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Paris by light

Akhil Sharma

Innovative lighting designers are reimagining the 'Ville Lumière' using new technology, colours and movement



Tour Montparnasse seen from the Eiffel Tower

The way Paris is lit at night is changing, both its monuments and plazas, and if you want to see this transformation first hand, Pont Saint-Louis is the best place to start.

I stood at the foot of this bridge one recent evening and waited for the sky to darken before crossing the Seine. Beside me was Roger Narboni, designer of the master lighting plan for much of Paris. He had been telling me that, because of new regulations, Paris is committed to reducing the energy consumed in lighting its streets, squares and buildings by 30 per cent by 2020; he had been struggling to relight the city in order to help meet the target. Were such changes controversial? He shrugged, chuckled. "We are French," he said. "Everything is controversial."

Darkness fell. The lamps along the river were switched on. The laughter of couples walking arm in arm acquired an air of tender mystery.

Narboni and I started across the bridge. Just beyond it, behind a small park, was Notre-Dame, whose lighting was designed by Narboni and Louis Clair. The best way to see the cathedral, he told me, and probably the only way to rediscover this endlessly photographed

monument, is to approach it from the rear, from Pont Saint-Louis, where the trees of the park block part of the view. From the bridge, the cathedral's dome, lit with white fibre optics, looked like a hot-air balloon tugging itself aloft.

We walked along the cathedral's north side, bordered by tall narrow buildings with souvenir shops at street level. Narboni directed my gaze upwards. About 40ft up, there was an arch and a row of pillars, behind which was another façade and load-bearing buttresses. These details were hard to see during the day, he said, because of the shade from the buildings.

Revealing hidden details is one aspect of Narboni's lighting design but the controversial part, and the one that will most affect the big tourist sights, is that the building is lit by fibre optics not spotlights, and the light is white instead of that famous yellow which gilds most of Paris's monuments at night.

Fibre optics consume much less energy than the almost universal spotlights used to light heritage buildings. Narboni chose white because the yellow spectrum diminishes our ability to see depth, detail and contour.

We came to the front of the cathedral. In the plaza, white from the reflected light, there were families, Bangladeshi men selling caps, young Caucasian French men with dreadlocks dancing to rap and busking for money. Standing there, I recalled that, when I had been at the top of the Arc de Triomphe at night or walked through the courtyards of the Louvre, the yellow lighting had made my skin appear grey and the people around me had looked exhausted. Now, around me in the whiteness, was enormous and vibrant life.

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My trip was organised by Brown & Hudson, one of those expensive travel companies that specialises in providing access to important people and places. My three-day trip, which included meetings with some of the most significant lighting designers in France, would cost £19,456 (though, of course, anyone can visit the same places alone for free).

Narboni and I got in a car and drove along the Seine. Churches, bridges and government buildings stood either side of us, lit up with gold spotlights. This drive is perhaps the classic way to experience light in Paris. "This is not the type of light I would suggest," one designer told me, "but the concentration of beauty is so crazy."

But as soon as I began researching how Paris is being relit, I was advised to leave the Seine and take the T3b tramway line between Porte des Lilas and Porte de la Chapelle, a lovely but poor and largely unvisited area in the north of the city. A new lighting scheme for the area was launched in December 2012, much of it designed by Narboni. As we drove through the neighbourhoods, I saw trams moving silently along tracks surrounded by grass verges and

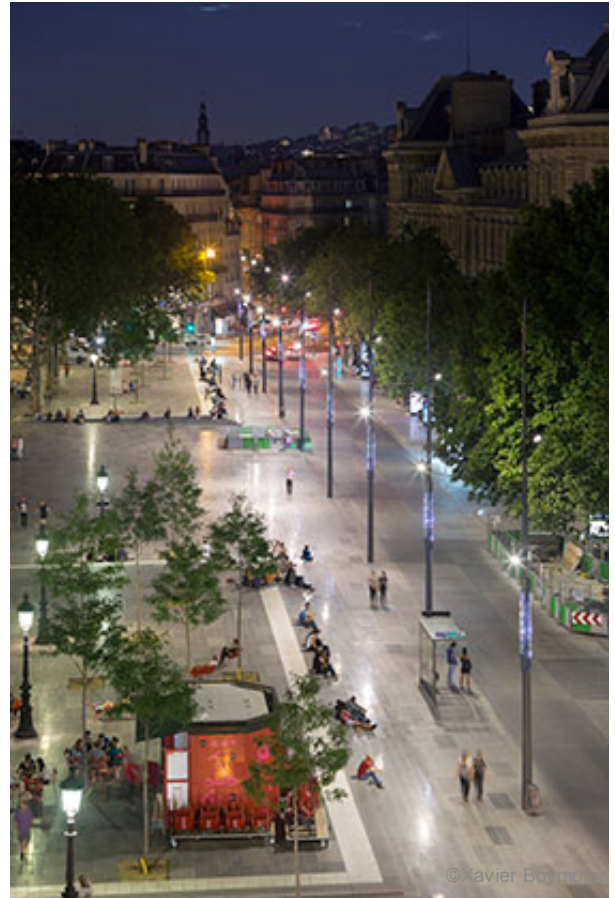


pavements, all lit in the same paper-white light. This uniformity of white makes both green space and pavements seem joined, and this unification makes one perceive them as larger and more spacious. On the pavements, Middle Eastern men were playing dominoes and young women with head scarves were walking, holding hands.

