

Nocturnal Imaginaries

Rethinking and Redesigning the City After Dark

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

How do the multi-sensory experiences and aesthetics of nocturnal places enable us to reimagine how those environments might be? In addition, how do those who inhabit the urban night through their labour engage with its aesthetics and develop knowledge of specific geographies? This paper draws upon ongoing autoethnographic fieldwork including encounters and exchanges with a range of night workers and creative practitioners based in the city of Manchester, UK, to explore the entanglements between light and dark, work and respite, creativity and place. This paper proposes that understanding how nightscapes are used differently by various people is valuable to shaping how they may evolve. This is of critical importance if we are to develop wider and deeper knowledges of the situated, relational, and practised nature of the city after dark, and be able to rethink and reclaim it as a time and place that considers accessibility and equity.

NOCTURNAL IMAGINARIES

Rethinking and Redesigning the City After Dark

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Introduction

This paper examines the multisensory experiences and aesthetics of the city after dark in order to investigate their potential for shaping nocturnal imaginaries. There are specific sensibilities when night falls, especially in urban landscapes, that open up creative exchanges between identity and place. Of particular interest in this paper is how night affects scholars' research and what kind of approaches may be useful through which to explore its spatio-temporality with respect to designing for urban places after dark. To illustrate this, I introduce the notion of 'nocturnal praxis,' a qualitative methods approach to studying the urban night. It draws upon ongoing fieldwork based in the city of Manchester in the UK and shows how this approach has been applied to explore how nightscapes are used and their changing dynamics. By doing so, it seeks to demonstrate how such an understanding can contribute to shaping the future of the city after dark. This paper is divided into five subsequent sections. The first section describes how values attributed to light and darkness have physically and symbolically been manifest in the nocturnal city as power, contest, access, or inequality. In the second section, the multisensory experiences and aesthetics of nocturnal urban places are examined. The third section presents the method of nightwalking as integral to a nocturnal praxis of investigating the city after dark. The fourth section provides a detailed extract from an autoethnographic account of a nightwalk in Manchester to illustrate its potential for conducting fieldwork in underrepresented and marginalized places at night. The final section reflects on how we might evolve towards nocturnal imaginaries that enable us to rethink and redesign the city after dark.

Power, Contest, Access, and Inequality

When we think about how cities are shaped, we do not necessarily consider how light and dark are contested and, in some instances, further sharpen existing power geometries. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that the distribution of lighting technologies is intertwined with issues of inequality where the brightly lit commercial areas contrast with the dark neighbourhoods of the poor, in which darkness quickly became “a symbol and a determinant of urban differentiation” (Otter 2008: 335) as “old light retreated into the far streets and lesser known neighbourhoods, disregarded and disparaged in relation to the new” (Brox 2010: 104). More recently, however, this dynamic between power and light has almost reversed in certain contexts. The over-illumination of poorest parts of some cities, in particular social housing developments, is notable compared to the levels of darkness and array of lighting in more affluent neighbourhoods. In their study of London, Sloane, Slater and Entwistle (2016) contend that lighting is deployed in a manner which renders social housing estates as dangerous or problematic irrespective of whether this is the case or not, while they observe that darkness has become a form of luxurious good with subtler lighting interventions that produce aesthetically pleasing environments that feel calm and safe.

These complex entanglements between light and dark as assertions of power or inequality have evolved from strategies for planned and coherent nightscapes. Across successive technological developments, many cities have become synonymous with the functional lighting layouts that were implemented following the Second World War. These infrastructures were generally a response to the increasing number of vehicles in urban centres (Nye 2018), with lighting installed at regular intervals and positioned atop poles, to form street lamps, to provide as much uniformity as possible. Yet, such comprehensive deployment of artificial lighting did not necessarily produce a coherent nocturnal city for two primary reasons. Firstly, because of the diversity of illumination from sources other than street lighting, there could often be considerable differentiation in levels of brightness and tonality across the city (Isenstadt 2018). Secondly, artificial lighting as it is manifest in the built environment is usually only partially implemented and situated with regard to contextual characteristics, built up through successive installations and operations of maintenance, repair, and replacement, which collectively resist consistency and uniformity. This planned power of coherence is subject to standardization and regulation to control and manage its implementation, though recent work has sought to negotiate this framework to enable luminous variation (Ebbensgaard 2019).

