the excessively wasteful use of shopping bags and their detrimental effects on the environment. These installations might seem literally to constitute what Walter Benjamin calls a 'profane illumination,' through which ordinary, often overlooked everyday things and places appear strange, supernatural or uncanny (Benjamin, 1979).

The Re-enchantment of Place, a Deeper Sense of Place

Though defamiliarisation through illumination can initially make the most familiar place seem peculiar or downright uncanny, it can also be considered as potentially deepening a sense of place by multiplying the way in which place is sensed and conceived. In this section I explore how illumination can in other ways deepen a sense of belonging and enrich a sense of place. Light festivals can forcefully undergird a sense of place by foregrounding historical and cultural depth, revealing connections with other times and places, drawing attention towards often ignored or even indistinguishable features, and bestowing new angles on iconic spaces and buildings. Moreover, lighting techniques can honour those usually unrecognised in official, potted histories, give a sense of the progressive emergence of place and herald the usually unnoticed rhythms and processes that course through all places.

This deepening of place was spectacularly achieved during the event held to mark the 100th anniversary of Liverpool's iconic Liver Building in 2011. The Macula, a group of light artists from the Czech Republic, used a geometry-aligned projection to provide a ten-minute visual narrative of several key historical processes and events of the city. At first, the port's early castle was projected onto the lower part of the building, replete with silhouetted carts and human figures. Subsequently, a forbidding figure of the grim reaper loomed over them, breathing pestilence

over the settlement – to symbolise the destruction wrought by the Black Death on medieval England. The next stage featured the advent of Liverpool as a crucial imperial port, figured by the prow of a ship thrusting through the lower centre of the building and the subsequent building expansion of the early modern port. This was followed by a representation of one of the city's most lamentable historical periods; the port's important role in the transatlantic slave trade. Chained together, silhouetted slaves viscerally trudged across the lower part of the building and then came to light, tramping along its vertical axis in silence, only their chains clanking. Following this episode, the emergence of the industrial revolution grinded into motion and the building was temporarily converted into a machinic assemblage comprising pistons and trains. The city then re-emerged, assembled out of cargo and building materials with a host of labouring workers, and this was followed by an animated sequence that focused on the construction of ocean-crossing liners by the port's shipbuilding industry. After this passage, the sounds of the Blitz and the German aerial bombing during the Second World War were featured along with explosions, planes and searchlights, to constitute a smoky scene that mutated into a sequence that focused on the sounds of the psychedelic sixties and the Beatles. In folding together different times and spaces, the selective histories highlighted in the display not only reminded residents of the events that had taken place in and around this very location, but also conjured up something of the sensations of these episodes. The display thus artfully combined the symbolic, the affective and the sensory to immerse onlookers into a consideration of these historical dramas. But, in addition to the narrative, the display also worked with the architectural features of the famous building, its planes, axes and sections used as sites for projection, confirming the importance of its iconic presence in the city. Accordingly, because the projection was customised for this particular building, it heralded its form. The intense illumination revealed more acutely the shape and design of subtle architectural features, carvings and textures that are not perceivable to the eye by daylight. In this sense, the display provoked what Martyn Evans (2012) refers to as an altered and compellingly intensified attention through which the world was made 'newly-present.'

At Durham's Lumiere, several attractions fostered attunement to a renewed sense of place. Perhaps most obviously, the animated installation *Keyframes* that was arranged across Durham Miners' Hall which featured a collection of 80 LED stickmen who danced across the building's façade in various patterns in time to a version of the song, *Working in a Coal Mine*, played by the Durham County Youth Big Band. The display playfully referenced the previous uses of the building, firstly its long historical role as a centre for miners' social and political activity and more recently, following the demise of the coalmining industry, as a nightclub.

Ron Haselden's *Fete*, situated on an off-centre expanse of grassland adjacent to the River Wear, was composed of two elements. Numerous single strings of multicoloured bulbs were arranged across the site and alternately switched on and off every 10 seconds or so. Accompanying this rhythmic pulsing were different snatches of old-fashioned fairground music. The whole effect was to stimulate an array of vague sensations and allusions to other times and places where we may have experienced the thrill or fear of the fairground. The acute sense that the event was over conjured up a sharp sense of melancholy and yet the site also offered the promise that a carnival might be staged there in the future. This place has served as the actual site for fairgrounds held in the city and the display therefore honoured this intermittent history. Yet, in addition, the installation differed from many of the other displays in being situated at some distance from central thoroughfares, demonstrating that illumination has the potential to provide new perspectives and engender appreciation for marginal, less heralded sites.

Lumiere also provided an opportunity for a reassessment of one particularly unpopular building through the clever deployment of light, the installation titled *Volume Unit*, devised by the Media



Fete, Lumiere festival, Durham, 2013.

Workshop. Milburngate House, a large 1960s brutalist structure and one of ‘Durham’s least favourite buildings,’ due for demolition, was thoroughly re-enchanted. It was transmuted into a giant visual jukebox with its rectilinear structure and components captured by different coloured lights that reconfigured apprehension of the building. Audiences were invited to tweet tunes that they wanted to be played and VJs then transmitted sound-responsive images and graphics onto the building to follow the songs’ rhythms. Viewed from Millennium Place on the opposite bank of the River Wear, the reviled structure was ideally constituted to serve its transformation into a music box to which throngs of people of all ages danced.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to foreground the potentialities of light festivals to produce convivial and festive atmospheres, productive forms of defamiliarisation and ways of deepening a sense of place. At present, light festivals continue to serve as venues for both professional and vernacular creative innovation and novel displays show little sign of diminishing. There is no doubt that at large light festivals there is a growing tension around the production of large spectacular displays, usually focused on light projections. The tendency to raise the bar in terms of technical mastery and scale is unsustainable and could lead to more focused complaints about empty spectacles that produce passive audiences. On the other hand, at most light festivals, including Durham’s Lumiere, there remains great diversity in the scale, form and objective of installations and displays. In this discussion, I have not mentioned economic benefits that accrue to cities who stage these events, to their potential for marketing places and attracting many visitors who may boost local economies. Similarly, the stimulus for social participation and well-being, particularly in the local vernacular festivals constitutes another potential. Light festivals might also be conceived as crucibles for invention, and exploring artistic and aesthetic development through illumination. This may not only provide economic benefit and opportunities for enhancing leisure: the world’s largest light festival, Lyon’s Fête des Lumières, has served as a stimulus for the wholesale redevelopment of that city’s lighting strategy so as to maximise social equality in lighting, an inventive and aesthetic attunement to the qualities of discrete spaces, and a far more sustainable, energy-conserving programme.

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3	Andy Wood	Popular Senses of Time and Place in Tudor and Stuart England	Time
4	Robert Hannah	From Here to the Hereafter: 'Genesis' and 'Apogenesis' in Ancient Philosophy and Architecture	Time
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Insights

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