



Designers Lighting Forum

The Broken Windows Theory as Applied to Lighting: Designing Environments that Signal Care

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Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, participants will be able to:

1. Participants will learn methods for teaching non-lighting informed community member how to evaluate existing lighting installations for glare, uniformity, and vertical light levels.
2. Participants will be introduced to ethnographic interview tools to use with community members.
3. Participants will be introduced to examples of lighting installations (case studies) of community led lighting installations.
4. Participants will learn vocabulary to use with funding agencies when pursuing community lighting projects.





The Broken Windows Theory

Wilson & Kelling, 1982: Visual signs of neglect signal that disorder is tolerated, inviting further disorder.


- Environmental cues shape community psychology and behavior patterns.
- Maintained spaces signal care and investment.
- Neglected spaces signal abandonment and invite degradation.



Before broken windows there were abandoned cars....

In 1969 Dr. Philip Zimbardo, also known for the controversial Stanford Prison Experiment, abandoned two cars.

The cars were left with their hoods up and license plates removed. One was left in a neighborhood in the Bronx, and another in a neighborhood in Palo Alto. One was stripped within 24 hours and the other untouched a week later... until Zimbardo himself took a sledgehammer to the car.

A photograph of a severe traffic jam on a multi-lane highway. The view is from the back of a car, looking forward into a long line of vehicles. The cars are packed closely together, and the scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn. A semi-transparent black rectangular box is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing three lines of white text.

Does this mean that we shouldn't put nice things out into the public?
Can we trust residents of a neighborhood to care for their public spaces?
Where does investment start and in whose hands?

From Broken Windows to Burnt-Out Bulbs

How lighting quality signals care or neglect

- "Relentless pursuit of efficiency erodes community pride and trust"
- The False Economy: Low initial cost \neq True value. Hidden social costs accumulate.
- What Gets Lost: Visual comfort, human-scale environments, community identity.



The Current Problem – Lighting for Surveillance and Security over Human Comfort



Residential building entrance.

- High-output, low-cost fixtures as industry default and desire to out light the competition.
- Glare creates visual discomfort and accessibility barriers
- Overlighting creates feeling of surveillance, not care
- Industrial lighting strips away neighborhood character
- Hidden costs: Reduced social use, decreased safety perception



Where to start: Empowering Communities

When we light in collaboration with residents, our lighting doesn't have to do the job of enforcing social norms



Van Alen Gowanus Neighborhood Fellowship Night Walk with residents of Gowanus Houses and share back Session.
Photos: Alisha Kim Levin

Three Key Metrics

For non-technical community evaluation



1. GLARE - Visual discomfort and accessibility. Can you comfortably look toward the light?
2. UNIFORMITY - Even distribution and safety perception. Are there uncomfortable dark zones?
3. VERTICAL LIGHT - Facial recognition and connection. Can you recognize faces?

Teaching Glare Recognition

Simple methods for community assessment



- The Hand Test: Can you look at the light without shielding your eyes?
- Photography Exercise: Cameras reveal glare invisible to adapted eyes
- Disability Perspective: Consider vision impairments and light sensitivity
- Time of Day Assessment: Evaluate at dusk, full dark, and late night

Listening to Communities using Ethnographic Research Methods

Ethnographic Research



Core Interview Principles

"What gets measured gets managed, but what gets heard gets valued"

- Open-ended questions (ask "how" and "why", not yes/no)
- Active listening without agenda or preconceptions
- Follow unexpected threads—best insights come from tangents
- Respect silence and allow time for reflection
- Cultural sensitivity and awareness of power dynamics



Lighting-Specific Interview Questions

Sample questions organized by theme

- Usage: "Walk me through a typical evening in this space..."
- Safety: "Tell me about times you've felt comfortable/uncomfortable here..."
- Memory: "What do you remember about this place before the lights changed?"
- Social dynamics: "How do people gather here? Has that changed?"



RED HOOK - CULTURE CORPS LIGHTING PROJECT: Day 1 Recap

Where is there a moment of light in the neighborhood that you love or brings you joy?

