

Designing nocturnal cities: Illuminating the social role light plays in urban life.

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Sociologists **Joanne Entwistle, Don Slater, and Mona Sloane** look at the fundamental role of light in social life. Lighting has a lot to say about social structures, yet many of these assumptions remain unchallenged. By investigating lighting design, social scientists can understand how social relationships are linked to technology and the wider built environment. In conjunction with the research, the team have recently released two videos which further explore the aims and outcomes of their recent *Urban Lightscapes/Social Nightscapes* project.

Light and lighting design are fundamental to our everyday life. Light is an enabler of all social interaction and experience and plays a central role in how cityscapes are shaped. To give you an example of the “social” significance of light and what it tells us about particular nocturnal spaces: on the left of the below image, you can see a photograph of Peabody’s Whitecross estate, which is a social housing estate in Islington, London and the location for our Urban Lightscapes workshop. You may or may not have noticed that the estate is brightly lit up, it almost looks like a spaceship that has just landed in Central London.



Images credit: Catarina Heeckt

Compare to the image on the right taken at dusk in Westminster, where you can still find old gas lamps. Here it is rather dark (or will be once the sun has properly set). What illuminates the street is a very warm light coming from the gas lamps or spilling onto the street from the interior of the houses. When looking at the difference in lighting between these two places, it quickly becomes clear that light, here, has become a signifier of social class:

The social housing estate is lit up to almost motorway standards, mostly because it is assumed that this will prevent “anti-social behaviour”. Bright illumination enables 24 hours of surveillance, because high lux levels guarantee enough light for the CCTV cameras to produce footage that is admissible in court. When we see this kind of lighting, we automatically know – or feel – that this is not the “nicest” area in town. The street in Westminster, on the other hand, is lit softly; it does not “need” bright lights because it is not a problematic area. Its residents can enjoy lower levels in light pollution coming from public lighting, its nocturnal streets feel calm and safe – and look pretty.

To put it bluntly: darkness has become a luxury good in London. Thus, lighting says a lot about a place and its social structure. Lighting allows us to see how particular social classifications are linked to technologies, particular aesthetic assemblages and design interventions yet much of these assumptions – enshrined in discourses on crime, policy discourses and lighting design are left unspoken and therefore unchallenged. This is the backdrop against which the *Configuring Light/Staging the Social* research programme was founded in 2012 by the three sociologists (Joanne Entwistle, Don Slater, Mona Sloane). Our main concern are the various social aspects of light and the fundamental role light plays in social life: as infrastructure, as technology, as medium, as ambiance, as façade, or, quite literally, as a particular kind of material – or stuff – that we do, make and shape through our everyday practices.

Thus, we are not primarily interested in the psychological effects of lighting on individuals, but the ways in which our world is made up of various social roles and communities – we belong to families, groups, subcultures, communities, villages, towns, cities, nations and so on. Our *individual* identity is shaped through these various memberships and social interactions; so too our understanding and use of light and lighting technologies.

