

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR DESIGNING INNOVATIVE URBAN LIGHTING SOLUTIONS

POLICY BRIEF



[www.enlightenme-project.eu](http://www.enlightenme-project.eu)

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## CREDITS

This policy is part of an outreach research developed in the framework of ENLIGHTENme. It has been authored by Don Slater, Elettra Bordonaro (London School of Economics) and Joanne Entwistle (King's College London)



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# HIGHLIGHTS

- **Lighting impacts all citizens' use of public spaces** but most have little understanding of lighting, and they have different needs, concerns and experiences of public spaces. Engaging people in design processes requires innovative thinking not conventional consultation and survey approaches.
- **Community participation in lighting design** is most effective when treated as part of wider urban design rather than as a specialised expertise.
- **Urban communities are diverse** with different and often conflicting lighting concerns in public space: community engagement means supporting people to articulate these differences effectively and then using design to respond creatively to make spaces that work for a wide range of demographics.
- **Participatory lighting design** does not mean turning communities into designers; it means seeing lighting designers as mediators, working with communities to translate their diverse concerns into designs.

# AIM

This policy brief explains the need for pro-active and ongoing community engagement for producing urban lighting that can support the quality of life of citizens. It provides an overview of key issues that cities need to consider in order to make community engagement an effective basis for urban and lighting design.

# BACKGROUND

Lighting can have an enormous impact on the effectiveness of public spaces in supporting user's needs and activities, encouraging social inclusion and creating comfortable, meaningful and welcoming urban places. It has a particularly direct impact on key user concerns such as feeling safe and secure, supporting clear wayfinding and visibility, and producing an socially and aesthetically appealing atmosphere.

However, these aims are hampered by three major issues:

- Firstly, most residents (and many policy makers) have little interest in or knowledge of lighting and its complex qualities, or the design possibilities open to them. People's lighting preferences are generally inconsistent, un-considered and unreliable as a basis for lighting design decisions without dialogue, workshops and on-going engagement.
- Secondly, urban lighting is generally treated in isolation as a technical matter for street lighting and engineering expertise, separate from its wider impacts on people's urban experience; alternatively, lighting is sometimes treated as a purely aesthetic concern, to create attractive spectacle, equally separated from actual urban lives of communities.
- Thirdly, urban communities are invariably diverse – multi-cultural, multi-generational, gendered, etc -- with conflicting needs, concerns and everyday practices; no single lighting standard or design solution will be equally good for everyone, requiring cities to both understand and negotiate different options for divided communities.

Conventional engagement tools are not effective: above all, consultation meetings and surveys generally elicit unreliable and ill-informed opinions, and only from a restricted range of active respondents; they generally also focus on either pre- or post-design opinions, rather than engaging citizens in an ongoing process. The result is not only a poor basis for evidence-based and engaged design, but also the exclusion of demographics who do not currently engage with a public space or district. Moreover, conventional approaches tend to ignore the issue of diversity: that resolving differences between the needs of different demographics is a political and design issue, not a technical matter: the city will need a process for coming to agreements about how a space is to be used and therefor how it is to be lit.

Community engagement and participatory design are labels for going beyond these limits and exploring possibilities for both educating and involving people in urban lighting and design as a process. The result should be more creative and responsive lighting designs and policies, ones that are fully anchored in understanding the real complexities of a public space and its users.





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# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Integrating lighting within urban design

Most people have little interest in lighting and yet lighting is involved in everything they do in public spaces. At the same time, citizens generally have very strong concerns and opinions about the public spaces they use in their everyday lives – streets, parks, squares. The best basis for community engagement in lighting is therefore generally a process that integrates lighting within a wider urban design process, enabling citizens to engage with lighting as part of their investment in the shaping of their urban spaces. Lighting for communities needs to be treated as an urban design process.

## Designing community engagement

Effective engagement and participatory design requires careful and often location-specific thinking about how to engage all relevant demographics. Off-the-shelf consultation and survey methods are generally actively counterproductive. Designing an engagement process requires

- Research to identify relevant demographics who use – or do not currently use – a public space: this is a proactive process
- Strategies – activities, events, research methods – to understand their needs and issues and to involve them in designing spaces that support them
- Structures to sustain involvement of different demographics over time, in phases that include baseline research, co-design, post-implementation research and experimentation
- If possible, public events, prototypes, demonstrations and installations of lighting design options that help members of the community learn about, visualise and experience light and lighting as part of urban design.

## Designing Agreement

Different elements of any community will have different needs, concerns, tastes and views of the other demographics that are co-present with them in a public

space: different ethnicities may understand the very idea of ‘public space’ differently; men and women will have different views of safety; teenagers and older people have opposed view of how much lighting is good for a space. Cities cannot ignore differences, or resolve them by imposing uniform technical standards; at the same time, they have to propose a design that ‘works for everyone’. Participatory design therefore involves:

- Ensuring that the widest range of different public space needs and concerns are actually articulated in discussions with each other and the city, including the concerns that might be excluding potential users. Ensure the possibility of people with different views engaging with each other.
- Explore technical and design options for flexible and responsive use of lighting to address different needs (rather than imposing external standards). For example, zoning different spaces to separate out users and practices; use of dimming schedules, motion sensors and other technical means to adapt lighting to different needs at different times of day, week, season; staging of events that foreground particular spatial needs (festivities, dark nights, etc)

## Professionals as mediators

Lighting design is a sophisticated expertise, requiring technical, design and social knowledge, plus considerable practical experience. Communities can participate in design in many ways but participatory design cannot mean ask them to design lighting. Conversely, they cannot be simply asked to simply give opinions about already-developed design options. A better option is for cities to see lighting professionals as mediators, working with communities – through workshops, communications and public events – to develop both community engagement and creative design. This idea of designer as mediator also requires cities to think about lighting as a design matter in the first place, rather than as a matter of engineering and compliance with technical standards. At the same time, it also means that cities involve wider professional expertise in lighting design: not just street lighting experts but also police, urban development, care services and any others who can provide understanding of the needs of specific demographics in public spaces.

