Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION Lighting the Way
Chapter Author(s): Ruth McDermott and Ben Baxter

Book Title: Between Dark & Light
Book Subtitle: The Light Art of Ruth McDermott & Ben Baxter
Book Author(s): ruth mcdermott and ben baxter
Published by: UTS ePRESS. (2022)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.3355127.3

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Lighting the Way

INTRODUCTION

SOMETIMES EVENTS THAT can influence your life have rather inauspicious beginnings. In our recollection, the first edition of the Sydney light festival *Vivid Sydney* started as almost a fringe affair, from an initiative of a small group of enthusiastic pioneers who worked hard to get support from the right areas of government. There was always a lingering question: Would Sydney people (who love their warm weather) come out in the necessary numbers for a winter night-time festival? This was in the days before these night-time activations were commonplace. Our memory was that in the first two weeks, the weather was not inviting and things were looking decidedly dicey.

The final weekend brought better weather and we went down to our installation to take photos. We were surprised to find the streets were full of people pushing strollers, children, couples, elderly people, crowds from all walks of life. Sydney came outdoors at night in winter and did so with a vengeance. Building on this early success, *Vivid Sydney* went on to become a major light festival (owned by Destination NSW, a government body) and has become an important part of the Sydney festival calendar.

Our interest in temporary public art had been piqued two years before *Vivid Sydney* when we attended a talk by artists Christo and Jeanne Claude at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2007. Christo and Jeanne Claude opened our eyes to the possibilities of large-scale outdoor installations within a local context. To them, art did not have to hang on the walls of a gallery—it could be open air, free and accessible to all.

We had always been interested in lighting. Ruth, with a background in industrial design, had designed a number of light fittings and created interior light installations.

Ben, who has a background in painting and sculpture, had an epiphany of sorts about lighting when he saw a Dan Flavin exhibit at the Tate Modern Gallery in London. From this point, he was looking for ways to become further involved in the medium of light. We saw the first *Vivid Sydney* as an opportunity to work together and over the following years developed a number of outdoor temporary and permanent light art installations for this festival and other applications.

Over this time, both of us became more involved with light as an academic subject, with Ben pursuing a Masters of Design Science (Illumination Design) and Ruth a PhD in the evolution of the LED as a light source. Our studies revealed that very little was being written around urban light art, even at a time when light festivals around the world developed into serious generators of revenue and important ways of enhancing the experience of each city. A series of questions arose in our minds. What was the provenance of this art form? Was there a history of light art? What about the ideas and stories that could be powerfully communicated with this artform? What about the large challenges involved in working at this scale with these technologies in a public arena? What is unique about light art?

Very few light artists had documented their motivations and practices, so after 13 years in the game we wanted to put our ideas forward. We have tried to create an honest account of how challenging it can be to bring these installations together, all the while making the final effect look easy with nothing to stand between the viewer and the experience of the work.

We decided to focus on 17 projects, but organising how to group the projects was a question. Should the work be discussed chronologically to reflect the story of the

practice unfolding over time, or should the structure be based around themes—that is, using the elements (water, air, earth, etc.)? We felt the latter approach was artificial, as this was not in our minds when we developed the work.

Site, however, is so much a part of the effect of urban light art that in the end it becomes integral to the experience of the work itself in a way that is not possible when visiting a gallery, cinema or theatre. With each work we had spent a great deal of time scouting, photographing and measuring different sites, as well as considering viewing angles, practical aspects of access and suspension points. Through this process, we became very familiar with different locations—each one feeling like a second home.

Therefore, the outdoor pieces are grouped by location: near the water (Waterside), in a purely urban location (Urban) or associated with a stretch of parklands (Landscape). We grouped works created for interiors into a single section (Interior). Unusual though this organisation might be, it better reflects the actual practice of making the pieces.

This grouping also reflects the experience of our city of Sydney, particularly the area we worked in. The area is a rather unique combination of water (harbour, wharf and maritime architecture), landscape elements (parks, rocky cliffs made of sandstone, hills, trees) and city (laneways, historic buildings). Sydney is a city that defies easy classification and really is a combination of these elements. Our narratives followed this pathway.

Creating a kind of provenance for light art became part of the book, and we enjoyed delving into the precursors of what we do in the 'From Baroque to Bauhaus' section. As a creative collaboration, we wanted to express our individual voices throughout—we each bring something different to each work even though the commonalities of idea are the main drivers. We did this in a section on our practice as well as presenting our separate voices throughout the projects.

We also looked for someone to write about us who really knew how we worked. Trent Middleton, who is a registered architect, has been our friend for a long time and worked with us on *Cloud of Bats*—our first urban light art project. In addition to his creative input, Trent's experience and connections with engineers and riggers really helped this first project get off the ground. Trent was asked to give a presentation at a seminar associated with the first *Vivid Sydney* and the transcript is included under 'Art and the City'.

With our light art practice, we only ever created pieces around things that inspired and interested us—each work being a genuine expression of some experience, conversation or idea. There was no conscious effort to have a 'brand' or to project ourselves in a certain way, yet there is a consistency that we hope makes our work recognisable. While we explored a variety of materials and always looked for the best technology available, the approach and motivations were always similar. We wanted to tell a story and create an experience, to change the way people see spaces and environments at night—not as threatening or dangerous, but a time and place where something magical can happen. ■