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Light and Public Places

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Light is of decisive importance when we experience public environments. The making of places means the interplay of light and space, light and form, light and surface, light and texture, light and pattern, light and color, and, most important, light and human activity. Light in this sense includes both natural and artificial illumination, a relationship which means that light is the great maker of presence and is of paramount importance in all man-made environments. Presence means more than that which merely surrounds us, it is a spiritual quality, a humanizing mood that uplifts our lives. It is an attitude that makes our day-to-day life, no matter where we are or what we are doing, a wonderful and personal experience. It takes into account all the idiosyncratic whims as well as the psychological amenities that people rely on in their workaday lives—and why should it be otherwise?

As architects and designers we have the unique opportunity of making environments for people, and by doing so we can immensely enrich their lives. Light and lighting are inseparably related to this obligation and it is our responsibility as designers of buildings, spaces, and objects to realize this in all our endeavors. We live with light and light must give presence to our lives.

The late Richard Kelly, dean of American lighting designers, once

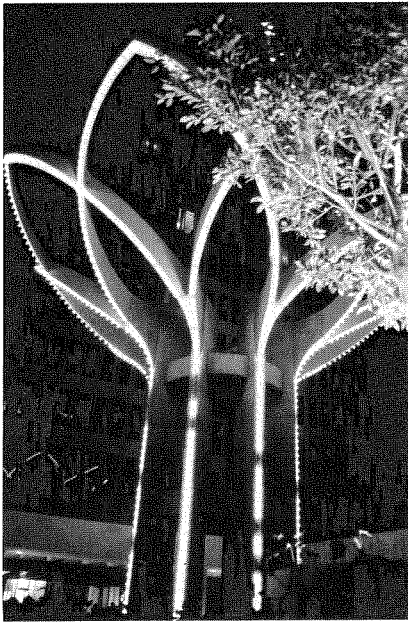


I Bandshell: Matera, Italy

(Photograph by Marvin Buchanan)



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2 Tapiola, Finland
(Photograph by Richard C. Peters)

3 Embarcadero Center
(Photograph by Anders Hench)

said that every space could contain three qualities of illumination: “focal glow, ambient luminance, and the play of brilliants.” This poetic expression is a great challenge to architects and designers because it clearly describes the magic of light, a magic that is essential if we are to enjoy the places that surround us.

The challenge is often realized in the design of lighting for interior spaces, but I believe that little attention is given to the importance of lighting design in out-of-doors public places.

The interweaving of focal glow, ambient luminance, and the play of brilliants is essential to all public realms. Focal glow is like a sunburst through the clouds. It commands attention, creates interest, and separates the important from the unimportant. Ambient luminance is necessary for revealing forms and is vaporous, like the interior of a white tent at high noon. It fills people with a sense of freedom of space and suggests infinity. The play of brilliants is a ballroom of crystal chandeliers, a heaven full of stars,

or the magic of Christmas trees. It is fantasy; it excites us; it charms the senses. Each of these elements of light play, however, can be spiritless and distracting if used alone.

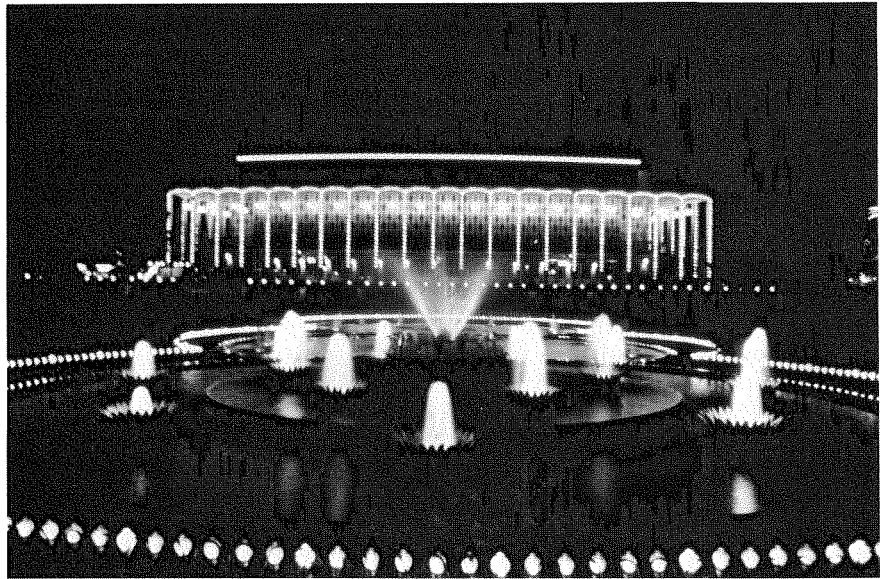
In the public realm the potency of this light play is too seldom recognized. Light can be the directive force of all our visual awareness, assisting in the creation of significant forms and spaces with symbolic meanings for everyone. Unfortunately, if misguided or ignored, the use of light can also allow chaotic visual stimuli to wreck our efforts to create the practical and noble places necessary for our humanity. Lighting of public places demands a demarcation of design intent and an elaboration of the specific needs and characteristics of the places themselves, and most important, of the participants within the place. Lighting should be focused on people. It should be oriented toward people in space. The general lighting design must provide the maximum sense of identification to form the place itself. It must attract people and stimulate activity. Lighting should be dynamic