Parallel to these technological interventions, the urban night has long been associated with pleasure, transgression, and freedom (Chatterton and Hollands 2003; Roberts and Eldridge 2009). The expectation of pleasure at night is a counterpoint to daytime activities which are generally understood as relating to everyday worlds of work, education, and care. But we also know that everyday activities such as convenience shopping or going to the gym have gradually expanded into the early morning or late into the evening. Notions of work and workplace have changed and eating out has become more commonplace, shifts which typically conceal the respective conditions of labour and economic status of those supporting such activities and services. For the night is also an assemblage of uneven economic, political, and social geographies since it belies a working population that reflects, to varying degrees, their ethnicity, immigration status, race, and limited and/or precarious labour opportunities, as determined by their context.

More recently, there have been important shifts with regard to accessibility and safety for a wider spectrum of different ages, genders, races, and sexual orientations through movements and organizations such as Reclaim the Night (n.d.) and Take Back the Night (n.d.). This has led to a more inclusive and tolerant attitude toward different communities and groups in some contexts, reflecting the considerable progresses that occurred across the twentieth century. In particular, the transition from widely demonized and prohibited activities, through necessary covert and codified behaviours, to more equal rights and less discrimination in the present day still remains highly variable and is relational to wider societal framings, values, and associations. However, it is important to acknowledge that this is an ongoing process which is not universal and is far from complete, its effects uneven across different geographical and socio-political contexts. Concerning this diversity of nocturnal urban places, their identities and who they are constructed by and for, Robert Williams reminds us, “Night spaces are neither uniform nor homogeneous. Rather they are constituted by social struggles about what should and should not happen in certain places during the dark of night” (Williams 2008: 514). Where positive developments have manifested has been alongside a corresponding history of the various forms of experience and place that LGBTQ+ communities have accessed, created, and sustained to offer, wherever possible, an enjoyable, vibrant, and safe city after dark (Haslam 2015, Campkin 2021). It is useful to next consider what nocturnal urban places offer as a means to rethink how we encounter and apprehend the city.

Multisensory Experiences and Aesthetics of Nocturnal Urban Places

The city after dark is always in a process of becoming, arguably even more so than the city during the daytime, since boundaries of identity and place may appear more ambiguous and be less easy to perceive. This paper aligns with a vitalist understanding of the city, that is comprising of heterogeneous and self-contradictory spaces, recognizing that the potential future of places informs their past and present (Deleuze 1966; Grosz 2004). Nocturnal urban places, thus, are spaces of possibility. Indeed, when daylight fades we witness the emergence of a “second city – with its own geography and its own set of citizens” (Sharpe 2008: 14). The uneven distribution of darkness across the urban landscape offers cover for the secretive, illicit, subcultural, and marginalized to be manifest in ways that are profoundly different from the quotidian routines and confines of the daytime. Such transformations are both psychological and physical. People are able to move differently at night, perhaps under less scrutiny than during daylight hours and outside of the roles and responsibilities they may be committed to in the daytime. Immersion in dark spaces alters how our sensory capacities work (Serres 2008).

This mobilization of a different multisensory experience of place, can profoundly change how we perceive and encounter the city after dark (Edensor 2013). Sounds and smells become more prominent, taste is enhanced, and tactile skills are needed to negotiate the gloom. Critically, as diurnal creatures, our visual capacities are significantly recalibrated after nightfall. This enables greater visual sensitivity to light, movement, and shape but our ability to discern colour is impeded. Experiencing this shift in our senses and the multisensory attunement to the urban night can be powerful. In aesthetic terms, this shift in non-visual senses and the affective experience of nocturnal urban place can “dim the sharpness of vision, make depth and distance ambiguous, and invite unconscious peripheral vision and tactile fantasy” (Pallasmaa 2005: 46). In addition, being out in the city after dark offers the potential for a different “regime of sensory experience” to support thought and creativity (Foessel 2017: 151). It is this capacity of the night, its blurring of borders along with the heightened attentiveness that it can stimulate, that has provided rich inspiration for creative engagements and interpretations concerning nocturnal aesthetics and experiences (Briggs 2013; Bronfen 2013).

