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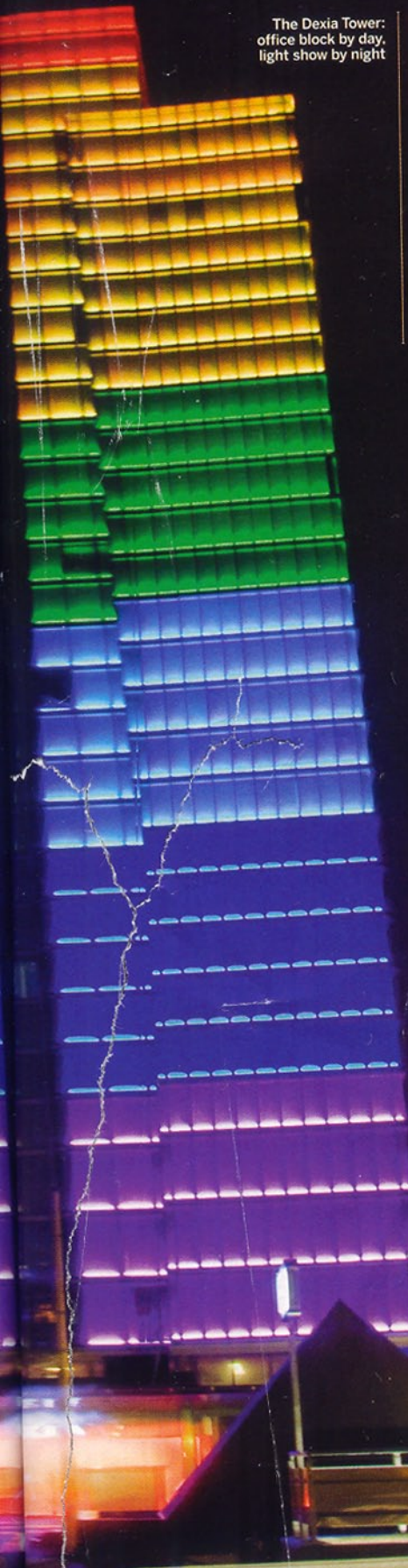


# LIGHT OF MY LIFE

With the help of a forward-thinking city government and some clever programming, Brussels is turning into a city of lights. Guy Dittrich explains



The Dexia Tower: office block by day, light show by night



Pretty much every metropolis looks better at night. Gone are the acres of grey concrete, the construction sites, the graffiti and litter – thankfully hidden, at least for a time, by the darkness. A new face appears from the gloom of twilight. Forget the jaw-dropping moment from the movie *ET* when the expanse of Los Angeles pans across the screen. Brussels offers a much more manageable and approachable view of the lit environment, a view that is being exploited as the city looks to raise its image.

Top of the tourist list come the Atomium and Grand'Place. The shining spheres of the Atomium

sparkle with a thousand pin-pricks of light. Refurbished for its 50th birthday in 2008, this super-sized model of a molecule seems to hover in mid-air. In contrast, the illuminations at the Grand'Place exaggerate every nuance and intricacy of the stonework tracery on the Guildhouse façades. Wait until the Christmas season and you'll see an array of coloured lights and lasers play out across the square as part of the city's Winter Wonders experience.

The same season will see the launch of the SolstiS project, an artistic *parcours* organised as part of the long-term Brussels Lighting







**Left** The Atomium twinkles in the night sky; **Right** Light reflects off the wet cobbles of a town centre shopping street; **Below right** The VRT/RTBF tower's light installation is one of LAb(au)'s newest projects



Programme. Stretching along the inner ring road from the fashionable shopping area of Avenue Louise in the south to Place Rogier in the north, lighting interventions will augment other, more traditional, festive street lighting. The parcours includes kaleidoscopically illuminated trees and lasers that seem to curve. Joining in the fun will be a string of anonymous towering buildings, their tops brightly lit to create a referential parade of colour leading to the maestro of them all: the ever-changing façade of the Dexia Tower.

The architectural lighting of the Dexia Tower is simply stunning. The financial institution might be suffering in the current monetary crisis, but it hasn't turned out the lights... yet! This composed blue-glass façade on Place Rogier explodes into light and life with the setting of the sun.

Some 4,200 windows are each bottom lit with red-green-blue LED strip lights that can deliver the full colour spectrum. Individually controlled via embedded microprocesses, the colour of each window can be adjusted within milliseconds, allowing truly amazing

sweeps of colours to course around the building with mind-numbing speed. It's one of the best free shows in town. The current artwork, called *Weather Tower*, which colour-codes the forecast for the next day's weather, was developed by the transdisciplinary studio LAb(au), Laboratory for Architecture and Urbanism.