- 1) By the bus stops and the busy streets there is enough lighting to feel comfortable.
- 2) By the pier they have nice lights that even in the dark you can feel "mellow" and safe.
- 3) Lighting should make an area feel "walkable" and a "safe space for us to feel like if we see a friend, we should be able to stop and have a conversation and be at ease"

Is there any experience or moment of light in the neighborhood that you consider uncomfortable or negative?

Police lights are uncomfortable and blinding, resident team feels that light should be welcoming, too much of it is blinding, too little makes you nervous (metaphorical/literally important). The orange lighting is not bright enough and reminds people of a "horror film" → discomfort & disability glare.

Can you recall a memory or experience where you felt safe? Do you recall anything about the lighting?

[Add notes below]

Feeling safe where lights were bright and focused in a way that you can see the ground and what is in front of you. The best lighting memories come from Red Hooks, "Pre-Construction phase". Ever since the construction has started it has felt more like an maze or "Rikers island" uninviting to walk in or through → like an alley

How is the space being used? How have the restoration efforts affected the use of Bush street?

[Add notes below]

- Bush street is dark at all times.
- The construction has played a detrimental role - sightlines are diminished.
- It places bush street in a "Hallway" so it feels darker due to the closed space.
- It feels like the "alley" you're not supposed to go down in a movie

Community-Led Lighting Transformations



1. BROWNSVILLE LOCAL CENTER CONNECTED CORRIDOR
2. RED HOOK SAFE LIGHTS
3. LIGHT FOLLOWS BEHAVIOUR COUNCIL HOUSING

Brownsville Is

Brownsville, Brooklyn

Pitkin Avenue Business Improvement District (BID) worked with Studio Cooke John Architecture and Design to transform Zion Triangle Plaza and other public spaces along Pitkin Avenue into a welcoming destination for residents, shoppers, and visitors of Brownsville.



Red Hook Safe Lights

Red Hook, Brooklyn

Sighte Studio collaborated with Court Center for Innovation and Residents from Red Hook Houses on the NSTAT Team to develop “temporary” lighting solutions throughout the NYCHA campus as it underwent significant construction from Sandy remediation.



Brandon Estate London, England

LFB worked with Configuring Light to undertake social research and community engagement in order to transform a space on Brandon 3 as part of the Great Estates Program - a community led estate improvement project run by the council. Although partially interrupted by the pandemic, we developed a new method of engagement using a temporary lighting installation to change a problematic space after dark and open a discussion about new types of lighting with the residents as well as the council.



Technical Vocabulary

Speaking precisely builds credibility but building reference vocabulary builds trust

Examples of common terms – how do you talk about these terms with your non-lighting friends, your kids, your clients?

- Lumens vs. Lux: Output from source vs. illumination on surface
- CRI (Color Rendering Index): Quality of color appearance
- CCT (Color Temperature): Warm (2700-3000K) vs. cool (4000K+) light
- Uniformity Ratio: Max/min light levels (lower = more even)
- UGR (Glare Rating): Lower = less discomfort



Impact Vocabulary

Frame lighting in terms funders already care about

- CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) - Safety outcomes
- Placemaking - Community identity and space activation
- Equity - Fair distribution of quality infrastructure
- Sustainability - Energy use plus lifecycle costs
- Accessibility - Universal design for all abilities
- Social Infrastructure - Spaces that build community cohesion



Working with Municipalities

Strategic engagement with agencies

- Understand constraints: Budget cycles, maintenance capacity, political pressures
- Find champions: Identify sympathetic staff and build relationships early
- Document effectively: Professional photos, measurements, peer comparisons
- Negotiate strategically: Start with pilots, offer resources, stay flexible



Quality Over Efficiency

Reframing the cost discussion

- Initial cost vs. Lifetime cost (includes maintenance over 20+ years)
- Monetary cost vs. Social cost (reduced usage, perceived unsafety)
- Energy efficiency vs. Human efficiency (safe, comfortable environments)
- Maintenance signals care - Broken Windows applies to lighting too



When we design lighting that signals care
that is scaled for people, well-maintained, and present
we are making a statement that the people who live and walk there matter.
And when we don't, we are making that statement too.



This concludes The American Institute of Architects Continuing
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