It is within these multisensory entanglements of how we experience the night that there is considerable opportunity for practices in architecture, urban design, and urban planning. The notion of the lit world acknowledges

how, with a few exceptions, our experiential worlds are typically made sense of in and through different quantities and qualities of light. New interdisciplinary inquiry seeks to illustrate how feelings of comfort, care, safety, security, and wellbeing can be represented in and through how people experience different coexistences of light and dark, and that improved experiences of the built environment can result (Sumartojo 2022). The key point here is how we apprehend a more extensive set of sensitizations and coexistences between light and dark than are typically accounted for in increasingly brightly lit cities and, by doing so, what the implications might be for practices in architecture, urban design, and urban planning. In particular, I am interested in the potential of darker nightscapes that can improve how people interact with urban spaces as well as how such spaces feel (Hvass, Waltorp and Hansen 2022).

But what does this mean for the on-the-ground conditions? How can we make meaning and better understand the nuances of the city after dark in order to design for its future? Night redefines the framework of thought of action in the realm of the imaginary, of territorial planning, and of the practice of landscape (Dunn 2016; Stone 2018). Fundamental practices concerning how we design cities need to ask, “If night means the ephemeral, the fragile, the spontaneous, how does one construct this element without distorting it?” (Armengaud, Armengaud and Cianchetta 2009: 6). In particular, an ethos of “Dark Design” would encourage further investigation into how cities could be “designed differently to promote positive, non-consumer-orientated experiences and encounters” (Dunn 2020a: 25). Such an approach resonates with the plea by Roger Narboni (2017) for cities to make use of “dark infrastructures,” to protect and preserve darkness and support green spaces and blue areas such as parks, canals, and rivers, by focussing their attention away from illumination toward a “nocturnal urbanism.” Recalibrating the relationship between light and dark also provides an opportunity for the nocturnal city to be redesigned at the scale of a building, integral to the composite of the urban experience of night. It is through “understanding how articulations of architecture – envelopment, permeability, scale, edge, recess – influence nocturnal spatial practice, alternatives in building and lighting can be imagined” (Downey 2020: 16). Clearly, the night offers a distinctive spatio-temporality and a diverse array of places in the city after dark. These conditions require tools and techniques to enable us to better understand these dynamic contexts and their rhythms, patterns, interactions, and geographies.

Nocturnal Praxis

Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance and urgency for the night to be better understood whether widely conceived as a “science of the night” (Acuto 2019) or night studies (Kyba *et al.* 2020), it is evident that urban conditions represent a significant type of night (van Liempt, van Aalst and Schwanen 2015), albeit one that is multiple and diverse across different contexts. However, the role of design has been largely left out of this discussion to date. Instead, as far as the night is concerned, architecture, urban design, urban planning, and indeed lighting design have become synonymous with safety and security after dark. This framing is highly reductive and serves to reinforce the binary associations of light and dark. Although an emerging body of work has sought to challenge this binary narrative (Gallan and Gibson 2011; Le Gallic and Pritchard 2019; Dunn and Edensor 2021), it endures as a common perception in many societies.

Over the last eight years I have spent many hours walking through various urban landscapes after dark, interested in how my physical and psychological relationships with place alter amongst different coexistences of darkness and light. Initially begun as a result of a temporary inability to sleep, over time it became apparent to me that nightwalking also provided a valuable spatial practice through which I gain knowledge and insight into places through direct experience and further understand how the identity of places shifts throughout the night in relation to day. In early 2014, the city council of Manchester, my home city, announced its strategy to conduct a comprehensive replacement of 56,000 sodium street bulbs with LED lights (Figure 1). Since then, I have been using nightwalking as a method to navigate and document the city through an ongoing series of surveys (Figure 2) (Dunn 2019). This fieldwork has led to several thousand hours of nightwalking through different urban conditions at night over the last eight years and the production of an archive of photographs, maps, and autoethnographic notes. I have compiled this archive as a way to capture some of the different ambiances of light and dark and how they are being altered (Figures 3-4). I am not the first person to undertake this type of research. In 1869, for example, the journalist Blanchard Jerrold accompanied by French artist Gustave Doré produced an illustrated record of the shadows and sunlight of London (Doré and Jerrold 1872). Together they spent many days and nights investigating the city, its night refuges, streets, and other places of nocturnal activity.



