

Lecture by Susanne Seitinger, 19 December 2011: Enacting the Social through City Lighting

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Susanne focuses on the strategic arrangement of programmable (LED) lighting elements that shape inviting and responsive 24-hour public spaces in the city. As a visiting lecturer at the Technical University of Vienna and a visiting scientist at the Austrian Institute of Technology she has been forging new ties in her home town Vienna. An ongoing research project LEDs2go studies how ambient LED lighting can subtly signal walking speeds to public transit users. She has also been teaching a course entitled "Erstes Wiener Nachtentwerfen" on interaction design for nighttime.

Where it is widely present street lighting - like most infrastructures - is taken for granted. Furthermore, citizens assume that lights mounted on regularly spaced posts present the most appropriate form of urban illumination. This configuration dates back to the late 17th century when the first broad attempts were made in Western Europe to illuminate city streets. (Schivelbusch 1988) Though some ancient cities do record oil lamps (Antioch in 4AD) or gas lighting (Cordoba in 15th century), the wide-spread adoption and acceptance of a fixed-in-place public street lighting infrastructure did not take hold until the 18th and 19th centuries. Instead, people carried lanterns of all sorts to light their way and make their presence known. Schivelbusch (1988) compellingly describes how lanterns served both as illumination and more importantly as communication. Carrying a lantern signaled to others that one was legitimately moving about the city at night. This view on a historical moment before brightly lit urban environments reminds us of the ephemeral and temporally-bound nature of nighttime and the specificities of different illumination devices. I juxtapose historical excerpts on the history of lighting with contemporary interventions and projects at the various scales related to dynamic lighting such as the recently completed LightBridge for MIT's 150th Anniversary celebrations. These examples aim to spark a discussion on the socio-political and cultural role of lighting in the configuration of public space in cities.