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2010 Winston-Salem Light Project:

UNCSA Students, Guided by a Faculty Veteran, Tell Stories in Light

Over the course of six nights in November, hundreds of people experienced the 2010 incarnation of the Winston-Salem Light Project, a work of public art designed by the five senior lighting-design students in the School of Design and Production at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts (UNCSA).

When Kyle Grant, Roya Abab, Michelle Chasteen, Jon Goldman, and Val Walz began brainstorming last spring, they explored Winston-Salem with their lighting design teacher, Norman Coates, and considered such possibilities as lighting an old tobacco-factory power plant or a water tower. Ultimately, they chose to do something smaller in scale but wider in scope in the heart of downtown that would invite people to become part of the art.

Along three sides of a city block, they would tell five stories in light. *Urban Revelations* was the title and reflection was the theme connecting the stories. "By juxtaposing the large industrial scale with the personal, immediate experience of the pedestrian, the 2010 Light Project provided an opportunity for participants to see their city in an entirely new light," said Coates, director of lighting at UNCSA.

At the storefront window, images of people were captured by a camera, digitally altered and projected onto a screen set up behind the window. On the pedestrian bridge, light projected by LED lamps onto paper covering the bridge's glass walls turned people crossing into silhouettes visible to those below. At the newspaper plaza, LEDs turned the scene into a gentle garden of light. Completing the project were a row of trees lighted by fluorescent tubes and a high-speed video of food preparation, projected on the side of a historic building.

After considering the possibility of each designer taking the lead at one location, the students decided they wanted to work together as equals on the entire project.

The opening of the 2010 Winston-Salem Light Project was scheduled to kick off "Six Days in November," an annual celebration of the city's arts sponsored by the Arts Council of Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, the first arts council in America. Armed with a \$10,000 matching grant from the arts council, the lighting students started working on ways to make their vision a reality while dealing with the challenges presented by a limited budget, available power,



logistical considerations and factors beyond their control, such as street lights.

This is the third year that lighting students at the school have undertaken a major lighting project downtown. Coates, now in his 20th year at the school, and with a recent commission for the NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte under his belt, had wanted to do a public-art project with his students ever since a visit to Florence, Italy, when he saw a public-art project with images projected onto the façade of a Renaissance church.

His desire bore fruit in 2008 when School of the Arts students lighted a neo-classical building that once housed the city's main post office. In 2009, they created images to illustrate the depletion of the world's resources, such as a giant red balloon lifting a methane-producing cow into the sky, and projected them onto the side of a 1929 office building.

"It's much more of an interactive experience this time," Goldman said. For the 2010 Light Project, people wandered at their own speed from display to display around the block, led by a printed program that students created and handed out.

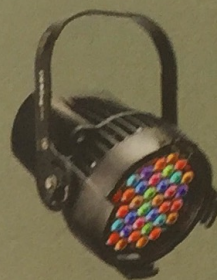
Although all five of the senior design students worked on the previous multimedia public-art projects, most of their experience at the school had been in the more controlled environments of opera, dance, and theatre productions. UNCSA normally presents nearly 300 performances and screenings for the public each year.

Because Coates wanted the students to make their own decisions and find their own solutions as much as possible, he offered input but did not dictate. When the time came to allocate the available money, the students found that employing LED technology that was recent but not the latest enabled them to create effects they wanted while respecting power and budgetary constraints. "The newest technology is going to be the most expensive," Walz explained.

Public art on public and private property meant asking for the support of the city and local business people. "They were very, very accommodating," Grant said.

A real estate company offered the students use of the

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space that once housed a sandwich shop. To turn a 20-sq.-ft. section of wall above an art gallery into a de-facto movie screen, the students needed access to the offices of a second-floor business across the street. The owners of a video company said they would be happy to help.

To turn their ideas into reality, the students enlisted the help of Erik Plath, a senior lighting technology student who served as production electrician for the project; Joel Schulman, a sophomore lighting student who served as master electrician; and Asher Robinson, the projectionist

who programmed and oversaw the operation of the media servers and projectors.

Once it was time to install everything on site, challenges naturally arose, including scheduling student crew members who were also taking classes and working on other projects. At that time, four shows were concurrently in production at the school. "It's a little bit of a logistical nightmare," Chasteen said.

After a months-long process that included setting up test displays off site, everyone loaded up the trucks and headed

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downtown, which is about two miles north of the university's campus.

At the sandwich shop, they brought in a Hippo Media Server, a Sanyo 5.5 Projector, a 9'-by-12' screen, and a panel made of forty-two 12'-by-12' sections of acrylic two-way mirror. Set up between the screen and window, it would add life-size reflections to the digitally manipulated images.

For the plaza in front of the newspaper's offices, they brought in six Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlasts and eight weather balloons that would inflate to 8'. Although they needed only four balloons for the display, it was a good thing they brought extras. Shortly after one was inflated, it took off for parts unknown with a length of 80lb test fishing line dangling beneath.

For the trees, they brought forty 4' fluorescent tubes as well as guards and watertight boxes. The bridge became home to 32 Sylvania LED lamps and 32 Par38 Cans. So they could project their video of such luscious images of food as mushrooms and onions tumbling into a sauté pan, they hauled another Green Hippo Hippotizer media server and two more Sanyo 5.5 projectors up to the offices of the video company.

In the design and testing phase, the lighting for the pedestrian bridge had presented some of the thorniest challenges, while the projected images at the storefront came together easily. However, once they were set up on site, the pedestrian bridge required little tweaking, but the storefront clearly had problems that needed solving. The light used



to illuminate passers-by for the camera proved to be too harsh, blinding pedestrians from some angles. And, with all the streetlights and other ambient light, the image projected on the screen was not sufficiently vibrant.

When it came to finding a way to properly light people for the camera, fortune smiled. The designers had originally planned to use two fluorescent tubes in a tree at the newspaper plaza to evoke a sense of connection with the lighted trees around the corner. The effect wasn't as soft as they hoped, though. "It feels out of place," Goldman said.

With two extra fluorescent fixtures available, the students tried setting them up vertically on either side of the storefront window. They discovered that it produced wholly satisfactory results and had the fringe benefit of adding a playful touch by making the window bring to mind a vanity mirror.

They solved the problem with the images on the screen by adding a second projector. "It is much better, much brighter," Abab said.

When the night came to launch "Six Days," on November 16, lots of local luminaries, including the mayor, showed up. The honor of throwing the switch to turn everything on fell to Milton Rhodes, the head of the arts council.— **Kim Underwood** 📧

Kim Underwood, the author of three books, is freelance writer based in Winston-Salem, N.C. He was a veteran reporter and columnist for the Winston-Salem Journal.