

# LIGHT IS HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

Light is History is a collective energy consumption display artifact that was installed in a public square in Helsinki in November 2012. The lamps of the installation, made from old recycled electricity meters were designed to function as bright therapy lights. Sixteen participating families from in and around the Kallio neighbourhood published their daily energy use on a web portal. The difference in their daily energy reading was used to determine the brightness of individual lights that was assigned to each family on the light installation. Each of the lamps brightened if the corresponding family's energy use was lesser than the previous day and otherwise inverted. The participants also provided images and textual narratives of their own electrical artifacts from their homes and this was displayed with their corresponding lamp on the installation, providing a glimpse of contemporary domestic life with electricity. A shared and collaborative energy art space was generated as a place for urban dialogue of private energy use and public well-being.

## INTRODUCTION

While the ever-increasing demand for electricity and energy in contemporary living generates a rising hum through news, research reports and policy calls in the public realm, its normalization in contemporary living continues silently. As design and art based measures, methods and modalities continue being employed to study energy use in contemporary living (Maze, 2008) (Peirce, 2008), here we present one such case of public engagement through an art installation that was carried out in Helsinki. Light is History, is part of an experimental design research practice that is engaged in studying domestic energy use by prototyping, building and deploying design objects that publish energy use in the real world contexts (Koskinen, 2011). Through such a methodology of material use publishing, the experimental research practice generates hypothetical inferences of matters concerning energy consumption, from the context of its engagement.

## CO-CREATING A PUBLIC ENERGY ART PLACE

Light is History as a community based project engaged with sixteen families, living in apartments in around the Kallio neighborhood of Helsinki. The families were recruited by advertising on social networks, public events and also through the personal networks of researchers through the snow balling technique. The project brief asked the participating families to track their daily domestic energy use through their energy provider's web service (Sävel). Then they were asked to publish this information once a day to a secure portal through a web-based interface that was specially designed for the project. This procedure was carried out over a period of ten days in the last week of November 2012 and was used as the daily data set for the public art installation. The aim was to co-create an outdoor light installation as a public space, as an urban dialogue of private energy use and public well being.

A public square in central Helsinki, the Hakaniemi market place, adjacent to the Kallio neighbourhood was chosen as a site for the light installation. A simple wooden box made from recycled plywood carried lamps that simulated the light intensity of bright therapy light sources. The lamps were made of recycled old analog electricity meters. These were gathered from the trash yard at the metering company of the local energy provider, because of a region wide drive to switch to smart meters. Each of the lamps was fitted with LED lights to simulate the intensity of therapy lamps and suitably wired and controlled with an arduino micro controller inside the wooden box. The data gathered from the participants input was fed manually into the installation daily. The installation was programmed such that the difference in the participants' daily energy use was used to determine the brightness of the individual lights of the light installation. Thus if a family consumed less energy on a day than the previous, then their lamp would be brighter than the previous day, if otherwise it would go dull. This pattern was put into a loop of fifteen minutes over the period of two hours. The installation went live everyday for one full week in the evening from five o'clock till seven o'clock when the pedestrian movement in the square was considerable. Thus the light installation slowly breathed light in a loop, into the public space, some with the brightness of therapy lamps, sometimes not, with the gathered information of daily energy use from the private homes of sixteen families of the neighbourhood.

#### NARRATIVES THROUGH ELECTRICAL ARTIFACTS

The other element of the light installation was the exhibiting of the images and personal narratives of the participating families of their relationship with an electrical artifact they used in their homes. The participants also provided images of their own electrical artifacts from their homes and this was displayed on the installation corresponding to their lamps. In this fashion the identity of the participating families was anonymized but yet represented through the images and narratives of domestic electrical artifacts rather than through their names. The juxtaposing of the images and text with the lamps also provided an ideal form for engaging with the light installation. As passers by got curious of the installation, they got closer and when got interested with the text and the images and if they glanced and read the text, they also engaged with the simulated therapy lights. Thus the collective exhibit also provided small glimpses and portrayals of peoples' relationships with contemporary domestic electric artifacts.

#### CRITICAL REGIONAL ENERGY USE FEEDBACK

Light is History as a design intervention while being concerned with the matter of the publics also dealt with

the design of feedback of domestic energy use. In this case the form of energy use feedback through lamps integrates a regional issue into its design. By simulating bright therapy lamps made with LED lights in the Nordic winter context it brings forth the matters of region and presents it within the design of energy use feedback. Whether bright therapy lamps help seasonal affective disorder or not is left to popular debate of its use within the context. But with such a design object, the experimental design research practice of publishing energy use presents design modalities of energy feedback that are not uncritical of the issues of the regional context (Frampton, 1986).

#### OPEN DIALOGUE

Thus a shared and collaborative context was created as a public energy art space that gave a glimpse of our contemporary life with electricity and also resulting in an urban place that was open and powered by the people. The one-week transient project thus generated a collective public engagement that portrayed concerns of energy use, managing resources and well being as a place of public private dialogue.

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