

Light Relief

Heather Claridge

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Heather Claridge proposes a simple idea to provide light relief as part of winter during the pandemic - transform our cities, towns, communities and houses into urban outdoor galleries of colour, vibrancy and artwork.

Humans are inherently social. The connections and interactions we make shape our lives and are often central to our happiness. Our built environment's spaces and places are habitually designed, adapted and commandeered to directly support and encourage greater social connection through different times of the day and days of the year. Glasgow is no exception to this. In fact, it is often recognised as one of the world's friendliest, most social cities.

The mindset of shaping spaces to foster social interaction and community has, however, been brought into sharp focus by Covid-19. The need for social distancing to help halt the virus' spread has been a national priority, and already our streets, town centres and open spaces are being tactically altered to manage and mitigate public mixing.

Going forward, it is unclear when social distancing will (or should...) be fully relaxed. It is also not known how probable a second wave of the virus will be. However, should a second wave bring a second lockdown, it may see a return to solitude through some of Glasgow's bleakest months.

This prolonged and resumed social separation, which goes against our inherent social nature, will undoubtedly further impact mental health and happiness levels. As we now know, this acutely and disproportionately affects the most vulnerable in society.

Scotland already has problems related to social isolation. According to research published in February 2020 on Social Capital, one in five adults in Scotland felt lonely some, most, or all of the time. The impact of adult loneliness is believed to be as damaging to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. When amplified by the prospect of mass social distancing, during our darkest period, this should be a matter of great concern.

While there seems no single or simple solution to this dilemma, there are many creative ways to ease the impacts and connect people, communities, and places from afar. Of these, lighting is perhaps one of the most exciting, accessible, and scalable.

Creative lighting has the ability to transcend language, convey emotion, tell stories, make the invisible visible, and to bring inanimate objects such as buildings to life. As such it can be used as a powerful tool to build social cohesion. Frequently, it is celebrated by designers as being a quick, colourful and playful means of transforming places.



Glasgow Now

Glasgow has a culture of using lighting to nurture social cohesion. Around the millennium, the City created a Lighting Strategy to champion the role of light as a catalyst for regeneration and changing people's perception of the city. From this, a number of socially minded projects were delivered including the lighting of the Glasgow's water towers as community beacons, the illumination of a disused railway bridge as the first step in reconciliation for two communities living either side of the bridge and the River Clyde, and the lighting of the front façade of Shawlands Academy with animations created by students (forging bonds between the school and surrounding town centre).

More recently, there have been lighting projects organically grown and delivered entirely by communities. One fantastic example is the Strathbungo Window Wanderland. The concept was originally founded by Bristol designer Lucy Reeves Khan. The project sees the streets of the neighbourhood transformed into a festival of light, with the residents playing with paper and light to create imaginative window displays. Lucy's idea for this community driven festival stemmed from her own experiences of social isolation. As part of rehabilitation from a chronic illness, she would regularly take short walks at night through her neighbourhood.

According to Window Wanderland, during those outings Lucy 'imagined her local streets alive with other people viewing dramatic, beautiful or just silly scenes in the windows...She wondered if, in the dark of winter, these displays would cheer up others too. She put on her first event in her own community. It was a huge success. Other areas wanted to join in...'

In February 2017, the southside neighbourhood of Strathbungo ran their own Window Wanderland, with local residents decorating their windows with dramatic effect. This has now become an annual, much-loved event and other parts of the city such as Maryhill and Mount Florida, have followed suit with their own versions.

In the same year as the Strathbungo Window Wanderland beginnings, within Glasgow's Canal Corridor, light was being experimented with by a community of interest. Aimed at bringing the unoccupied Civic House to life through inviting a playful conversation between passers-by and the building, the Responsive Lighting theme of the Test Unit initiative devised, designed and installed a colourful lighting prototype in just five days.



