

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

IF THE URBAN LANDSCAPE CAN NOW BE USED TO REPRESENT HUMAN THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS, HOW WELCOME WILL BRANDS BE IN THIS EMERGING SPACE? / BY GIACOMO BRACCI

Cities have always been subject to changes in industry, art and culture, but what is perhaps less obvious is the way these changes are reflected upon the actual bricks and mortar. Advances in technology means that creating temporary installations is now feasible and the large scale manipulation of light and colour is suddenly a realistic option for artists and advertisers alike.

Light installations could prove to be an engaging counter-trend, providing a real-world alternative to the faceless, 2D interaction of the online environment. Since the beginning of the 21st century, artists and designers have been interacting with light and the metropolitan landscape, 'hacking' buildings' lighting systems for artistic guerrilla purposes.

A similar installation – Arcade – was created by the CCC for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. This time, mobile phone interaction transformed the building into a playground of falling blocks. Players used buttons on their handsets to play one of the most successful games of the 8-bit era – Tetris.



LASER TAGGING / ROTTERDAM /

Mobile Interaction

One of the most influential examples of these illegal high end graffiti manoeuvres is Project Blinkenlights, created by the German Chaos Computer Club (CCC) in 2001. Some of the organisation's 1,800 members set up a light installation in the Haus des Lehrers building in Berlin's Alexanderplatz that transformed the facade into a giant monochrome computer screen. Passersby could dial a number and play Pong via their mobile phones.

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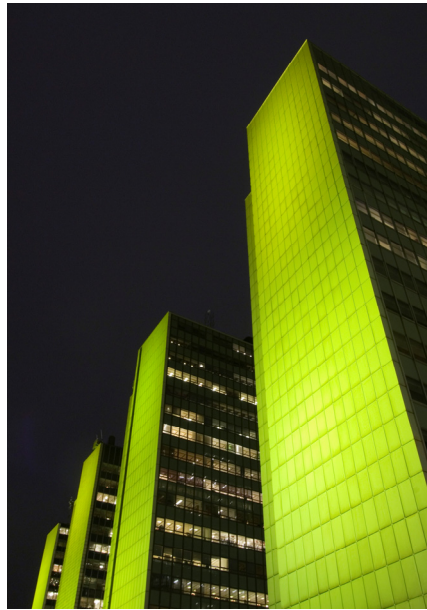
Laser Tagging

More recently Theodore Watson, an interactive artist and designer living in Amsterdam hit the headlines when his art collective Muonics entered into partnership with the New York-based Graffiti Research Lab. Together, they created an incredible optical installation called Laser Graffiti, which used light beams to create a semipermanent 'tag' on a building or large surface. As part of Muonics' open source vision (and in keeping with an unwillingness to involve brands in their activity), Watson posted tutorials on his website offering like-minded people the chance to build their own laser tagging equipment using components freely available in electrical retailers. This created an instant global laser tagging community, and allowed members of the public to personalise the cityscape on a grand scale.

Emotional Cities

Emotional Cities is an artistic and psychological experiment to monitor the emotions of Stockholmers and judge the overall mood of the Swedish capital. The project was commissioned by Moderna Museet (Museum of Modern Art) in partnership with digital advertising whizkids FarFar, and realised by artist Erik Krikortz, to explore issues of democracy and public space.

The Emotional Cities project asks 'How Are You Today?', using an interactive website to take the digital pulse of the city. Inhabitants are asked to select one of seven circles of varying colour. Violet represents a



EMOTIONAL CITIES / STOCKHOLM /

miserable status, progressing through to the red sphere, symbolizing pure happiness.

The average mood value is calculated on an ever-evolving basis and projected onto the city's five tallest buildings, creating a gargantuan light installation that can be viewed for miles around. The site also encourages visitors to write a private online journal explaining their mood.

'Advertising dominates the public space, points at our shortcomings and tells us what we need in order to feel good. Our economy is an "economy of deficiency", based entirely on dissatisfaction,' Krikortz explains. 'Through this light installation, the city's denizens can demonstrate collectively how they feel. The result is a psychological diagnosis of society.'

The project is in the process of being exported to other countries,

beginning with Korea, at the SK T-Tower in Seoul.

Dexia Tower Project

A similar venture with a slightly less sociological target is the Dexia Tower Project. The Laboratory of Architecture and Urbanism (LAB[au]) is a Brussels-based art collective whose audio-visual performances merge 'artistic, scientific and theoretic methods'. In their recent work at the 145-metre Dexia Bank Tower in Brussels, 4,200 windows were illuminated through remote controlled RGB LEDs to create a stunning light installation. At the bottom of the tower, a control station offers people the chance to interact with the display individually or collectively through a multi-touch interface.

Textual Healing

As with anything sitting at the intersection of popular culture, design and technology, branded involvement is steadily increasing. Paul Notzold is the brain behind TXTual healing, an interactive project that stimulates public participation through the SMS functionality of mobile phones. The 'always on' technology allows passersby to text their stories and see them projected in lights onto the facade of a building. An SMS is sent from a mobile to a specific number linked to a projector that automatically displays the message in the bubbles, completely uncensored. The exercise attempts to re-educate the public to think about the physical space in which we all live and share.

Just a few months after TXTual Healing was featured on the *Contagious* DVD (Issue 12), New York based agency SS+K collaborated with Notzold to create a dynamic street campaign for CREDO Mobile. Alice Ann Wilson, design director, SS+K, told *Contagious*: 'The text projection campaign really brought the core idea of CREDO to life. This is a mobile brand that enables activism through the everyday use of your cell phone. In essence, your phone = your tool for change. What we created for CREDO allowed people to see their own voice and opinion in a community focused political theatre.'

Sony Live Colour Wall

Tokyo agency Hakuodo Kettle adapted the facade of a skyscraper in the city's glamorous Ginza district to bring Sony Bravia's 'Colour Like No Other' campaign dramatically to life. As part of the Live Colour Wall Project, surfers online could see the Sony building via webcam and were invited to interact with it. Users could select from a Photoshop-style colour wheel with 16 million possible combinations, then drop their selected colour onto the building and see it change in the real world, in real time.

Sceptics may question whether this is advertising imitating art, or vice-versa. We would say neither. Art, design and advances in technology have always fed the advertising world, with brands providing the budgets required to achieve mainstream exposure. However, in the grand scheme of things, buildings and cityscapes still represent a relatively unrealised canvas for marketers to experiment with. Watch this space.

WEBSITES /

www.muonics.net

www.txtualhealing.com

www.emotionalcities.com

www.blinkenlights.de

www.lab-au.com

<http://livecolor.sonydrive.jp>

This article appears in issue fourteen of *Contagious*. The issue also includes case studies on MINI Clubman and Johnnie Walker.

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