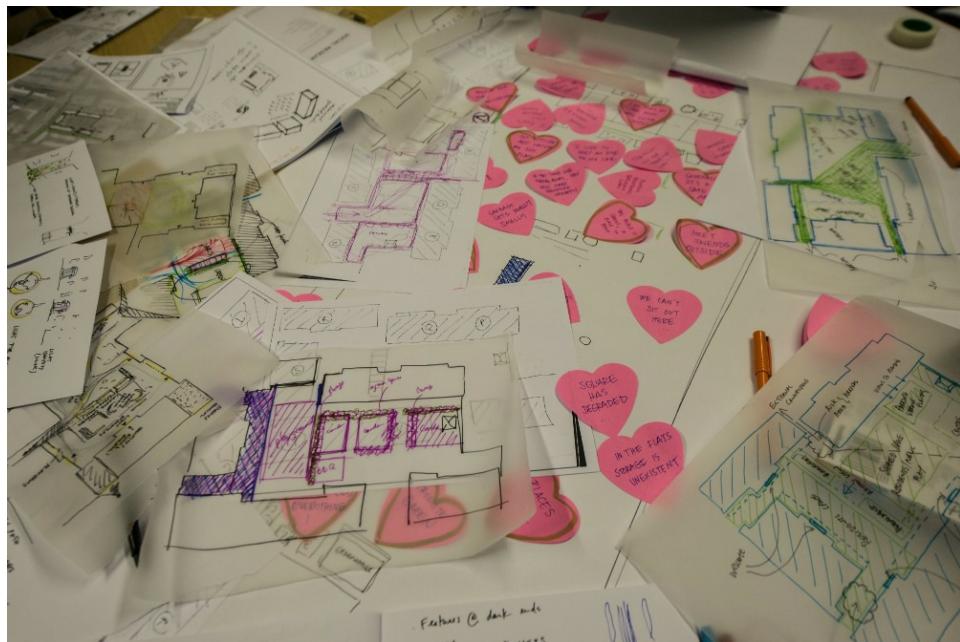
How can light as “stuff” be configured better or differently? How can lighting design consider social needs and contexts more seriously in overall design schemes? What difference can or should social knowledge make to the way designers and urban designers work with light? And what can social research contribute to “configuring light”?

[Urban Lightscapes/Social Nightscapes project](#) Film 1: Lights of Whitecross

When we "build lightscapes" and think about how the built environment we need to not only talk about technologies, but also about *techniques* for understanding the social spaces which architects, planners and lighting designers design for. Here is where Configuring Light's research agenda comes in and where we are making an impact.

This was the context from which our HEIF5-funded Knowledge Exchange and Impact project '[Urban Lightscapes/Social Nightscapes](#)' emerged. The project had at its core a workshop that piloted the *practical* integration of social research in lighting design through a case study on Peabody's Whitecross Estate in Islington, London. During this week-long workshop we worked with lighting designers, architects and planners to get them to think about their design practice from the point of view of social research. In other words, we set out a range of social research techniques and suggested some creative ways for them to explore their design practice in relation to a particular place.