Figure 1. Blackfriars Street, looking towards Manchester city centre, 26 January 2014. © Nick Dunn. The view shown here no longer exists since the sodium street lamps have been replaced by LED lighting.

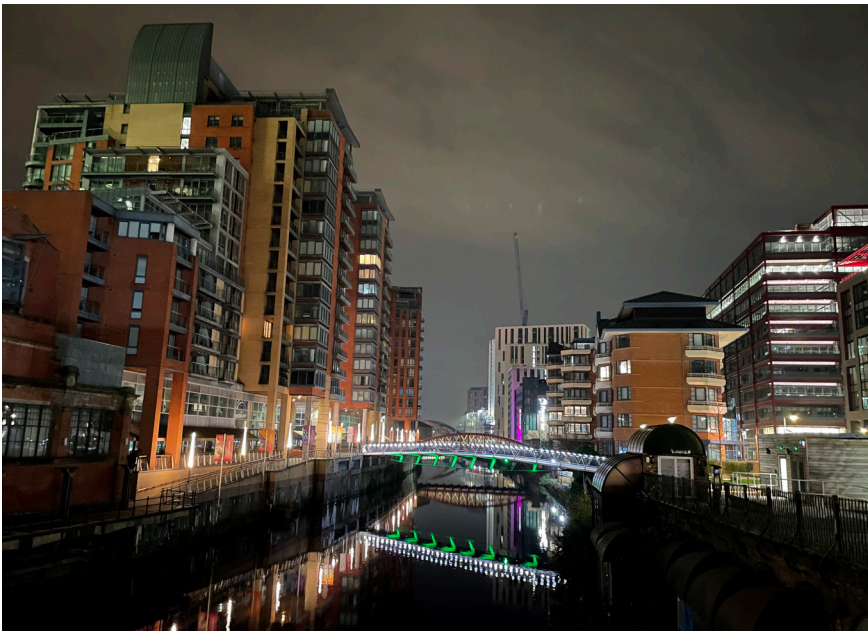


Figure 2. Bridge Street, overlooking River Irwell, Manchester, 8 November 2020. © Nick Dunn. The brighter and generally whiter characteristics of the LED lighting installed between 2014 and 2019 have produced a different nocturnal atmosphere across the city.



Figure 3. Sodium lamps, Castlefield, Manchester, 26 May 2016. © Nick Dunn. The quality and quantity of this form of artificial illumination was commonplace in many cities by the second half of the twentieth century.



Figure 4. LED streetlighting, Castlefield, Manchester, 8 November 2020. © Nick Dunn. In the twenty-first century, this type of artificial illumination has become a popular choice for cities wanting to reduce their lighting energy costs though their impact also has multiple negative effects on human health and biodiversity, significantly altering the character of the urban night.

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly changed the ways in which we relate to one another and interact with the places we live, work, and play. It has manifested spatially in a number of ways through forms of lockdown, restriction, and curfew depending on the national or regional context. Across the three national lockdowns that were deployed in England, I continued to nightwalk through Manchester. During these periods, I became quickly aware of two aspects to the city after dark. Firstly, the extent to which the urban night was devoid of human activity aside from a small number of designated key workers (Figure 5). This resulted in the nocturnal ambiances that are typically found in the city after dark being significantly different in character. Secondly, the rhythms and patterns of these workers, which would have been absorbed into the background of the busier, pre-pandemic urban night, were suddenly much more legible and revealed latent geographies of how nightscapes are used by different groups of people. It is also important to acknowledge that my practice of nightwalking is inseparable from the fact that I am a white adult male moving through urban space after dark. As such, I recognize that my encounters are personal and far from universal since gender and race, for example, may influence how other people experience nightwalking, both physically and psychologically. In terms of positionality, I believe that the long-term fieldwork, which has been conducted at regular intervals, has enabled my body to be an epistemological tool that one utilises as appropriate. It is through this nocturnal praxis I have been able to produce thick descriptions of urban places and the reflexive writing of my autoethnographic notes illustrates this. This has included gaining knowledge and understanding of the intended and unintended uses of spaces at night, while also being able to adapt to the dynamic situation of the city after dark. Yet it would be impossible to capture everything about the urban night nor is my work an attempt to do so. My presence in and moving through place might alter the character of that situation and the way events unfold in it even if this is not necessarily obvious. Through this inquiry I hope to stimulate further research by fellow researchers to better understand a wider spectrum of encounters that nightwalking as a methodology can reveal in relation to diverse entanglements between bodies and landscape, light and dark, work and respite, creativity and place.