From its digital design gallery MediaRuimte, the creative minds at LAb(au) have orchestrated other music-based audio-visual performances on the Tower. The *Touch* event was an interactive installation that let the public choose the coloured lighting for themselves from a touch screen.

"The installations can be called 'light art', while certain projects inscribe the tower in 'cybernetic art,'" explains Alexandre Plennevaux, one of LAb(au)'s four members. "We see our work as architecture and, more precisely, Metadesign – architecture as code."

The Lighting Programme is a co-operation between the City of Brussels and the Brussels Region, whose minister for mobility and public works, Pascal Smet, hopes to create: "an image of the city for visitors that will become more

attractive, and inhabitants will become prouder of their city. They can really feel the city environment in three dimensions at night."

This artistic element of the programme comes after the more prosaic general improvement of street lighting across the city. Brussels' street lighting is a graphic example of individuality and variety shining through. Take the yellow glow of the swooning array of bulbous lamps at Square de l'Aviation, or the steely regimentation of the pillar-like shafts of light that march along Rue de la Roi towards the Arc de Triomphe in Parc du Cinquanteenaire. Such diversity is typical of the metropolis' eccentric charm.

After all, not many cities can boast of a museum of street lighting. Yes, the Musée de Réverbère does exist. What's more, it never closes and entry is free. The result isn't spectacular, but the 15 different lamps on display each tell a story. From the filigreed 1880s Faux-Vieux lamp to the functionality of a parasol-like light of 100 years later, the collection questions the interchangeability of fashion and efficiency.



#### Details

**Atomium**  
Square de l'Atomium,  
atomium.be

**Winter Wonders**  
winterwonders.be

**Dexia Tower**  
11 Place Rogier,  
LAB(au) &  
MediaRuimte  
104 Rue de Laeken,  
lab-au.com,  
mediaruimte.be

**Le Musée de Réverbère**  
75-87 Rue Delva,  
between Rue Mabille  
and Rue Fineau

**VRT/RTBF tower**  
52 Boulevard  
Auguste Reyers

**Basilique du Sacré-Coeur**  
Parvis de la Basilique,  
Koekelberg

**Citroën showroom**  
7 Place de l'Yser

**Theatre National**  
111-115 Boulevard  
Emile Jacqmain,  
theatrenational.be







Among the newer LAB(au) lighting projects, established just last year, is the VRT/RTBF television tower. The top-heavy tower is programmed to light up in a random array of colours.

This project is Smet's favourite to date because, in addition to gaining the co-operation of the two public broadcasting companies who co-own the tower and sit across the country's contentious language divide, he says: "It is good for their image and for Brussels. The tower isn't very elegant, more of a brutal architectural element, but at night it becomes something mysterious, a kind of UFO!"

The Basilique du Sacré-Coeur is another monument to benefit from the

city's largesse. The copper dome has seen the introduction of an ethereal blue-green light that gives it the floating appearance of an iridescent jellyfish in the night sea. A crimson cross, long a warning to planes, sits atop the dome as a focal point of this northern neighbourhood of Koekelberg.

Sweeping down from Koekelberg are two contrasting façade lighting treatments. The Citroën showroom is gently washed with clear white light that transforms its geometric art deco windows into a soft array of tiered scallop shapes. Around the corner, the Theatre National appears to have a featureless,

**Above** Traffic lights with heart; **Left** White light accentuates the curves of the art deco Citroën building; **Right** The huge Basilique du Sacré-Coeur with its copper dome; **Below** Subtle lighting makes a pedestrianised square even more inviting



modern, all-glass fascia of windows that are stacked floor to ceiling. However, by night the etched windows provide a tonal depth to the usually white brightness of the façade.

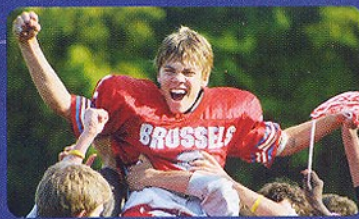
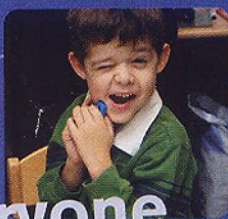
Brussels may have a grey image, especially in the weak, low winter sun, but at night it is a city transformed. Solstis and Winter Wonders inject seasonal colour and life, and future projects to light the Wiels Brewery and, for the first time, the bridges over the canal, are set to invigorate the city year round. It's an appropriate upturn for the first European city to implement an aesthetic urban lighting system.

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