without being gaudy, cheap, or banal, and it should provide areas of excitement and repose and points of emphasis and interest within the place, while satisfying our physical and psychological comfort and security.

The nightly radiance of cities produces an extremely exciting organization of forms and patterns. However, when one is involved at the personal level, these patterns can become indistinguishable amid the clutter of clashing, garish, over-illuminated forms and spaces. The formulation of an overall, comprehensive, lighting-design plan should expand the unique physical, visual, and emotional characteristics of a place. This does not impose a rigid order, but rather provides a framework in which many activities can take place and be understood. To flood everything in light is not the answer. By the imaginative application of light we can reduce the visual chaos of unplanned light and bring a sense of joy and enrichment to the public domain.

Let us imagine that we want all places to be beautifully illuminated. To most people that would only mean providing a great deal of light. How wrong that is! If people do not see very well, they demand more light. As designers we must persuade the public that the *quality* of light is far more important than the quantity of light.

I believe that lighting for the public realm should blend two systems of



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4 Concert Hall (Night)

Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen, Denmark

5 Concert Hall (Day)

Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen, Denmark



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6 Model: "Wonder Wall"

1984 Louisiana World's Exposition, New Orleans
(Photographs by Alan Karchmer)

7 Theme Pavilion: Osaka World's Fair

(Photograph by Richard Clayberg)

8 Elephant Tower

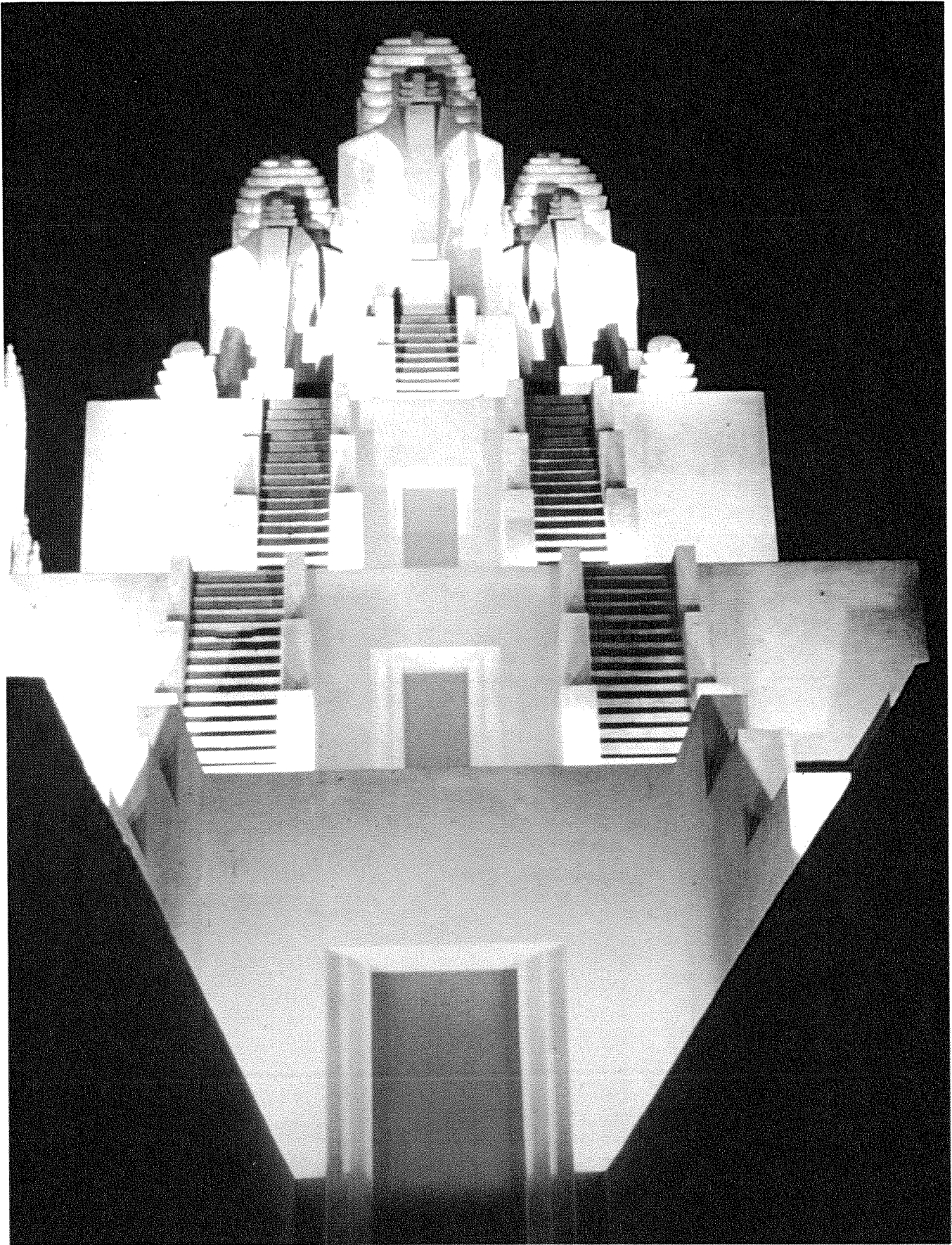
Golden Gate International Fair, San Francisco, California, 1939–1940
(Fair photographs from the collection of Richard C. Peters)

