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London Bridges Are Lighting Up

By Roslyn Sulcasnov



“Illuminated River” is a plan to light the span of the Thames river from the Albert Bridge in the west to Tower Bridge in the east. Credit Malcolm Reading Consultants and Leo Villareal and Lifschutz Davidson Sandiland

LONDON — London’s bridges will slowly fill with light as the tide rises. Luminous colors will wash across their surfaces. Beams will shoot out from each bridge, pierce the sky and then drop, connecting with a beam on a neighboring bridge to trace the path of the Thames. The bridges’s underbellies will glow gently; the banks will offer floating stages for performances; waterfalls will create a screen for projections; a weave of projected light planes will hover over the surface of the Thames, creating a ghostly river of light.

These are some of the ideas put forward for what is being called the largest-scale permanent public art project that any city has yet undertaken. “Illuminated River” is a hugely ambitious, £20 million (\$24.8 million) plan to light the span of the Thames River from the Albert Bridge in the west to Tower Bridge in

the east. (The money will come from private and philanthropic sources, with \$12.6 million already contributed by the Rothschild and the Arcadia foundations.) It aims to transform this part of the Thames into a glowing river of light and spectacle, and is part of the city's ambition to match other international metropolises with a vibrant nighttime economy.

The light project will also draw tourists to the bridges and banks of the Thames, which traces a loose S shape through central London, and has 17 bridges along its trajectory. The river is now "a black snake" through the city at night, Hannah Rothschild, the chairwoman of the Illuminated River Foundation, said at a preview on Monday of a three-week exhibition of the final proposals. With this project, she added, the transformation will be dramatic: "Light, energy, beauty, commerce, at the flick of a switch," she said, adding that it was also a meeting point for art, design and technology.

The six finalists were chosen from 105 entries, including big-name architects, designers, engineers and artists of all stripes from all over the world. The winning team will be announced on Dec. 8, and the organizers hope that the project will be started by 2018.

The London-based architect David Adjaye, whose National Museum of African American History and Culture recently opened in Washington, has assembled a wow-factor list of international artists for the proposal: Doug Aitken, Jeremy Deller, Cai Guo-Qiang, Glenn Ligon, Chris Ofili and Philippe Parreno among them. Each was assigned a bridge, resulting in a cornucopia of spectacular light designs that treats each bridge as an individual artwork.

The city's bridges "have always been conceived of purely as infrastructure between north and south, but they actually encapsulate history and ideas about trade, labor, gender and race," Mr. Adjaye said. "We really tried to match the narrative of each bridge with each artist's practice. I decided not to try for a unified vision; one of the great things about London is that it's a medieval mosaic city. These are different artistic and architectural languages that come together to create a whole."

AL_A: "The Eternal Story of the River Thames"

Amanda Leveté's London architecture firm, AL_A, has collaborated with the filmmaker Asif Kapadia and the writer Simon Stephens as well as a team of engineers and sound designers to come up with a subtle project that ties the lighting of the bridges to the natural rhythms of the tides.

"The idea that you can have an impact on the perception of the city without constructing anything was fascinating to me," Ms. Leveté said. "For us, the essence of the project is to tell a story about the river and how central it is to people's lives. In the end, it's a very simple narrative: the tides are a physical manifestation of the shape of the earth and the landmass of the U.K., and we want to reveal this through light.

"The tidal range of the Thames is around 9 meters, the height of a three-story building, which is very unusual for a river in a city," she continued. "We want to illuminate the shoreline as the tide goes out, inviting the public to appropriate that space at low tide. At high tide, the lighting shifts to illuminate the elevation of the bridges and show their structure.

"In the space of two hours, you see the tidal change; we want to remind people that their lives play out not in minutes and hours, but in the context of centuries, and the forces of nature," she said.

