

Everything Is Illuminated: The Secret Lights of New York City

SARAH GOODYEAR 7:00 AM ET



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It is not long after dark on a Friday night in high summer, and the sidewalks of Jackson Heights, Queens, are crowded with shoppers and club-goers, shouldering past each other on streets teeming with commerce. Within two blocks you can buy sliced mango, grilled corn, quesadillas, and T-shirts, all without ever stepping into a store. Old men gossip on benches. Teens stop to flirt with each other. Toddlers scamper along underfoot, just out of their parents' reach.

In the midst of this chaos, clad all in gauzy white, stands the slight figure of Leni Schwendinger, urban "illumination expert." She plants herself in the grim shadow of the elevated train tracks on Roosevelt Avenue and raises her megaphone to speak.

Overhead, the 7 train roars by. A garbage truck grinds its compactor just behind her. Schwendinger waits for the worst of the din to subside, and then she starts talking. Or rather, she keeps talking, as

she has been all up and down the cacophonous streets of Jackson Heights, where the confused proliferation of light is nearly as disorienting as the subway's brain-rattling clatter.



The 82nd Street Entrance to the number 7 train is one spot in this Queens neighborhood that could benefit from improved lighting. Photo by Nathaniel Goodyear

Schwendinger, who reads the world in patterns of light and shadow, is an expert in things most people never stop to see. She points out the dramatic shadowy shapes created by the girders that hold up the subway tracks. She calls attention to the changing colors of the grime-encrusted traffic signals that hang from the underside of the hulking structure — glowing points of red, amber, and green that she calls "the jewelry of the night." She admires the way light peeks through the stairs that lead up to the station platform above, showing the feet and ankles of travelers going up and down. She asks us to imagine how all these glorious steel beams and rivets would look if lit with deliberation rather than by default.

Schwendinger is leading what she calls a "NightSeeing" tour of New York's Jackson Heights and Corona neighborhoods as part of a community effort to rethink the way the neighborhood is illuminated. With her firm, [Leni Schwendinger Light Projects](#), she has created light installations around the world, some of them in neglected and aesthetically challenging locations, such as the underpass leading to the back entrance of the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. And now she'd like to do the same for Jackson Heights.

"I'm sort of known as the underpass queen," she says. "It's not sexy, it's not glamorous. But I do love a good underpass."



The varied and multicolored signs of Jackson Heights and Corona reflect the neighborhood's cultural diversity, and are one of the area's luminous assets. Photo by Nathaniel Goodyear

The business district of this jam-packed neighborhood, home to immigrants from around the world, is hardly lacking in lighting. Flashing signs are everywhere, blinking out messages about everything from tacos to car insurance to massage. One enormous plastic awning, brightly lit from within, touts dentists, computer repair, doctor's offices, and tax assistance, all at a single address. Piles of oranges, bananas, and pineapples at a produce store glow in a bath of white light that looks bright enough to operate by.

Jackson Heights, where people from countries including Ecuador, Nepal, India, Colombia, China, Bangladesh, Mexico, and many others come to gain a foothold in the United States, is booming. But according to Seth Taylor, executive director of the 82nd Street Partnership, it could be so much more than it is today.

"Roosevelt Avenue and 82nd Street are very bustling and vibrant commercial corridors," says Taylor. "But if you look at the outdoor infrastructure, it's relatively underdeveloped. There's a lack of community gathering spaces. We want to encourage people to spend more time outdoors, and lighting is a part of that." The elevated train tracks, long perceived as a negative element in the neighborhood, could be transformed into an asset if it were properly lit to showcase its remarkable architectural features, he says.

Part of the partnership's strategy is to have Schwendinger create a new vision for lighting the streets of the area, in consultation with the community, to enhance the perception of safety and "organize the visual environment." The NightSeeing tour is the first step.

The tour starts at the Jackson Heights Cinema, where Schwendinger makes sure everyone appreciates the old-fashioned marquee lights, even if several of the yellow bulbs are burnt out. Then, followed by a group of about 30 people who have signed up to see the neighborhood through her eyes, she flits from storefront to storefront on 82nd Street, stopping every few steps to call attention to some aspect of light that most people would pass by unthinking.



Photo by Nathaniel Goodyear

"You see how the orange of the light is sticking here?" she says, pointing to the way light from inside a closed store clings to the open grille protecting the storefront. "These are the little things that you probably haven't realized that you see." She talks about the difference between public light, provided by city streetlamps, and private light, which is cast by shops and residences.

Schwendinger keeps up a steady patter about what we're looking at the whole time, all the while throwing in facts about optics and lighting design. She talks about foot candle measurements and color temperature, and explains why we hate the way things look in the high-pressure sodium light cast by many city streetlights. "It has a bad color rendering index," she says. "That's why we all look so sallow right now."

She is also constantly encouraging people to share their opinions. "Let's talk about holiday lights," says Schwendinger, explaining that these familiar and festive bulbs are known as "direct view" lights because you can look at straight at them without discomfort. "I think they add cheer," she says. "Who hates sparkle? Who dislikes twinkle? Anyone?" Silence from the group.



Photo by Nathaniel Goodyear

"OK, hanging things," she says, looking at a row of stuffed animals dangling from an awning at a variety store. "I don't know about you, but I love hanging things!" The Asian woman running the shop looks at Schwendinger skeptically as the lighting designer fingers the clear sack covering some kind of plush creature, perhaps a bear, perhaps a cat.

"Look at the sheen on this plastic bag," Schwendinger says. "Do you guys think I'm crazy?" Her calm smile suggests she doesn't much care.

Her eye is drawn by something she notices just a few feet further down. Here, a closed storefront is protected by a metal rolldown gate that doesn't allow any light to come through from the inside. The store's sign has been turned off. There is no nearby streetlight, and a tree casts further shadow on the sidewalk.

"Come on everybody!" she urges the crowd. "Come over here. Feel the darkness. This is called dark." She has someone check with a light meter to see just how dark. "It's .01 foot candles." The city standard is at least .5 foot candles, she says.

"This is dark, everybody," says Schwendinger. "Some people prefer it this way." She shrugs, and moves quickly to the next pool of light.