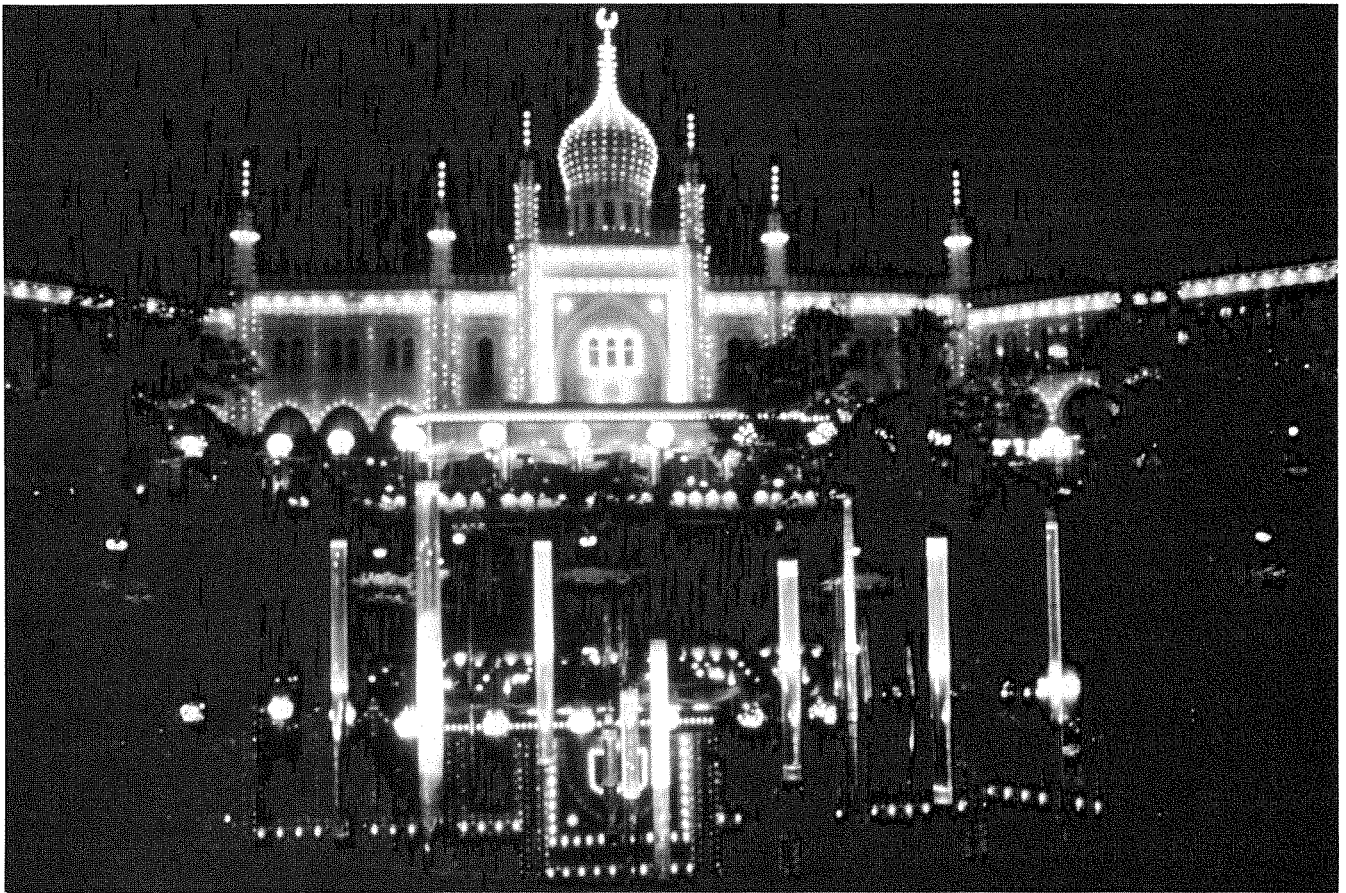
lighting: what I call "syncopated light," the vivacity and luminosity so necessary to the life of places, and "painted light," the background lighting to enhance the feeling of festivity and community.

