



## ‘Dazzling relief’: floodlighting and national affective atmospheres on VE Day 1945



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### Abstract

The VE Day celebrations in London on 8 May 1945 are popularly understood as a moment of wild national celebration. An important aspect of this event was the use of floodlights by the government to highlight important buildings in central London, and many accounts of the event describe this illumination as both spectacular and national. This article uses this case to explore the relationship between the materiality of the built environment, the way such environments are transformed through illumination, the use and experience of such sites, and how these aspects might combine into ‘national atmospheres’. In doing so, it draws on recent scholarship concerning the materiality and agency of light and affective atmospheres to show how use of floodlighting helped constitute the built environment of central London nationally symbolic. Two aspects of this occasion are considered: the role of this spectacle in reinforcing national narratives, and the more subtle ways in which the illuminations helped create affective atmospheres that complicated the explicit ‘nation-ness’ of the event. This article will also discuss the importance of the experience as a collective one, as spectators helped construct the national through collective activity. It argues that these elements combined to create a ‘national atmosphere’ that relied on the embodied and collective spatial practices for its both its affective and discursive impact.

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**Keywords:** Illuminations; Affective atmosphere; National identity; VE Day; London

Artificial light has a long history in rendering urban environments spectacular, convivial or celebratory. This includes its use at national events, such as US Fourth of July fireworks, Australian Anzac Day dawn services, or Vietnamese lantern festivals.<sup>1</sup> In these instances, illumination (and darkness) is employed to help create a sense of national collectivity. This article takes the example of the Victory in Europe (VE) Day celebrations in London on 7 and 8 May 1945, to explore the relationship between the built environment, the national symbols within it, official schemes of illumination and the practices of the crowd. In doing so, I address how the elements combined to create affective atmospheres that worked to construct or enhance national identity. I show how, during VE Day celebrations, a national atmosphere was created that relied on spatial and collective practices for its both its affective and discursive impact, and explain how artificial illumination contributed to this.

The VE Day floodlighting was a particularly important part of this atmosphere, as it linked the celebrating crowds to a historic national environment that had survived the war. Although officials tried to use floodlighting to both create a spectacular effect and to underscore national survival, this display was not necessarily understood in explicitly national terms by the people who saw it. However, the potential of illumination to create emotional atmospheres, what Bille and Sørensen call the ‘agency of light’,<sup>2</sup> worked on the crowd in ways that emphasised collectivity and a story of national endurance through years of war. This case study asks how illumination affected the celebrations, how it influenced the experience of nationally symbolic space, and whether this might contribute to a more general conceptualisation of national affective atmospheres.<sup>3</sup>

I begin by identifying the conceptual areas that underpin the empirical section to follow, the first of which is the established

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<sup>1</sup> See M. Di Giovine, Revitalization and counter-revitalization: tourism, heritage and the Lantern Festival as catalysts for regeneration in Hoi An, Việt Nam, *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events* 1 (2009) 208–230; T. Edensor and S. Millington, Illuminations, class identities and the contested landscapes of Christmas, *Sociology* 43 (2009) 103–121.

<sup>2</sup> M. Bille and T. Sørensen, An anthropology of luminosity: the agency of light, *Journal of Material Culture* 12 (2007) 263–284.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Closs Stephens, The affective atmospheres of nationalism, *Cultural Geographies*, forthcoming.

literature that addresses the link between national identity and urban space. I then discuss affect and atmosphere, drawing out the connections with the spatial, the collective and the importance of experience before turning to illumination and its potential to help shape atmosphere. In the second section, I apply this framework to the empirical example of VE Day in central London, before drawing some larger conclusions about the possibilities and potential of national atmosphere.

### Theoretical orientations: national identity, affective atmosphere and illumination

The use of the urban built environment to buttress narratives of national identity is well-established. Monumental structures and urban plans,<sup>4</sup> street names,<sup>5</sup> memorials<sup>6</sup> and groupings of institutions and government structures have all been mobilized to proclaim, impose, consolidate or gently invoke national identity. There is a long history of elites creating 'historically inflected urban landscapes as a way to bolster a particular political order', and attempts to control the use of these places by various social groups, both hegemonic and transgressive.<sup>7</sup> The large body of scholarship on the relationship amongst place, monuments and public artworks, memory, history and national identity explore the potential of such sites thoroughly. Driver and Gilbert, for example, show how sites from across the British Empire were evident in central London's buildings and places, and approaches such as these identify the flexibility or intractability of national narratives as expressed in the built environment, and the extent of their inclusiveness.<sup>8</sup> The built environment can also be activated by events that emphasise the national and collective. In London's case, this has included royal coronations, weddings or funerals; or major sporting events such as the Olympics or World Cup. Brubaker remarks that, rather than being conceived as a 'substantial, enduring collectivity', 'nation-ness' should be treated as an event, a 'contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action.' According to this account, the nation is not a stable entity with a long history of development, but is instead a 'category of practice' that can erupt into expressive events.<sup>9</sup> VE Day was such an event, and was characterized by fluctuating affective atmospheres that central London's buildings and monuments helped to engender.

