

Peter Fink

Three Rivers Park, Pittsburgh

Cameron Cartiere



The first thing I noticed when I met light artist Peter Fink were his glasses. They were thick and bold, made of semi-translucent yellow plastic and appeared slightly luminous, not unlike his work. They suggested the wearer might be flamboyant, boisterous, or even slightly eccentric. But appearances often prove deceiving and as we settled in for a conversation about Fink's latest project proposal for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania it was immediately apparent that the glasses disguised a much more serious personality.

Fink's *Three Rivers Park* proposal is ambitious, not just in scale, but also in philosophy and ideology. Developed with his partner, architect Igor Marko, the proposal is an extensive design to light not only the park, but also substantial areas of downtown Pittsburgh. When Fink talks about the project proposal, he doesn't begin with drawings of lighting specs or photomontages of what the park would look like. He does not immediately talk about the art. He begins by talking about the city.

Not unlike many major cities in America, Pittsburgh is a divided city – divided by economics, class structure, and topography. Downtown Pittsburgh sits at the crux of where the Allegheny River from the north and the Monongahela River from the south join to form the Ohio River. The city is also intersected by two main highways, and a third highway cradles downtown as it curves along the Monongahela banks. Pittsburgh is covered with steep hillsides, some over 365-metres high, and numerous bridges criss-cross the three rivers, shuffling workers into and out of downtown. Pittsburgh appears to be a city that operates at a fast pace, but not necessarily on a human scale. While Pittsburgh may have begun as a typical pedestrian city in the 18th century, years of extensive growth, the evolution of the suburbs, and the development of superhighways have created a fractured downtown area that often repels rather than attracts visitors.

Fink's approach to developing a regeneration project for the metropolis was to create a plan that reunites the downtown with the greater city. Fink

and Marko's firm, Art2Architecture has proposed a public art design that will literally bridge the downtown area to the banks north and south of the rivers with light. Utilising bridges, pedestrian zones, existing parks and green belts, Fink hopes to re-link the fragmented spaces of the city; drawing people back to the downtown by creating illuminated corridors from one area to the next. The project includes green laser beams that cross the rivers constructing a sort of sky gateway, forming an X of light over the Y created by the rivers' junction. Fink also proposes to dim other areas of the city that are currently over-lit. By utilising a number of economic and environmental strategies, the proposal would see Pittsburgh's current pattern of glaring hotspots of light bisected with intimidating dark passages turned into a holistic plan for a city that glows.

Under Fink's proposal, Point State Park – a 36-acre area at the tip of downtown – would be lit at three main locations; the footprints where Fort Pitt and Fort Blockhouse once stood, the fountain with a water geyser almost 46-metres tall, and a pedestrian loop. The effect would be a park that was safely accessible at all hours. Along Pittsburgh's North Shore, the proposal calls for the development of the riverfront along Heinz Field and the Carnegie Science Center. Fink's vision is for a square that is totally media based – “culturally driven rather than commercially dominated.” The science centre would visually spill out onto the square through the use of contemporary wind turbines, providing the needed electricity and floating walkways allowing visitors to see the technology behind the design. The activities in the area would focus on sports, science and art. Fink's plan also incorporates the three principles for developing a sustainable region: attention to local economics, environment, and community. His proposal identifies a number of benefits to the city including lowering overall energy costs for lighting, reduction in levels of crime, higher earnings through a greater night economy, increased tourism, environmental benefits, and a renewed sense of community unity and celebration. This is a design for reopening the city.



1 *Ohio Laser Gateway*, a monumental yet immaterial gateway celebrating the historic importance of the beginning of the Ohio river as the Gateway to the discovery of the West



2 *Art Science Sport Square*, 2002, concept design for a 21st century public realm

3 *Peter Fink*

4 *Pittsburgh Point Park*, concept design for reighting of Point State Park in downtown Pittsburgh, currently undergoing extensive restoration

5 *Rivers of Light*, a concept proposal designed for large scale public involvement and an international promotion of Pittsburgh by using the installation in other cities with rivers

During our interview Fink stated that, "Grand projects need to come up from a deeper cultural understanding of how to embrace and manage change, and that comes from being able to work together in an open and yet efficient way." And this is a grand project on a large scale, encompassing over 200 acres of water and landmass, yet somehow it still maintains a human quality. Perhaps it is because Fink is so convincing when he talks about the proposal. He speaks about Pittsburgh as if it is his city, like a native son. When Fink arrived to present his proposal to the selection committee, he did not arrive with an entourage like many of his competitors. Nor did he arrive with an elaborate multi-media presentation. He came simply to talk. To talk about *this* city – its past, its problems and its possibilities. It is clear when you listen to Peter Fink that he not only understands the city's history, but he also has a sense of the potential of its future and the urgency with which this project needs to move forward. He is adamant in his belief that the project must happen in the next five years or it will never materialise.

Following our conversation, Fink had a teleconference with the planning committee in Pittsburgh and not surprisingly the project is being scaled down into more digestible stages. The Art2Architecture team often find themselves in this position when working on grand projects. A client will request something extensive, visionary, that encompasses the whole of a city and when they get it, they shy away from the enormity of what such a project would entail. The client's resistance is not generally about costs, but about the radical change required in how one views a city. Fink's relationship with Pittsburgh is now in what he refers to as a "capacity building" phase. Working in stages, he will help the committee gather support and enable them to articulate a larger vision for the city. He will guide them in creating public and private partnerships and help to develop a greater understanding of contemporary urbanism. The lighting committee will be looking at ways to implement elements of Fink's proposal including a uniform illumination of the city's many bridges, the sky gateway, and temporary projects such as a river of light created by thousands of floating spheres that would be illuminated by

battery-powered strobe lights within each unit. In one scenario, the spheres would float down the river where they would be gathered and shipped to London to float across the Thames, metaphorically transplanting the Ohio River to England.

Fink believes that twenty years ago many European cities drew inspiration from waterfront regeneration projects that were developing in US cities such as Seattle. Yet somehow, since then, many American cities have lost their way, unable to find a means to reunite neighbourhoods. Fink hopes that a modern European model of regeneration, one that incorporates a holistic approach to urbanism, can now serve as inspiration to the US.

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Notes

Art2Architecture London was established in early 1990s by artist Peter Fink and architect Igor Marko to explore collaborative and inter-disciplinary ways of working and is now involved in a wide range of award winning projects from town squares, ecological parks, bridges, gateways to major lighting installations in both Europe and North America. It is at the threshold of the Open City that Art2Architecture London stands. Open City is about wholeness, connectedness and interlinking, a network rather than a hierarchy. In these projects, the practice has established a reputation for an innovative and rational approach to urban design with new ideas for sustainable transport, strategies and IT provision in the public realm. Their approach to the process of creating contemporary space introduces a strong emphasis on the fusion of urbanism, landscape design, architecture, art and lighting.

www.art2architecture.co.uk