Narboni pointed out certain details to me while I noticed others. The shadows cast by the street lamps had sharp edges — so distinct, they appeared almost drawn. The artificiality of this made the pavements feel like stage sets, which, in turn, made the entire space feel more constructed and, therefore, more thought-through and precious. To walk on these pavement is to feel that someone has designed them for you. Listening to Narboni, I was amazed at the art it takes simply to light a pavement.

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The trip might be expensive, but there is something unique about not just visiting a place, but doing so in the company of its designer. Narboni describes Yann Kersalé, another French giant of lighting, as his “best enemy”. Despite a long complicated history, involving litigation and differing aesthetic imperatives (Narboni is quite clear in saying that he is a lighting designer not an artist, while Kersalé is much more willing to embrace that label), they appear, at least to me, remarkably similar.



The Place de la République with lighting designed by Yann Kersalé

Kersalé is slender, balding, energetic and willing to push the boundaries of expectations. When we met, he was preparing to light a castle in blue, because he thinks blue enhances detail. Among the ways he and Narboni seem similar is that both are fiercely morally committed and are determined to work with communities that typically see little of the arts. While many people visit the gardens of the Musée du Quai Branly to see the “lake of light” Kersalé has installed there, he urged me instead to go to Place de la République.

At the grungy intersection of the third, the 10th, and the 11th arrondissements, the Place de la République has become, through a massive project completed in 2013, Paris’s largest pedestrian plaza. “If you approach it from a nearby square,” Kersalé told me proudly, “it appears like you are approaching a place that has no lights.”

I got off the Métro at Temple, where people were selling pens and batteries under bright streetlamps. Place de la République, in the distance, was so dark that it looked like it had suffered a power outage. After its redevelopment, the 3.4-hectare plaza has quickly become a

haunt for hipsters; one of the junior editors of my French publisher said she goes there every weekend.

When I arrived at the plaza, it was dim but crowded. There were young men doing tricks on bicycles, Middle Eastern men wearing thawbs, hipsters with tattoos sitting in a café drinking beer and two young women swinging glow-in-the-dark hula-hoops round their waists. Various types of lighting structures were situated around the plaza, including poles with LED screens that featured abstract displays. The lamps that interested me the most rose up till they were just below the trees. The casing of the bulbs had gorgeous leaves stencilled on them so that the light appeared to come from within the trees. The light was strong enough to see people's faces and walk confidently but not much more.



Detail from Notre-Dame, lit by Roger Narboni and Louis Clair

The reason Kersalé is so proud of the darkness is that most designers agree that Paris is overlit, and the easiest way to save energy is to reduce the brightness. Walking around the plaza, feeling perfectly safe, I felt the intimacy and privacy that darkness can bestow.

Régis Clouzet belongs to a younger generation of lighting designers than Narboni and Kersalé. While the latter are in their sixties, Clouzet is 47 and, with curly brown hair, he looks even younger. We met in Le Ciel de Paris, the restaurant at the top of Tour Montparnasse, the hideous 59-storey glass tower that led the government to ban skyscrapers in the city centre. The restaurant, like the drive along the Seine, is a celebrated place to take in the city at night: all of Paris is laid out before you.

In 2012 Clouzet unveiled a bold new lighting design for Tour Montparnasse — a scheme of delicate multicoloured lights that appear to slide along the building's corners. Looking up at them from the street, even this slab of a building looks lively. When I repeated to Clouzet what many people have said — that his design has redeemed the building, that the timing of the sliding lights matching the flickering of the lights on the Eiffel Tower has tied Tour Montparnasse to Paris's history — he demurred.

The best place to see the relationship between the two towers is probably from the top of the Centre Pompidou. On another cold night I stood there watching; the Eiffel Tower looked like a shimmering young woman at a dance and Tour Montparnasse like her sober tuxedoed partner. I asked Clouzet whether the lighting of Paris's monuments in white or the dimming of street and plaza lights would be resisted. He said that Narboni's design for Notre-Dame and Kersalé's at the Place de la République had proved that change might be surprisingly wonderful.

I left Paris late one afternoon. The sky was grey and the light dim. It was too early for the monuments to be lit. My trip had mostly involved travelling through the city at night. Now,

driving through its streets, I was again amazed by the churches and grand apartment buildings. I knew how beautiful Paris would look in a few hours but, right then, the city looked like a lovely woman regarding herself in the mirror and considering what make-up and jewellery to put on for a party.

Akhil Sharma's most recent novel, 'Family Life' (Faber) is shortlisted for the forthcoming Folio Prize

Why the 'City of Light'?

Paris has long been known as *la Ville Lumière*, the City of Light, but its inhabitants can't quite agree why, **writes Theo Leanse**. One theory is that the nickname derives from the 18th century — not from any physical lights, but from the city's leading role during the Age of Enlightenment, when philosophers including Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot spread bold ideas through its salons.

An alternative explanation relates to the century before, when thieves stalked Paris's narrow, pre-Haussmann streets at night. To curb the rising crime rate, Gabriel Nicolas de la Reynie, Paris's first lieutenant-general of police, ordered a public lighting programme that saw 6,500 lanterns put up in the streets.

The third story is simply that, in the 19th century, Paris was one of the earliest and most enthusiastic adopters of gas-powered street lighting. The boulevards were first lit with gas in the 1820s and, by the end of the 1860s, there were almost 60,000 gas lamps. In 1867, Julius Rodenberg wrote: "The whole of Paris is studded with golden dots as closely as a velvet gown with golden glitter."

Photographs: Xavier Boymond; Light Cibles; Concepto

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