

Lighting and Linking Downtown Pittsburgh

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Peter Fink resculpts the nighttime landscape into dramatic constellations that articulate the spaces that link bridge to bridge, community to community.



"Pittsburgh is a city of lights for all the wrong reasons," says light artist Peter Fink. The night sky is polluted by bright surface parking garages and piercing beams from the highways. Pittsburgh—once one of the wealthiest cities in America, breeding Carnegie, Mellon, Heinz, Westinghouse, Frick—is still recovering from the collapse of the steel industry. For the past fifty years, city government, desperately seeking urban renewal, has tried everything: luring industries back into town; cultivating elite universities, top medical research facilities, world class sports arenas, and preeminent cultural institutions. Yet according to the 2000 census, downtown and surrounding areas still saw a decrease in population—businesses and creative young people continue to seek other destinations. As Richard Florida, professor at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University, writes in his theory of the "Creative Class," the "key" to regenerating an urban center—to making it viable, livable—"can no longer be found in the usual strategies."

Many may view an expansive and innovative lighting strategy as a peculiar way to address endem-

ic urban renewal needs. Lareese Hall, of the city's Riverlife Taskforce Lighting Committee, says the intention is not simply to create "fantastic, spectacular lighting display," but to "integrate all of these elements"—the institutions, the landmarks—that have been traditionally seen as very disparate" and to foster "cohesive public spaces through light." These targeted public spaces include the six and a half miles of Three River Park as well as the physical, visual and psychological "corridors" that connect bridge to bridge, and community to community. But how can fancy lighting accomplish more than superficial recasting? Can light design transform an entire downtown?

Fink, the England-based lighting designer, who with his partner, architect Igor Marko, directs the firm Art2Architecture, says that to successfully re-light an urban space, "you must persuade a city to look at it very holistically, to look at it as a series of interlinked challenges." Rather than implanting "iconic works of art for a phenomenal amount of money" onto the surface of a public space, Fink and Marko focus on community concerns. It is this "comprehensive understanding," of the aesthetic and community concerns,

says Hall, that differentiated Fink's team from the other twenty-one designers vying for the bid. Fink sees light as a medium suited to this task urban renewal, for it has two, concurrent capacities: first, to articulate individual spaces, and second, to provide a connective tissue, linking the various places.

The Art2Architecture's lighting strategy will "remediate the enormous amount of light pollution," says Fink, re-sculpting the nighttime landscape into dramatic constellations. The centerpiece of the design proposal are two green beams of light that will pierce the night sky, acting as visual bridges reaching from the riverbanks. The beams will cross to form an "X" in the sky above the point at which the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers converge to become the Ohio River. Beatrix Barker, a public art consultant on the project, claims that this "laser monument may act as a gateway to the West that would rival the St. Louis Arch." Only this gateway, says Fink, will be both "immaterial and monumental." The light will create a grand symbol while accentuating the natural, dramatic beauty of Pittsburgh's topography.

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