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Use Lighting to Support Urbanism

Reject uniform standards for place-based solutions.

AT NIGHT, SPACE IS MADE BY LIGHT. In all cities, especially northern ones, much of the time that people spend in public is after dark. The great success of winter placemaking in cities like Montreal, Edinburgh, and Copenhagen shows us the impact that great exterior lighting can have on the walkability and livability of our communities. Getting it right benefits from paying attention to the criteria that follow.

Only in auto-centric environments should the objective be to maximize coverage per dollar with bright standards and tall poles.

Attraction, not coverage: North American urbanism was struck a blow in the latter twentieth century by a crime-avoidance lighting strategy that insisted the path to safety was a scorched-earth campaign of uniform coverage. Still, many cities control development with guidelines that mandate minimum lighting levels in all locations.

These rules work against the creation of distinct character, but may also subvert their own ends by creating unpleasant environments that repel pedestrians. Safety comes not from brightness, but from population, and a place that fails to attract people due to its harsh lighting will become more dangerous. Moreover, the goal of uniform coverage, on a budget, has led to the proliferation of tall street lights spaced far apart, a solution at home on highways but not in character with walkable neighborhoods. In cities, uniform coverage requirements belong in parking lots, not in potentially walkable streets.

A range of solutions based on place: The choice of the light itself (called a “standard”), its placement in a space, and the height and frequency of the light poles are the primary variables that can and should be adjusted to achieve the desired effect. Only in auto-centric environments should the objective be to maximize coverage per dollar with bright standards and tall poles. Otherwise, the solution should respond to two principal conditions: where does the site sit on the rural-to-urban continuum (called the “Transect” by planners), and is it a retail location?

Sustainable, transect-based standards: energy use and light pollution, all standards LED or MIL with zero uplighting. The spectrum should be close to incandescent, to create a warm glow, avoiding a sodium yellow, mercury blue, or fluorescent effect. The design of the fixture itself should be appropriate to the location; some fixtures have a historical character, and that history should be preserved.

Light location and frequency: Light poles should be placed about 18 inches from the roadway. In walkable environments, poles should be between 10 and 14 feet tall, and no taller, to create a sense of scale. While it is difficult to set generic lighting frequency, it is not unusual for rural and urban locations to limit light poles to corners only. In shopping districts, street lights may be spaced as close as 20 feet apart, to create a sense of enclosure. Another attractive solution for urban areas is to hang especially narrow streets and alleys, is to hang lights in the center of the right-of-way on criss-crossing streets.

Alternative lighting: The best sidewalks are lit primarily by the flanking buildings themselves—wall-washers, and decorative lighting that makes a glow, and window displays bathe the sidewalk. To the degree that such private lighting is used, street lights themselves become less important.

RULE 86: Eliminate minimum-light-coverage standards, zero-uplight, low-energy standards. Determine standard and frequency with alternative and decorative lighting.

5 to Support Urbanism

Standards for place-based solutions.

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Sustainable, transect-based standards: To minimize energy use and light pollution, all standards used should be LED or MIL with zero uplighting. The spectrum of the light should be close to incandescent, to create a welcoming glow, avoiding a sodium yellow, mercury blue, or fluorescent white effect. The design of the fixture itself should correspond to the transect location; some fixtures have a history of urban use and others, rural use, and that history should be respected.

Light location and frequency: Light poles should almost always be placed about 18 inches from the edge of the roadway. In walkable environments, poles should be between 10 and 14 feet tall, and no taller, to support an intimate feel. While it is difficult to set generic criteria regarding frequency, it is not unusual for rural and truly suburban locations to limit light poles to corners only. As suburban works its way to urban, frequency increases to perhaps every 50 feet. In shopping districts, street lights may even be provided as close as 20 feet apart, to create a more decorative effect. Another attractive solution for urban environments, especially narrow streets and alleys, is to hang lights over the center of the right-of-way on criss-crossing wires.

Alternative lighting: The best sidewalks for shopping are lit primarily by the flanking buildings themselves: spotlights, wall-washers, and decorative lighting make the streetwalls glow, and window displays bathe the sidewalk in colorful light. To the degree that such private lighting can be counted on, street lights themselves become less important. Some main



Denver's Larimer Square didn't get that much attention until the lights went in.

street merchants' associations require stores to keep windows low-lit after hours, to enhance feelings of safety.

Decorative lighting: Do not underestimate the value of decorative lights in contributing to the success of retail or even strictly residential environments. Holiday lights are nice, but many communities have opted for the year-round celebratory feel that comes from strings of mostly white lights arranged creatively around a space. The oldest commercial block in the city, Denver's Larimer Square is a great testament to the power of historic preservation, but most people go there for the canopy of lights that merchants wisely added in the 1990s.

RULE 86: Eliminate minimum-light-coverage requirements in would-be walkable places. Use zero-uplight, low-energy standards placed on moderate-height poles just behind the curb. Determine standard and frequency based on the location's degree of urbanity. Get creative with alternative and decorative light sources.