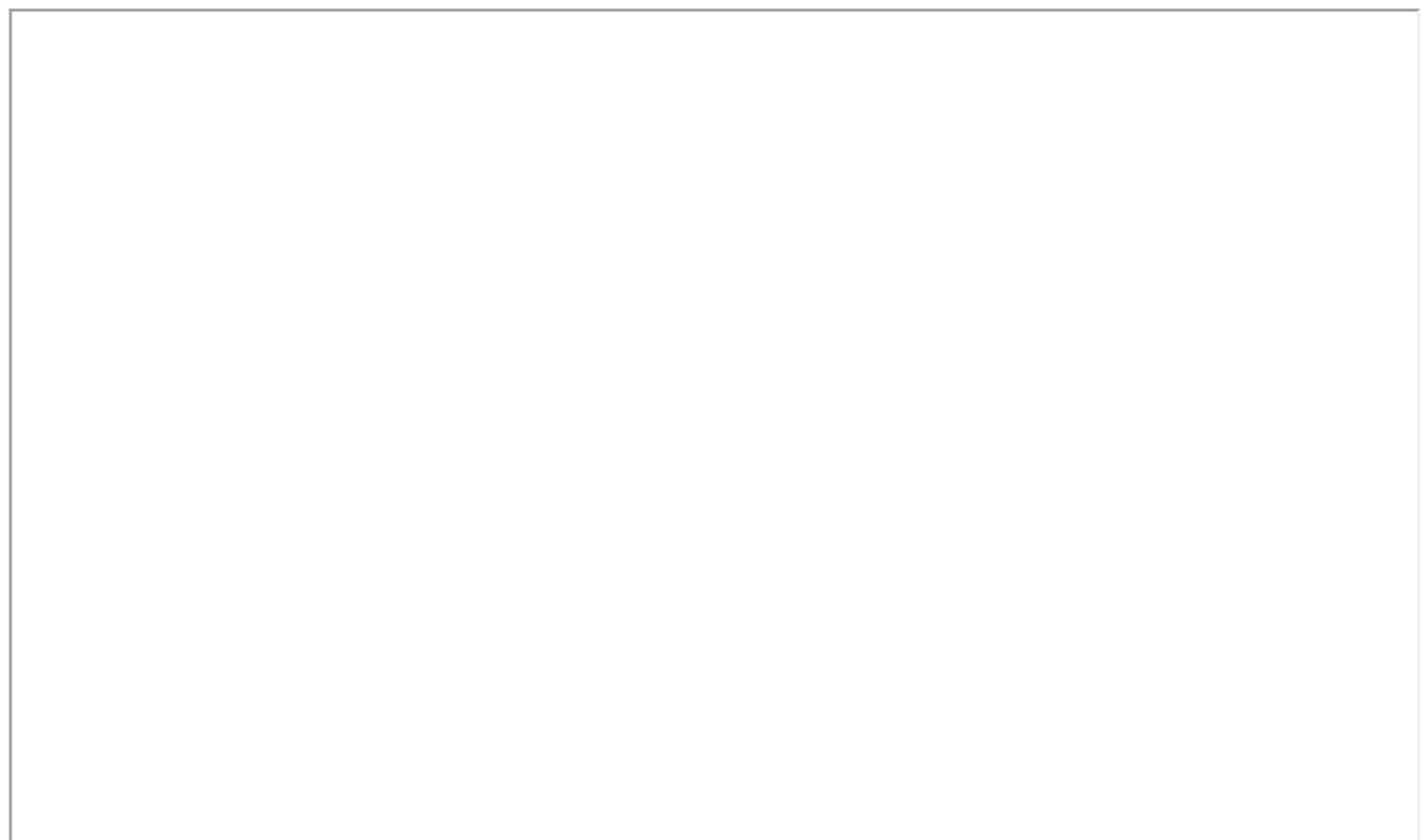
What has become central to this work is an approach which we call 'Social Research in Design'. Usually in design practices, research is external to the design process – pre-packaged information, through briefings, statistics, reports, regulations, etc., or used to either verify common-sensical understandings of a space or to test a design concept. The Social Research in Design approach turns this process around and implies that *doing* social research should be an integral part of designing. It means that designers remain critical of the, pre-packaged social research they receive and that they engage with the people they design for by way of *going out* and doing their own piece of social research.



Credit: Catarina Heeckt

This does not mean that Social Research in Design is about design that *only* reacts to issues that pop up or simply gives people 'what they *want*', as a particularly engaging mode of public consultation. It acknowledges the central role – and responsibility – of the designer and demands transparency about the objectives of a piece of design, to allow new information to disrupt professional biases or assumptions, to be able to give good reasons for specific design decisions, and respond creatively to what people in that space need. Social research, here, is impactful because it makes room for (lighting) designs that are explicitly site-specific and thus can be more effective and sustainable.

The workshop was a big success. Five teams of five researchers were asked to design one of five areas of the estate. Having first examined the space and come up with their own views about it, they were then tasked to conduct some social research, aided by training we delivered over the week.



In all cases, after talking and observing residents, the participants were surprised by their research, their pre-conceived ideas challenged. As a result of thinking through the social understandings of the space, their designs developed in different directions. One group had to totally rethink how to light a building as a result of learning, to their surprise, that the front of the building wasn't where they initially thought it was. Another group found they needed to think about the external users of their space not just the residents when learning the estate was a 'secret' cut-through for non-Peabody residents.

Our immediate project aim – to place social research at the heart of the design process and prompt designers to think about the social uses and implications of their designs – was achieved at the end with thoughtful design 'pitches' for the Whitecross Estate in a final symposium. The workshop is a step towards our longer term aim to develop a more integrated dialogue between design and academic research and more multi-disciplinary academic-practitioner collaboration.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Authors

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