Syncopated light is the "play of brilliants." It bestows on places an atmosphere of enchantment. It is light as lines, dots, sparkle, glitter, and glow. Syncopated light possesses a distinct character of intensity and color, and heightens all sensation.

One of the richest and best examples of "syncopated light" is Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, Denmark. The play of brilliants on decorated surfaces provides night illumination and gives an enchanting beauty to the intimate garden setting.

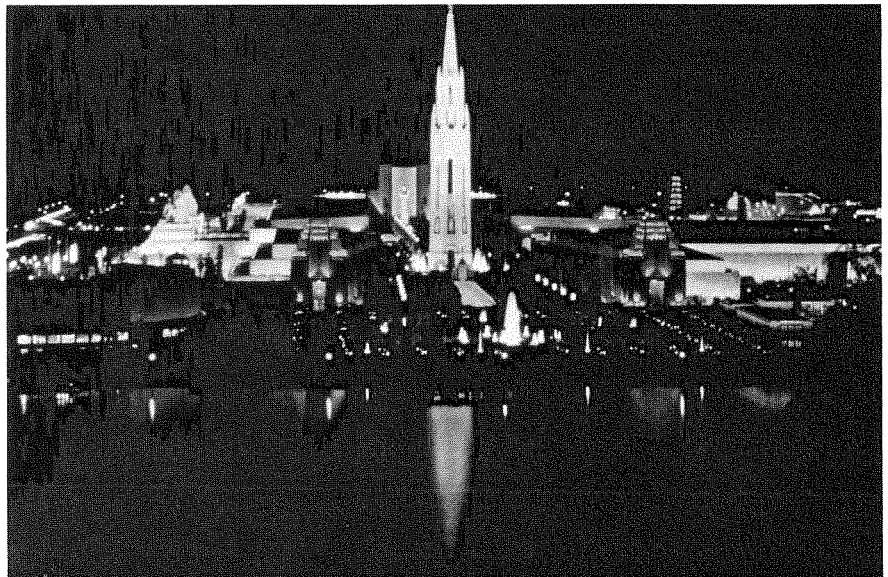
Painted light is ambient luminance and, as good background light, aspires to create a comfortable, restful, and reassuring place. Painted light is night color and does not reproduce the effects of daylight. It seeks to achieve by illumination an entirely new feeling of the place at night.