#### Affective atmospheres

Narrative representations in the built environment are enlivened by non-representational elements in the moods, feelings and intensities that comprise atmospheres. McCormack argues that atmosphere is co-constituted by people and their spatial and material environments, describing them as 'a quality of environmental

immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies while remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal'.<sup>10</sup> They are manifested as intensities or turbulence that derive from their constitutive elements, but that '[exceed] lived or conceived space-time' in unpredictable and varied ways.<sup>11</sup> As such, they are fleeting and difficult to capture but also autonomous and powerful. They are assemblages of humans and the more-than human, but are greater than the sum of their parts: 'atmospheres are spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with'.<sup>12</sup> Of the established and growing body of geographical and design literature about atmosphere, this article draws on three aspects as relevant to the connection amongst national identity, atmosphere and illumination: spatially-expressed power and narrative; the practices and experience of space on the part of the 'perceiving subject'; and the role of the collectivity, or of people experiencing space together.

According to Thrift, affect is manifested in spatial 'intensities of feeling' that have 'always been a key element of politics and the subject of numerous powerful political technologies which have knotted thinking, technique and affect together in various potent combinations'.<sup>13</sup> He offers a politics of affect in which a 'top-down' process determines how the built environment is shaped or manipulated to produce a reaction in people who experience it, including through 'design, lighting, event management logistics, music, performance'.<sup>14</sup> In this article, I suggest that attention to affect can help explain the impact of the artificial illuminations of VE Day celebrations in London. The twentieth century has seen many examples of this type of design as powerful groups have sought to elicit a particular affective response through the manipulation of the urban environment. Lighting has been a common strategy. Examples include Nazi Nuremberg rallies and their use of a spectacular 'cathedral of light', the electrification of the world's fairs from the 1880s or the spotlighting of national memorials and monuments in many cities around the world.<sup>15</sup> These cases demonstrate the longstanding use of illumination to not only help constitute particular affects, but also the political implications of using light in this way, including its utility for national narratives. Such manipulation of the built environment helps to 'engineer' affect to official ends, and thereby construct the nation through spectacular events.<sup>16</sup>

However, such atmospheres are not under the absolute control of top-down officials or designers who create illuminated displays. As they experience the built environment, the practices of users also shape spatial meanings. Duff, for example, argues that 'affect is the emergent and energetic expression of the force of practice in place... [it] is the principal mechanism threading urban places together' (emphasis in original). In turning to affect, he grapples with experiential aspects of place that cannot be plotted on a map, but which only unfold through the rich meanings engendered by

<sup>4</sup> K. Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, Abingdon, 1999; L. Vale, *Architecture, Power and National Identity*, 2nd edition, Abingdon, 2008; D. Gordon (Ed), *Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities*, Abingdon, 2006; S. Sumartojo, *Trafalgar Square and the Narration of Britishness, 1900–2012: Imagining the Nation*, Oxford, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> M. Azaryahu and R. Kook, Mapping the nation: street names and Arab-Palestinian identity: three case studies', *Nations and Nationalism* 8 (2002) 195–213.

<sup>6</sup> A recent example is Q. Stevens, Planning Canberra's memorial landscape, *Fabrications* 23 (2013).

<sup>7</sup> A. Hoelscher and D. Alderman, Memory and place: geographies of a critical relationship, *Social and Cultural Geography* 5 (2004) 350.

<sup>8</sup> See for example L. Vale, *Architecture, Power and National Identity* (note 4); N. Johnson, *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance*, Cambridge, 2003; R. Jones, Relocating nationalism: on the geographies of reproducing nations, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33 (2008) 319–334; T. Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, Oxford, 2005; M. Heffernan, For ever England: the Western Front and the politics of remembrance in Britain, *Cultural Geographies* 2 (1995) 293–323.

<sup>9</sup> R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in New Europe*, Cambridge, 1996, 21.

<sup>10</sup> D. McCormack, Engineering affective atmospheres on the moving geographies of the 1897 Andrée expedition, *Cultural Geographies* 15 (2008) 413.

<sup>11</sup> B. Anderson, Affective atmospheres, *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 (2009) 79.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, Affective atmospheres (note 11), 80.

<sup>13</sup> N. Thrift, Intensities of feeling: towards a spatial politics of affect, *Geografiska Annaler* 86B (2004) 57–78.

<sup>14</sup> Thrift, Intensities of feeling (note 13), 67–68.

<sup>15</sup> S. McQuire, Immaterial architectures: urban space and electric light, *Space and Culture* 8 (2005) 127.

<sup>16</sup> Thrift, Intensities of feeling (note 13), 64.

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