Diller Scofidio & Renfro: "Synchronizing the City: Its Natural and Urban Rhythms"

Light beams play tag in the design by these New York-based architects, who count the city's elevated High Line and the Broad Museum in Los Angeles among their projects. Collaborating with the lighting designer Jennifer Tipton, they have created a proposal that includes curtains of falling water as screens for projections, and floating platforms along the riverbanks for performance.

“We came up with the idea of concentrating on the performance of the lighting,” said Elizabeth Diller, a founding partner. “It starts when the sun goes down; as it sets, the bridges start to fill with light, from the embankments towards the center. The moment that a particular degree of darkness arrives, it triggers the ‘night kiss,’ a vertical light pointed at the sky. This happens in tiny increments because the rotation of the earth means the moment of darkness is about 20 seconds apart from bridge to bridge. There is a pause, then soft white light comes up on each bridge, like a blossom.”

“We’re imagining the moment of the beams going up a bit like the chiming of Big Ben; a moment of urban consciousness,” she said. “It’s an opportunity to pay attention to the transition between day and night, and to evoke a collectivity that is missing in our urban lifestyle.”

Les Eclairagistes Associés: “A River Ain’t Too Much to Light”

This Paris-based lighting firm, working with the artist Federico Pietrella, proposes subtle washes of light over the bridges and along their underbellies, with lights triggered by sunset and sunrise. Different styles of lampposts from around the world would be partly submerged in the water, symbolizing London as a place for international exchange.

“When you walk along the river, you can see that every borough has its own aesthetic, which is very different to a more homogeneously designed city like Paris,” said Joseph Frey, one of the partners of the firm. “Our first intention is to clean up the light pollution along the Thames path; buildings are lit very differently depending on where you are, and we would try to persuade the stakeholders that it’s a question of contrast; there is no point spending a lot of energy and money to light the river if it’s not visually readable.

“There is approximately a minute of light difference, when the sun rises or sets, between the outermost bridges; we wanted to show the natural rhythms of the day, which of course are totally different in winter or summer,” he said.

Sam Jacob Studio and Simon Heijdens: “Thames Nocturne”

Sam Jacob, a London-based architect, and Simon Heijdens, a Dutch artist, have a poetic proposal that embodies the title of “Illuminated River”: a shimmering river of light hovering just above the surface of the Thames, created from light planes that are generated by data readings of the river’s depth, flow and surface tension.

“It was hard to think what you could possibly do on that scale that would respect the variety and detail of the London riverscape and withstand the scale of the city,” Mr. Jacobs said. “London is a strange city, it has never been planned and doesn’t have an urban principle, but the river is the one unifying factor.”

Mr. Heijdens added: “It’s such a narrative surface: where you are, what time it is, what the weather is like. But most of that is lost at night when the Thames becomes a black hole. So we created a dimensional weave of light from flows of data from the river that are measured by a small unit on each bridge, and powered by the tides.”

Leo Villareal with Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands: “Current”

The New York light artist Leo Villareal, who created the “Bay Lights” installation on San Francisco’s Bay Bridge, has worked with a team of London architects on a straightforward proposal that transforms the river bridges into light sculptures, washed by soft colors that one writer described as turning the Thames into “a giant linear lava lamp.”

“We wanted to create something cohesive to unify the bridges and create a ribbon of light,” Mr. Villareal said. “We also wanted to create a better atmosphere around the Thames, where there is a lot of commercial lighting, so we have proposals for tuning that light. We would replace much of the current

bridge lighting with LED light, which makes it more energy efficient and adds dynamism through light and color.

“I sometimes make monochromatic pieces, but here it felt appropriate to use color,” he continued. “An important element of the project is that it references the light and atmosphere of paintings of the bridges by artists like Turner and Monet.”

He added: “Lighting the undersides of the bridges is also important; working with structure and finding a way to augment what exists is at the heart of this. These kinds of public art gestures are a gift and can be transformative; they have the power to bring people together.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/arts/design/london-bridges-illuminated-river.html?_r=2