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9 Restaurant and Garden

(Photographs by Richard C. Peters)

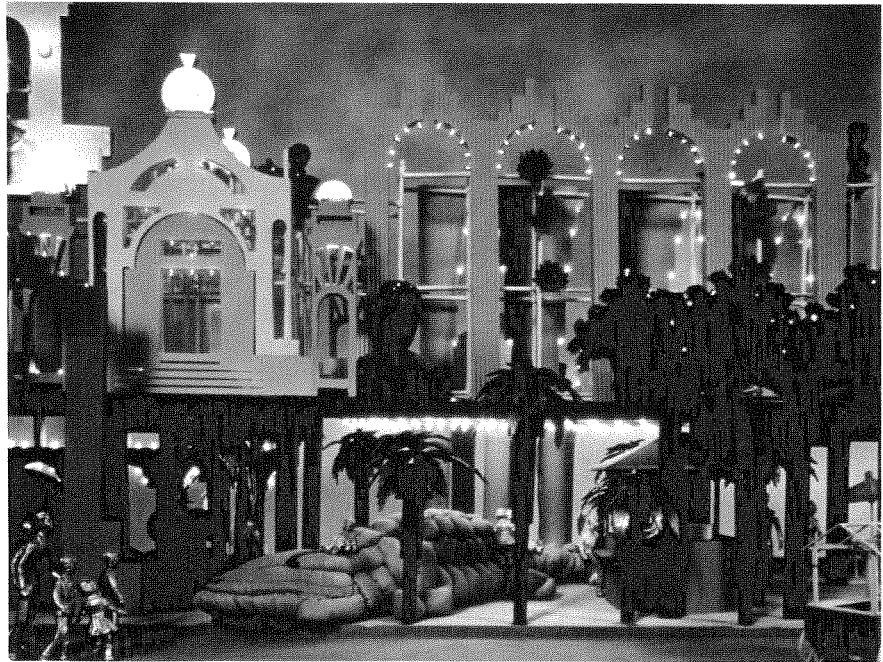
10 Overall view of Fair

Golden Gate International Fair, San Francisco,
California, 1939–1940

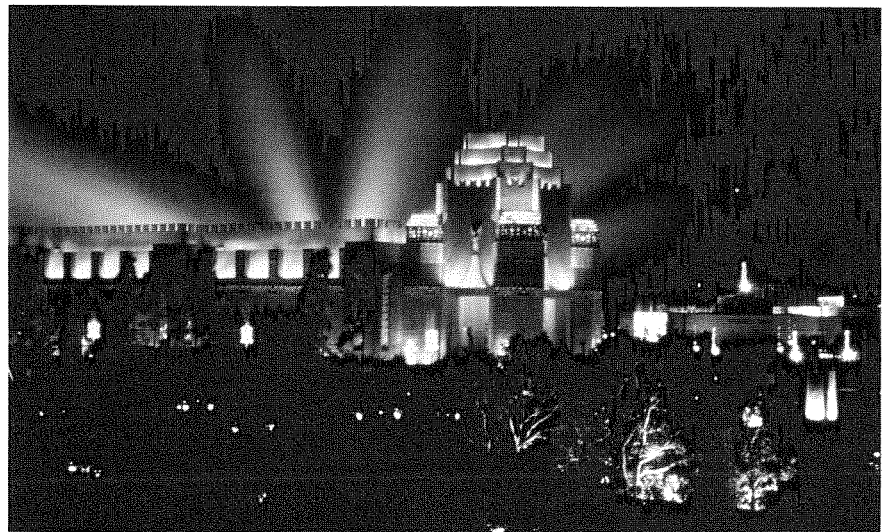
The Golden Gate International Fair in San Francisco Bay (1939–1940) was a dramatic example of “painted light.” The illumination formed an integral part of the building design, and color, light, and structure were composed with a personal scale and eloquence seldom achieved in the making of public realms.

With light, everything is showmanship. The perfect blend of syncopated and painted light will celebrate places and provide the diversity of light play. My lighting design for the Wonder Wall of the 1984 World’s Fair in New Orleans is such a blend of light play. Conceived to enrich the visitor’s experience, the 2,500-foot wall of fantasy and delight offers a sequence of light events. Ambient surfaces, glowing objects, and subdued light are woven together in a harmonious design. In moving through spaces, from light to light, emotions are excited, and highlights, shadows, and silhouettes are accentuated. The “wonder” of light provides the mystery of wandering and discovery and makes people feel good—no matter where they may be.

“Good light,” as it is called, is the ingredient for creating wonderful public realms. In the task of creating places of value, lighting can play a significant part and make us care about the places that we love.



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11 Model: “Wonder Wall”

1984 Louisiana World’s Exposition, New Orleans

12 Court of the Moon

Golden Gate International Fair, San Francisco, California, 1939–1940