Why investigate the city after dark? Night is fascinating as a topic of inquiry since it “has a being different to a thing, a subject, a person, an animal; it is a collection of relations, possibilities and materialities. While there are material features to night, and elements of night that act in unison, there is no material, thing or form that we can point to as ‘night’”



Figure 5. Nightingale Hospital North West, city centre Manchester, 8 November 2020. © Nick Dunn. This image taken during the second national lockdown shows a security guard inside the booth, one of only five people I encountered during six hours in the city centre that night. The others were a streetcleaner and three female health workers returning home from work. Such nightwalks were also notable for the amount of wasted artificial light in the city.

(Shaw 2018: 3). When we seek to consider how our patterns, rhythms, and confrontations co-produce the city after dark, what methods are available to explore these coexistences? Walking is well established as a methodology for creative practice (Solnit 2000; Careri 2002; Middleton 2010; O'Neill and Roberts 2020), bringing together the body and landscape, their rhythms, and multisensory interplay. If we seek to account for how the night is moved through and how it moves through us, then the perambulatory autoethnography afforded by nightwalking can be valuable. Nightwalking here is positioned as a mobile method that can reveal empirical sensitivities and new avenues for critique (Büscher and Urry 2009) pertaining to the city after dark – how and why it is constituted and by whom. The ‘who’ in such processes is crucial. Jacques Rancière (2009 [2000]: 13) explains how making sense of a sense is inherently political since it concerns, “what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.” Responding to this latter point, although my nocturnal praxis aims to give expression to different presences of the urban night and thus begin

to illustrate the heterogeneity of experiences, it is important to recognize that there will always be those who do not seek to be represented by virtue of how they act within and move through the city after dark. According to Matthew Gandy, “Light is integral to the changing sensory characteristics of late modernity, connecting with the affective dynamics of everyday life that encompass the built environment, circadian rhythms, and pervasive atmospheres of distraction” (Gandy 2017: 354). When transposed to the city after dark, this perspective enables the mobilization of the variety of belongings that are situated in, relational to, and may also coexist within a specific context. This distribution of the nocturnal sensible is what I refer to in the context of this paper as the ‘everynight’ of the city after dark. It enacts “previously unanticipated ways of apprehension, soliciting perceptions that expand the capacities for imagining and sensing place otherwise, such approaches extend the compendium of ways of seeing” (Edensor 2017: 125).

Nightwalking is therefore positioned as integral to a nocturnal praxis of qualitative methods, which along with autoethnography, photography, and sound recording, can make legible certain characteristics of the environment. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to an emerging body of methods (Diamanti and Boudreault-Fournier 2021; MacQuarie 2021; Brandellero, Kenny and Pardue 2022) which recognizes that experiences and representations of the urban night are often overlooked in humanities and social sciences research. This nocturnal praxis reinforces an understanding of the night as being anything but a simple linear period of time by engaging the body in multiple temporalities (Griffiths and Dunn 2020). In addition, it provides an embodied way to experience how lighting “informs multiple, overlapping, and intersecting urban temporalities and mediates our experience of an ever-changing city” (Ebbensgaard and Edensor 2021). Thus, nightwalking contributes to the ways we might rethink how to conduct sensory ethnography (Pink 2015).

