

The Boston Globe



Bold light schemes transform cityscapes

By Erin Ailworth

October 08, 2013

Philips Color Kinetics of Burlington made a big splash with its energy-saving LEDs this past year, relighting the Empire State Building and transforming the Zakim and San Francisco Bay bridges into glowing landmarks.

The projects, illuminating signature structures in three major US cities, have ignited an increased interest in light as public art, from interactive beacons for designer benches in Boston's Fort Point neighborhood, to restoring a weather-forecasting light sculpture atop Pittsburgh's Gulf Tower Building. Later this month, when Mayor Thomas M. Menino flips the switch, the Northern Avenue Bridge in Fort Point will become the newest addition to Boston's lightscape.

"There's a growing awareness of these types of installations and their potential," said Susanne Seitinger, city innovations manager for Philips Color Kinetics. "It's a big topic for urban designers, it's a big topic for planners, it's a big topic for city leaders."

It is also a big opportunity for Philips, raising the lighting company's public profile and providing it a laboratory to test and showcase new energy-saving technologies that consumers may one day buy. For example, Philips Color Kinetics' lines of Hue and LivingColors home lighting products change colors with the help of a smartphone app while using a fraction of the energy of a conventional bulb. Both were developed from systems designed for art installations.

“Artists have a way of asking questions that other people don’t,” Seitinger said. “When they have these ideas and work with us, it allows us to push boundaries as well. [It] gives us the opportunity to explore and figure out what the future is of these technologies.”



Take “Street Seats:

Reimagining the Public Bench,” the Design Museum Boston bench project on display around the Fort Point Channel. Seitinger said the exhibition presents an opportunity for Philips Color Kinetics to explore how it can use the Internet to make lighting systems more interactive.

Each of the 18 benches in the installation is accompanied by a rectangular tower with a color-changing light that visitors can control with their smartphones once they scan a bar code. The lights are activated at sunset each day.

Derek Cascio, cofounder of Design Museum Boston and a former Philips employee, said his team members knew from the start that they wanted to use light to not only draw people to the project, but to allow them to participate.

“We could just make the thing light up, but we’re designers,” Cascio said. “We wanted to have these light up because of the distributed nature of the exhibition. We needed a way for people to find their way.

Philips Color Kinetics is a unit of the Dutch conglomerate Royal Philips, and part of a larger cluster of advanced lighting companies helping to illuminate Massachusetts landmarks. For instance, the New England Aquarium’s recently renovated four-story ocean tank includes a new energy-saving LED lighting system, with bulbs by Canada’s LumenPulse, that can be manipulated to mimic the light a typical Caribbean coral reef might get.

The top of the Prudential Building is also a little bit brighter of late, with 168 new LED lights framing the windows of the Top of the Hub restaurant. The bulbs, by TerraLUX Inc. of Colorado, are expected to save the facility about 28 percent a year on energy costs.

Philips could not break out what its Color Kinetics division spends helping make such projects happen — lights are sometimes provided at cost or as an in-kind donation — but said the company’s lighting sector invests roughly 7 percent of its sales, or about \$2.4 billion, into research and development.

Jane Preston, of the New England Foundation for the Arts, a regional art group based in Boston, said she expects light to continue playing an increasing role in public art installations, in many ways becoming the medium.