Precedents and Inspirations

Of course, for creating person to person and person to city connections through playful lighting, there are also many great examples to explore elsewhere. The Playable Cities programme founded in Bristol has undeniably championed some imaginative projects. This includes the Stop Smile Stroll project, which transforms pedestrian crossings into opportunities for people to share their moods. Shadowing, a concept which allows the city lights to record and play back the shadows of the previous passer-by. And BikeTag Colour Keepers, an active game played on bikes through parts of the city via coloured lighting trails.

Creative lighting also often embraces film and videos. The Switch project located in a small market town in rural Ireland has been running for over 10 years. This project involves back-projecting international film and video artworks into the windows of shops and other spaces throughout the town. For one week, the initiative creates a discourse between the artists, the audience and the place itself.

These projects, along with the examples shared recently by the international urban lighting community (LUCI) - which Glasgow City is part of - show the power and possibility of lighting to bring joy, create connections and reimagine settings, as a response to Covid-19 and beyond.



Building Back Better

The immediate threat and driver for this exploration into lighting remains the possible onset of a significant second pandemic wave during winter. Yet there is no reason why light shouldn't also form part of Glasgow's recovery plan, after the pandemic. The notion of building back better, by adding creative lighting to the mix, is reasonable. To illustrate this, here are three areas of thought.

- Our current situation has highlighted the important role of thriving local town centres. Efforts to invest and revitalise town centres are being prioritised by the public sector, but there is a role for light to help engage, re-programme, reanimate and illuminate local distinctiveness and assets.
- Similar to town centres, the need for good quality accessible open space has been brought to the fore by our current circumstances. But this is also likely to remain part of our green recovery supporting greater climate action. Light is key in helping make spaces more usable, multifunctional and feel safer after dark. In many of the Scandinavian cities, with similar long dark winter days, playful light is incorporated into the design or adaption of spaces to encourage and prolong use.
- Neighbourhood quality will continue to matter after the pandemic. A green recovery is likely to champion the concept of self-sufficient or complete communities. This will include everyday facilities reachable by short walk or cycle ride, cutting down on carbon emissions. Lighting neighbourhood landmarks, routes and spaces can support the rekindling of local pride and community cohesion. With new lighting technology highly energy efficient, the benefits to climate action outweigh any detriments.



How can light be used now?

This article is a provocation and does not pretend to offer a particular or worked up approach. It is designed to stimulate interest and new thinking for the response and recovery plan to Covid-19. However, there are several potential ideas which could be worth exploring first, or further:

- A city-wide Window Wanderland, during our darkest month could be explored and encouraged. The scaling up of the neighbourhood light festival would support widespread efforts to feel closer to our friends, family and neighbours whilst safely distancing. This would also be an interesting way of involving children in local placemaking at a city scale.
- ‘A day in the life of’, and ‘a year in the life of’ a local town centre. This could be investigated and tested through using light, town centre users could work with local designers to animate shop windows, spaces and buildings after dusk helping enliven and potentially re-programme local centres. Lighting strategies for town centres could be used as part of the engagement process for recovering plans, to literally shine a light on issues and/or hidden gems.
- Case studies could be collected and shared on the different strategies, ideas and examples of how lighting is being used to connect, shift moods and creatively communicate, from afar. Glasgow is full of creative talent so why not show this off.
- With playparks temporarily closed, lighting could be investigated to create new play opportunities in different places: think light projected hopscotch on a street or perhaps a Bristol’s ‘BikeTag Colour Keepers’ equivalent.

To end where this article began - humans are inherently social, and the idea of being socially distant from friends, family and community during the bleakest months of the year is deeply concerning. In managing the loneliness this will bring, we will need a suite of creative means to stimulate local social connections, but from afar. Light can offer an exciting, accessible, and scalable vehicle for this.

There are many examples to inspire and encourage, ranging from community-led, to the artistic, to civic endeavours. Preparing for the threat of a second lockdown now could see a mix of creative light projects throughout the city involving different communities, designers and organisations.

However, it shouldn’t stop there, with town centres, open spaces, and local neighbourhood investment likely to be the focus for years to come, building back better should consider lighting strategies as part of the creative and collective response to our recovery.

