

New York Times

Ruining That Moody Urban Glow

By **LIONEL SHRIVER** OCT. 17, 2015 [Sunday Review](#) | OPINION

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AT 13, I covered multiple lamps in my bedroom with variously colored theatrical gels, the better to create a luminary ambience to suit my mood. When I felt sunny, I chose the yellow; when glum, the blue. And hey, I was a teenager. The blue got a lot of use.

In my repellently contented middle age, I don't seek blue light. Like most sane people, I spurn restaurants whose lighting glares. I recoil from mirrors under fluorescent tubes. I switch on an overhead only to track down a water bug while wielding a flip-flop. Yet each evening from March onward, in the Brooklyn neighborhood where I live part of the year, it seems as if the overhead is always on.

Along with other parts of South Brooklyn, Windsor Terrace is an early recipient of the Department of Transportation's new light-emitting diode streetlights. New Yorkers who have not yet been introduced to these lights: We are living in your future.

Our new street "lamps" — too cozy a word for the icy arrays now screaming through our windows — are meant to be installed across all five boroughs by 2017. Indeed, any resident of an American municipality that has money problems (and what city doesn't?) should take heed. In interviews with the media, my fellow experimental subjects have [compared](#) the nighttime environment under the new streetlights to a film set, a prison yard, "a strip mall in outer space" and "the mother ship coming in for a landing" in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind."

Although going half-blind at 58, I can read by the beam that the new lamp blasts into our front room without tapping our own Con Ed service. Once the LEDs went in, our next-door neighbor began walking her dog at night in sunglasses.

Medical research has firmly established that blue-spectrum LED light can disrupt sleep patterns. This is the same illumination that radiates in far smaller doses from smartphone and computer screens, to which we're advised to avoid exposure for at least an hour before bed, because it can suppress the production of melatonin. The tribute to "the city that never sleeps" was meant to celebrate a vibrant cultural night life — not a town of hollow-eyed "Walking Dead" insomniacs.

While the same light has also been associated with increased risk of breast cancer and mood disorders, in all honesty my biggest beef with LEDs has nothing to do with health issues. These lights are ugly. They're invasive. They're depressing. New York deserves better. Yet the substitution of LEDs for traditional high-pressure sodium bulbs, whose familiar tangerine glow would have suited my rare upbeat humor at 13, is proving irresistible to many cities because of the economic benefits. Chicago, Seattle, Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit and Los Angeles have all undertaken mass retrofits. Although three to four times more expensive, the new bulbs are supposed to last two to four times longer than their predecessors, reducing energy costs between 30 and 70 percent.

Thus the advance of this technology has an inexorable quality. Rather than stand in the way and get mowed down, we urban aesthetes are probably better off focusing on the fact that all LEDs are not created equal.

Color temperature is measured in Kelvin units. Lower temperatures are warm, in the yellow range; higher temperatures are cool, in the blue. Sodium bulbs are around 2,200 Kelvin — light in which one might fall in love. The brutal LED outside our house is 4,000 — light more conducive to dismembering a corpse.

New York's D.O.T. has also opted for lights that penetrate lower-floor residential properties like ours with rude, invasive lateral glare. Though the D.O.T. claims to have adjusted the angles slightly in disgruntled neighborhoods, our street's lights appear untouched.

But LEDs come in warmer spectra. Even fiscally and environmentally conscientious California has compromised on this point. Berkeley, Oakland and San Francisco have all opted for yellow-rich LEDs. These cities have willingly made the modest 10-15 percent sacrifice in efficiency for an ambience that more closely embodies what Germans call *Gemütlichkeit* and Danes call *hygge*: an atmosphere of hospitality, homey-ness, intimacy and well-being.

Other municipalities have worked successfully with citizens to reconcile energy savings with a more pleasing nocturnal landscape. In Berlin, in response to outcry over a similar conversion, engineers designed LEDs that imitate the qualities of gaslight. After enough complaints, Davis, Calif., sponsored a variety-pack test street, from which residents ultimately selected not only a lower color temperature fixture, but one with a lower wattage, thus saving the city yet more money.

For New York, it may not be too late to marry practicality and aesthetics. Specifications could still be revised — though LEDs may last up to 20 years, and once they're installed citywide it will be too late. So even if you don't live in a south Brooklyn neighborhood, call 311 to support:

- Limiting, per a stalled City Council bill, streetlights to no more than 3,000 Kelvin (think an incandescent “soft white”);
- Installing some kind of shade or lens cover to reduce lateral glare;
- Exploring ways of dimming lighting in residential neighborhoods;
- Suspending further installation until specifications are refined.

My husband claims that everyone will eventually “get used to” these grisly blue-spectrum diodes, and he's probably right. But then, we've “gotten used to” garish big box stores and the foreshortening blight of fast-food franchises that make so many American cities look fungibly frightful. Parents “get used to” a clutter of kitschy plastic toys. Just because one is capable of becoming dully inured to something doesn't make it desirable.

As currently conceived, the D.O.T.'s streetlight plan amounts to mass civic vandalism. If my focus on aesthetics makes this issue sound trivial, the sensory experience of daily life is not a frivolous matter. Even in junior high school, I understood that lighting isn't only about what you see, but how you feel.

Lionel Shriver is a novelist whose most recent book is “Big Brother.”