I conducted a series of 36 nightwalks between 8 November 2020 and 8 April 2021 in the city centre of Manchester and the adjacent areas of Cheetham Hill and the Irk Valley. I made audio recordings and autoethnographic notes during each of these nightwalks, and also took photographs at regular intervals. At the end of each nightwalk, I first wrote down from memory my experiences then listened to the recordings to understand any resonances or discrepancies between my encounters as recollections and the sonic documentations. The sound recordings have proved valuable in contributing to rich descriptions of place where

presences may not be visually apparent but are detectable in other ways. It is important to note that the encounters and exchanges that occurred are representative of parts of the city within which there was distinctively less activity than there typically is when not under the restrictions of lockdown measures. Although familiar with these areas of the city pre-pandemic, the cumulative experience enabled me to comprehend the nuances of them at night and better understand the different rhythms and ambiances they present, albeit ones that were sometimes dynamic and fleeting. In order to convey the embodied and embedded nature of this work and describe how the city after dark appears and changes by moving through place, I provide an extract from an autoethnographic account of one of these nightwalks in the next section. This particular nightwalk took place on 8 April 2021, starting from the edge of the city centre at Corporation Street, adjacent to Manchester Victoria station, at 9pm, about an hour after sunset and lasted approximately four hours. It also includes photographs of specific sites to assist the reader's understanding of the experience and context of this 'evernight' (Figures 6-7).

Nightwalking the Evernight

Walking along from the corner of Corporation Street and up Cheetham Hill Road, the eerie quiet and lack of urban buzz due to the national lockdown is palpable. Cars and bike couriers move people and food around the city's circulation system. By Manchester Oratory St Chad's the illuminated stained glass window melds with the late evening sky, capturing its bruised hues in its crystalline fragments. Crossing over and moving down Chatley Street, the roads here all seem to be held together by the background drone of the city beyond. The width of the streets and the style of architecture whisper more of small-town Middle America than an urban centre of North West England. In some ways it is the frontier, still fending off the forces of gentrification and regeneration. Thanks to the bulwark of the prison, human activity around this part of the city is all the more conspicuous for its general absence. This is the muffled soundtrack of furtive and illicit movements and transactions, the slow crunches under rubber of the kerb-crawling car and the buzzes of vibrating mobile phones in hands setting up the next deal. The district around the prison is a micro-climate where many edges of urban activity overlap and coexist.

Distorted percussion crackles out of a mobile phone. Washing lines flutter their wares beyond railings, dancing ghosts swaying to the sporadic traffic hum. There is a tangible absence of people and activity in general. As

a result, the soundtrack of the night slips out of open windows and doors held ajar. Music and voices intermingle, wafting out of these apertures towards the sky, their rhythms and accents dispersing in the dark. Swatches of reggae, hip hop, and soukous uncoil themselves from domestic interiors and weave their way into the street beyond. Tinny ribbons of music escape into the wider world, distorted and shrill from their source. Occasionally they overlap, forming interstitial sonic zones for the nightwalker. The babble of a family couched in the splurge of a television gameshow adds jingle bursts and audience appreciation to an already heated discussion. The low-rise housing schemes in this district offer a slower tempo to the feet, this is a landscape at a human scale, and for the body to enter its suburban calm. Where figures can be seen they are usually standing alone and motionless, frozen in time by the blueish white glaze that emits from their phone, a temporary death mask isolating them from the wider dance of the city.

Onward and upward along Waterloo Road and the low thrum of urban life seems to build. Fried chicken and other takeaway food smells drift towards me, tasty poltergeists drawing the body to their origins. At the top of the road where it is swallowed by Cheetham Hill Road, the plunge and sizzle of deep fat fryers within the brightly lit glass boxes of fast food outlets. Delivery drivers wait with their insulated cubes ready to transport these crispy wonderments across the hungry neighbourhoods. Bright colours of illuminated signage join the visual fray, a private psychedelic showreel for the nightwalker. Above one of these, a leg hangs out into the night air from a window amidst the sweet plumes of a vaping machine providing intermittent succour to the suckling owner of the limb. Urgent Arabic flourishes pinch their way into the night air from the lowered window of a private hire vehicle stopping at the traffic lights. Engine idling, its thrum adds syncopated beats to the treble waves of the music that is playing inside the car. The sounds build as the car accelerates away, streaking its mash-up melody down the road to quickly fade out of sight and ear.

