

A Walk in a Woman's Shoes: Re-thinking Lighting in Urban Nightscapes

By Aditi Govil

"The street is the scene of her writing, with her body following the role that she is given in the evaluation of her body as merchandise. The street is the scene of architectural writing. The private realm is the scene of the institutions, where woman and her body have an assigned place: the house. Wife in the kitchen. Whore is the street." – Diana Agrest, "Architecture from Without: Body, Logic and Sex," 1993

For women, a simple act of walking back home at the end of the night involves being always on the look out, where the feeling of fear is a part of their everyday routine. Men on the other hand, due to physical and cultural differences, often have the privilege to be ignorant to such scenarios. This research recognizes that danger cannot be eliminated by just trying to change one factor. It does, however, argue that the perception of fear can be influenced by lighting. In this day and age where the #metoo movement has revealed the extent that women rely on each other for safety, how can the city respond through light?

The advent of artificial light diminished the darkness of the night, but did not influence the anxieties and social boundaries tied to accessibility of the urban environments for women. This study attempts to understand, what the specific factors influencing women's perception of safety in the night are and how the change in quality of lighting can influence these factors to help transform the way they experience space.

Historically, a woman's place has been confined to the home. Urban spaces have been considered the rightful place of men, where "respectable women" were called shameless when seen in public and said to be vulnerable to a man's abnormal and violent sexual expression. While today, women have significantly more access to these spaces, the way they claim urban space is still seen through the variations of masculine and feminine body languages.

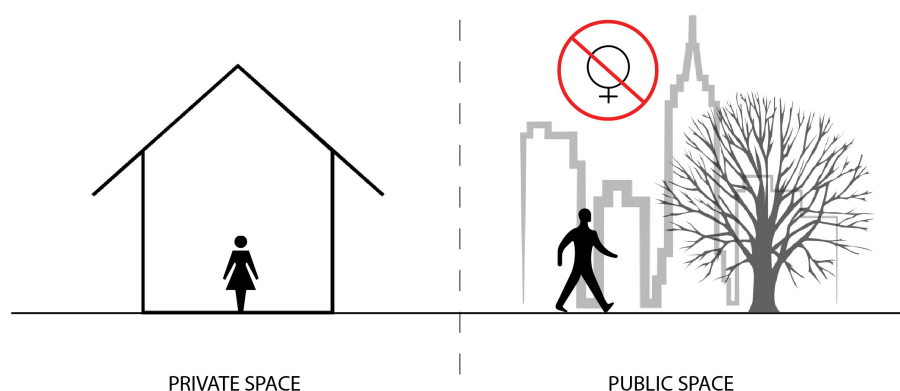


Figure 1 'A women's place is in the home.' (Source: Dolores Hayden, What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like?, 1980)

In the literature of 18th century, the figure of the observer, the stroller within the city was that of a man. Philosophers Rousseau and Goethe defined this as the concept of

‘flaneur’. In *Walking the Victorian Streets*, Deborah Nord very aptly described the ‘flaneur’ as a traditionally middle class, masculine subject of leisure whose privileged position shielded him from the curiosity of the crowd. He was the subject and not the object, a spectator not a spectacle. The woman on the other hand, could not aimlessly walk the streets and was always under the watchful eyes. She was the object, a spectacle for the eyes of men.¹

In *Claiming the Public Space: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, Susana Torre writes “women are seen as extensions of the male gaze and as instruments of the emerging consumer society and its transformative powers at the dawn of modernity”. This male gaze forces women to perceive themselves as mere body parts or objects existing only for the man’s pleasure.

This objectification of women leads us to argue that gender identities are very much a part of the urban realm, where the invisible line of privilege separates men and women. Hence, urban spaces are constructed by gender, as well as aid in the construction of gender.

Gender is not a biological category but more of a social construct, and for this research it is assumed to be a culturally defined attribute, which exists and varies in time and space. Though gender varies, physically and biologically, the human ‘body’ has more permanence through space and time. Culture, as it relates to gender, in this sense is something malleable and material, though it can be argued that there are some attributes that are universal. As Lars Svendsen writes in his book, *Philosophy of Fear*, “In a culture that in many ways is characterized by social integrations, fear is something we all share, a unifying perspective on existence. Fear has become a basic characteristic of our entire existence.”² Though fear is universal, there is a fear “specific” to women.

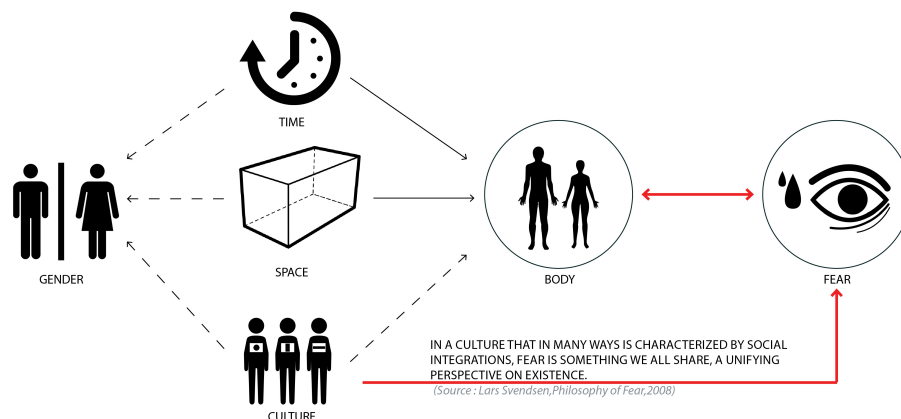


Figure 2 Gender, Body and Fear.

