

Architectural Illumination since World War II

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Most major trends of Western art and architecture in the second half of the twentieth century continued or responded to developments in the first half. To a certain degree the same is true for the approaches to architectural illumination, where key applications, artistic solutions and theoretical debates are remarkably similar in the early and later years of the century. While classic modernism in art and architecture, however, had ceaselessly been discussed, defined and celebrated since the 1950s, the ephemeral art of illumination temporarily fell into oblivion after World War II and again after the energy crisis of 1973. [...]

Festival Lighting

With the revival of architectural illumination in the late 1970s, the tradition of carefully choreographed searchlight displays was also rediscovered. [...]

The onset of the year 2000 inspired innumerable lighting projects around the world, their vocabulary usually dependent and in dialogue with that developed during the first half of the century. In Berlin for example, illumination artist Gert Hof had been commissioned to develop fireworks and a search-light display for the occasion. [...]

For the same night, Mexican /Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer had staged a lighting spectacle above the Zocalo in Mexico City,³² undisturbed by any such debates. From December 26, 1999 to January 7, 2000, Lozano-Hemmer maintained a website where anyone could submit designs for the eighteen robotic Zenon searchlights on the roofs surrounding Mexico City's historic central square, which were then executed in sequence, just long enough to be documented by three webcams at different locations in Mexico City. More than 100,000 participants from all over the world submitted requests or watched the light spectacle unfold via video-stream on their computer screens. Lozano-Hemmer understands his projects as "'relational architecture,' altering the urban experience through technological interventions."³³ He sees himself in a tradition reaching back to the art of projected color in Thomas Wilfred's Lumia projects from the 1920s to the '40s (see pp. 23, 61) and other lighting spectacles in the public realm, and consciously responds to what he calls the "cathartic intimidation" of Albert Speer's *Lichtdom* with the "intimacy" of individual participation in his projects.³⁴

It seems appropriate at the end to remember one of the most thoughtful responses to architectural illumination in the 1920s. After a visit to Times Square, the British writer G. K. Chesterton explained that artistically he had nothing against luminous advertising and illuminated skyscrapers. "When a child would see these colors, it would dance," he wrote. But he objected to the use of "colors and fire" in Times Square as a "vulgarization of the symbolic." While the former celebrations at royal weddings or church holidays deserved spectacular color and light, with today's commercialization, "the significance of such color and such light has been entirely killed," he explained, and thus, the "new illumination has made people weary of proclaiming great things, by perpetually using it to proclaim small things."³⁵ While Chesterton's critique is as valid today as it was in 1927, new projects continuously suggest a rethinking of notions such as representation, monumentality and the technological sublime. [...]



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Relational Architecture. Lighting Installation above the Zocalo in Mexico City, December 31, 1999. ©Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.

32. See: <http://www.lozano-hemmer.com> and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (ed.). *Vectorial Elevation* (Mexico City: Ediciones san Jorge, 2000.)

33. Daniel Canogar. "Spectral Architectures" in: Lozano-Hemmer (Ed.), 77–93.

34. Geert Lovink. "Interview with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer," in: Lozano-Hemmer (ed.): 49–67.

35. Quoted from: William Leach. "Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture." (New York: Pantheon, 1993): 347.