Two figures snap me out of my reverie, their fast patois stretching out before them as they talk excitedly in an ethnic dialect I am unable to decipher as their sound bubble passes me by and then floats down the street with them. Moving down towards Cheetham Hill Road again, the rhythmic pairings of homes abruptly stop as the landscape shifts from dwelling to commerce. Now the architecture is one of brick boxes and car parks, the noise from the nearby main road swirling around these barren places as it reflects from blank surfaces. Too late for shopping tonight. Back onto the artery road and the hubbub of takeaway restaurants sizzle and fizz with

fryers and brief chatter between cooks, couriers, and customers. Grease, warmth, and strongly spiced aromas jab the air, wafting from doorways and opened polystyrene takeaway boxes. Chicken and chips, kebabs, curry and rice, hot treats to provide sustenance for those who share the night. The shuttered, blank expressions of some shopfronts provide unintentional minimalist artworks of aluminium and steel, white and grey planes with the accoutrements of a sticker or a grimy edge. The quick staccato call and response of a Polish couple in minor disagreement before recommencing their walk together enters my sensory field before exiting stage left down a side street. Leaving behind the area of synagogues and threading through one with mosques, the latter bookended by Trinity Union Church and the mostly derelict St Luke's Church. In its graveyard, exhausted bicycle couriers take it in turns to rest and chat softly over high energy drinks (Figure 6).

From here the road tumbles down to the city centre again. Large retail parks bulk into view, their patchwork sheds offering discounted dreams and convenient parking. A budget bit of consumerist Americana grafted onto the skin of the city. Behind these is North Street and a longer history of light industrial units stakes its way across the urban landscape. Wholesale clothes retailers, garages, electronics, textiles, materials, foodstuff. This is a micro-utopia of demand and supply. It provides the city and the region with portals to the world through its procurement and logistics of goods and services. Electric light skims along the bottom of a steel door or illuminates the odd window but whatever clandestine operations are going on inside are not disclosed beyond its walls. The ghosts of intense and poorly paid labour hang heavy around here. A formerly white plastic seat since speckled with the patina of grit and grime waits to receive a tired body and provide brief respite from work. Little gatherings of cigarette butts close to façade apertures rest quietly following a flick and then the arc of their flight from fingers. They are tiny reminders of yesterday's hard labour, spectres of routine, and all-too-temporary recuperation. The sleeping hulk of a HGV lies hard against the kerb, its smell of rubber and dust telling tales of highways and byways near and far. Its wide eyes and festive cabin lights sit forlorn and discharged from power. The jabber of the unseen city beckons, its babble ebbing and flowing around corners and along streets in relation to my navigation across the warp and weft of the urban fabric. Arcing back again towards the main thoroughfare of Cheetham Hill Road, along which cars and trucks shift to and from the urban centre, their bright white headlights growing and blood red rear lights dissipating into the long

avenue. Hydraulics squeak, while further away some light rail transport adds metallic streaks of noise.

Turning back into the city centre, it is striking how being hidden in plain sight, Cheetham Hill is both a promise and premise. It offers countless opportunities for reinvention in its environs and the ability to have encounter and exchange with a diverse and mobile set of cultures and identities (Figure 7). Its steadfast refusal to acquiesce to the planned power of the city and the latter's ongoing quest for an urban renaissance of renewal have led to its character as much as the forces of late capitalism have shaped its offer of cheap and counterfeit goods, shady operations, and both legitimate and illicit provisions to the wider population. With the return of LED-illuminated hues in the sky, the very radiance of the city centre, it is time to leave the early hours of the urban landscape behind for another night.



Figure 6. St Luke's Church, Cheetham Hill, Manchester, 8 April 2021. © Nick Dunn. Gig economy workers made use of spaces close to this derelict church as sites for respite and recuperation when normally outside of lockdown it would be hazardous to do so due to the presence of young people partaking in underage drinking and drug-taking.



Figure 7. Chatley Street, Cheetham Hill, Manchester, 8 April 2021. © Nick Dunn. Not everyone out and about in the city after dark is working in the same way and there still endures surreptitious forms of pleasure seeking. There have been a number of illegal raves, pop-up bars, and parties occurring in this district which despite being close to the city centre appears hidden in plain sight as an area for covert activities.