This research will, therefore, address two connected questions relating specifically to the field of lighting design: firstly, are there gender specific conditions that people perceive within lighting in the urban night environments? And secondly, is there a quality of light specific to women that help diminish the perception of fear of the nighttime?

¹ Deborah Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995)

² Lars Svendsen, *Philosophy of Fear* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 19.

Jessica R. Barnes, an advisor at University of Wisconsin, performed a case study, *A Walk in The Park: Gendered Perceptions of Fear in Oz Park, Chicago*, where she examined the difference in spatial perceptions of different genders and how different degrees of fear affect patterns of travel. In her case study, Barnes highlights the fact that women are restricted at night, by for example not walking alone at night, avoiding places viewed as unsafe and not dressing “provocatively.”³ As Mona Domosh puts it, “Many women have come to fear the city itself, since they feel that their own physical safety is at risk there. Much of their fear is focused on urban public spaces, such as streets, parks, and subways.”⁴ This case study concluded that women tend to report higher levels of threat in urban public spaces than men.

This study illuminates the factors that affect the perception of safety within nighttime environments and also the difference in the perception of men and women relating to the degree of fear.

To validate and understand the basis of the case study done by Barnes, a documentation and study of my own walk home at night was done, looking into how I personally navigate space and understand the affects of night lighting. The research done above helped narrow down the factors affecting both women and men’s perceptions of safety within urban environments, which varies with the degree of fear.



Figure 3 Factors Influencing Perception of Safety for Women and Men in Urban nightscapes

For women, there has to be a clear understanding of the surroundings, recognition of facial expression in order to understand intent and a way to orient themselves in space. Analysis of urban lighting shows that lighting today, for both men and women, mostly consists of street poles, which are spaced according to DOT standards creating pools of light. This contributes to non-uniformity in lighting, high contrast levels and issues of glare. These are the conditions of present urban lighting, which disregard the factors that are important for women to feel comfortable at night. The above-mentioned factors can be argued as the qualities of light that are missing from urban environments. Peripheral vision, orientation and facial recognition, thus become the design objectives to influence the urban nighttime environments.

In order to ground this research, the site chosen for this investigation consists of a

³ Jessica R. Barnes, *A Walk in the Park: Gendered Perceptions of Fear in Oz Park, Chicago* (University of Wisconsin-Platteville, 2007), 5.

⁴ Mona Domosh and Joni Seager, *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001); cited in Jessica R. Barnes, *A Walk in the Park: Gendered Perceptions of Fear in Oz Park, Chicago*, 5.

sequence of urban spaces traveled by women everyday. The site analysis was performed in two segments: a field study and luminance mapping.

The field study consisted of 20 participants, 10 male and 10 female, who were mainly design students from ages 22 to 30. This study very clearly showed that both men and women do feel discomfort in some areas of the nighttime environment, but the nature of that fear differs. Men, during this study, described spatial discomfort relating to scale, i.e. being too confined or feeling uneasiness^[1] in a space that was too expansive. Women on the other hand, were talking about feeling disoriented.

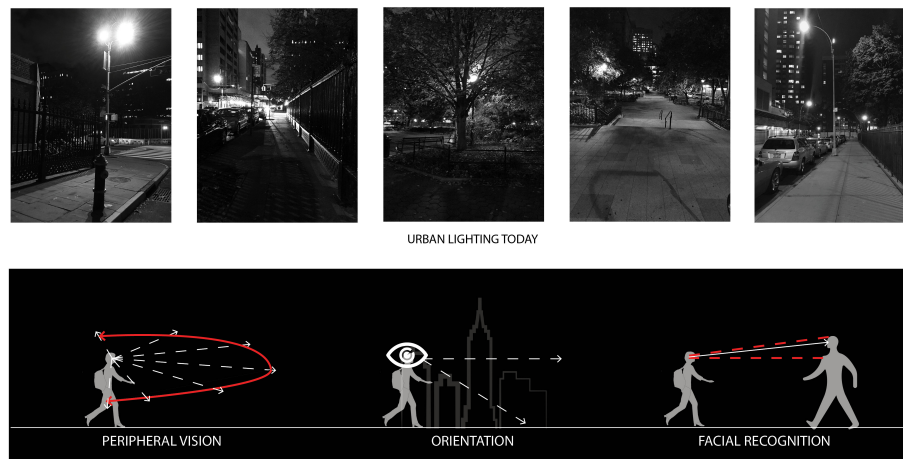


Figure 4 Analytical Analysis of Urban Night Lighting: Quantity vs. Quality of Light

Luminance was chosen as the measurable criterion to study the quality of space and^[1] the contrast ratios between the existing luminaires and the materials within space. The combination of these two analyses helped to construct the design framework and a lighting proposal.

The conclusion of the two studies is that we as lighting designers do need to re-think urban lighting, not just quantitatively but mainly qualitatively, i.e. considering the first-person individual experiences of the nighttime while also honoring the local identity.

Issues of Gender Identity and urban space have been an on-going conversation within many design fields, but in lighting design there is a true vacuum around issues of gender and equity in lighting the city. I believe that we as lighting designers should start questioning how we can contribute to this critical discourse.