Towards Nocturnal Imaginaries

This paper contends that understanding how nightscapes are used differently by various people is valuable to shaping how they may evolve. This is of critical importance if we are to develop wider and deeper knowledges of the situated, relational, and practised nature of the city after dark, and be able to rethink and redesign it as a time and place that considers accessibility and equity. In order to respond to this premise, I have sought to explain the ongoing entanglements between light and dark. This has first been done through an overview to illustrate the ways in which values associated with light and dark have both physically and symbolically been manifest as multiplicities in the urban night as power, contest, access, or inequality. To further explore what the city after dark might support in the conception of alternative approaches to its design, an examination of the multisensory experiences and aesthetics of nocturnal urban places is provided. Responding to the need for different tools and techniques to study the night, the method of nightwalking is presented as integral to a nocturnal

praxis of investigating the city after dark. This qualitative methods approach combines nightwalking with autoethnography, photography, and sound recording as a means to reveal the 'everynight' of the urban landscape. A detailed extract from an autoethnographic account in Manchester is then provided to share its potential for conducting fieldwork in underrepresented and marginalized places at night.

What are the applications and implications for such an approach in terms of design? The complexity of contemporary urbanism and the diversity of people it can often represent suggests we need new methods to articulate how its spaces are used by different people at different times, and this is particularly relevant at night. Urban spaces, especially those outside of brightly lit city centres, may be subject to various forms of temporary demarcation, occupation, and contestation. While access and equality, or the lack of these, are often visible during the daytime because we can literally see them or identify their absence, after dark this becomes less obvious and harder to ascertain. This is not simply a matter of visual observation but also because the needs and motives of various people at night may be distinct from those during the daytime, even in exactly the same urban space. Despite an extensive history of working with the coexistences of light and dark, the practices of architecture, urban design, and urban planning have increasingly tended towards illuminated homogeneity where the built environment at night is concerned.

This paper has shown that experiences within the city after dark are situated and relational. Vitally so. Thus, if we are to account for the diversity of a city's personal geographies and encounters then we need to find suitable approaches for studying them and understanding what they can tell us about the important yet often latent ways in which the urban night is experienced. By understanding how nightscapes are used differently by various people, it is intended to contribute to a thick description that might usefully challenge existing approaches to designing the city at night by embracing its distinctiveness from the daytime and working with darkness, rather than against it. The dynamics of the nocturnal city can thus be supported through an ongoing process that adopts a more temporally sensitive approach to architecture, urban design, and urban planning (Gwiazdzinski 2015). Using the nocturnal praxis described in this paper, I have attempted to provide some initial forays into ways through which we might document and communicate the underrepresented and marginalized places of the city after dark. By gaining insight into how and why spaces are used at night and by whom, architecture, urban design, and urban planning

practices can establish appropriate design values that are specific to context and the dynamics of the city after dark. I also contend that it is in the city at night where we can find fertile opportunity for imagining how places can change. I have previously discussed in detail how the urban night offers “sites for experimentation and imagination, new conceptualizations and visions” (Dunn 2020b: 165). This is important because visions for place are currently dominated by representations of clean, green, and daylit urban environments that say very little about how people actually live and work in cities, overlooking the temporal qualities of place. By contrast, nocturnal imaginaries are essential as a means of articulating how and why the future of the city after dark might be shaped, and by whom.

Through focussing on its specific spaces, streets, and micro-geographies rather than trying to comprehend the city as a whole, the approach offered in this paper deliberately attempts to engage with the vitalism of the urban ‘everynight’, that is those mundane aspects of the presences and rhythms that co-produce it, rather than as a highly (over-) illuminated spectacle. The nocturnal praxis presented in this work is envisaged to feed into principles and practices for Dark Design and support dark infrastructures by generating empirical data as part of an evidence base that can inform decision making and, in turn, the design outcomes for urban places at night. To conclude, it is clear that further work needs to be done to examine how this ethnographic data can be translated into a set of criteria that supports the different access requirements of a diverse population living and working at night in an equitable manner. While this lies beyond the scope of this paper, it has shared its theoretical framing and methodology to demonstrate how existing darker nightscapes that usually reside outside of brightly lit city centres provide different people with various opportunities to support their activity and movement through the urban night. As light pollution now presents a global challenge, recognizing the diversity of interplay between light and dark is critical in moving towards an overall goal where its impacts on diverse human and non-human bodies can be tackled in a local and situated way. For this to be effective and enable us to rethink and redesign the urban night, we need new nocturnal imaginaries that are plural, diverse, and situated. Being able to account for the alternative knowledges and understandings of different relationships and values across the city after dark will support the production of nocturnal imaginaries that can shape the urban night and vice versa.

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