

[heading] Cities of Light

[Streamer 1] At night, cities look like brain synapses or computer chips

[Streamer 2] Modern, energy-efficient lighting is making these photographs possible, and beautiful

[Introduction] An editorial assignment on psychology and coincidence led photographer Vincent Laforet to fulfil his dream of capturing aerial photographs of cities by night. These images, collated in a new book, AIR, demonstrate how lighting is changing our cities for the better.

What is the AIR Project?

The AIR project was born out of an assignment in 2014 on psychology and coincidence. I proposed that cities at night looked like brain synapses or computer chips from high altitude. The photos were published online and people (*40 million so far and counting*) seem to have this visceral reaction to them.

Think about when you're on Fifth Avenue looking up at skyscrapers all around you. You feel small, insignificant. But, when you're up in the air looking down on these cities, you suddenly realize how much more *connected* we are.

Why did you choose to take them at night rather than in the day?

I have been waiting twenty-seven years to take photographs of cities at night. Every time I land in a new city, I'd see these scenes out of the window and wished I could capture them. It's just been impossible until now; we're at a time when the cameras are able to photograph this much low light from a helicopter in a way they couldn't even two years ago. That's why no one has done this before, and it's what has allowed me to do it now.

Lighting at night is essential to the series. Cities in the day are a mass of buildings and concrete. At night, you feel this pulse, this energy, coming from these lights as though the city is a living organism. And this comes at an interesting time – most cities are evolving into alternative, modern lighting, like the more efficient LED lights.

And what does this change in lighting mean for the cities and for the photographs?

Had we shot this assignment a few years ago, it would not have looked the same. Were we to shoot it a few years from now it wouldn't look the same either, because the cities will have been transferred over to these new lights.

London is a good example of this. I first shot London in 2008, and it looked utterly lackluster; it was mostly dark, with a bit of tungsten light, a little fluorescent.

But now, with the newer, brighter lights, a lot of which are daylight-balanced, London is full of these incredibly rich blues. You're seeing a cornucopia of colors – tungsten, sodium vapor, fluorescent green and magenta, but mostly you're seeing those daylight-balanced bulbs that, in relation to those, are blue. These photographs show us lights that are always there but, because our eyes automatically adjust to them, we don't see them.

Is each city different depending on the lighting?

Cities like New York and London are very bright in the modern parts. Piccadilly Circus and Time Square are hugely bright and colorful. Whereas Berlin hasn't yet modernized its lighting so is maybe four times darker, which makes it difficult to photograph. Barcelona has moved some lighting to the new, modern LED lighting, so you can see the history of the city, the modernity. And in places like L.A., you can even see socio-economic divides where the richer areas have modern lighting, and the poorer areas have older lights. You can still see East and West Berlin through the different levels and quality of illumination.

How do these different light sources influence the images you capture?

These images are all about the lighting: The move to new, energy efficient bulbs has made these images possible. Three or four years ago, you'd fly over a mostly yellow dark, almost depressing city, all gloomy and orange. But this new lighting is much more daylight-balanced and full of life. It gives you energy.

I think we're at the apex for lighting in terms of beauty. This is the perfect time – a lot of

these lights and colors will disappear in a few years in most major metropolitan cities, because the sheer energy saving of modern lighting solutions is impossible to ignore. And that's a good thing.

And what about the architecture of a city? The materials, the styles of building in a city, do they transform the images?

Architecture is a big factor. Some architects use light more than others. Some buildings, like London's Gherkin, or new the World Trade Tower, radiate light. Some reflect light, and some architects project light on to the buildings.

But it's mostly the design of the city you appreciate the most. For example, in Barcelona you can see the history of the city in the design, in the grid, and it's pretty fascinating. What's also amazing is that certain cities, like Las Vegas, really look exactly like computer chips. I mean, identical. You couldn't tell it apart from an image of a computer chip.

So was Las Vegas your favourite city to shoot?

It's impossible to pick a favourite. London was the biggest surprise. If you look at a map of London it's best described as chaotic and, when I'd flown over before, I'd been unimpressed. But, perhaps because of Olympics-related modernization, London was unbelievably impressive at night.

Chicago is another one: You fly over Chicago and can see Downtown is overwhelmingly sodium vapor lighting. It's very vibrant, but you see endless rows of lights for miles and you can see how much the lighting is bringing life to this city.

What is the message you'd like to convey through these photographs?

We're all much more connected than we realize. In this digital world, there's a weird artificial distance and we forget the world is smaller than we think. We have a lot more similarities than differences, and borders are quite artificial.

Nowhere is this more apparent than up in the air. When you photograph these cities at night, you see this vibrancy, these corridors, avenues and streets that look like pulsating veins of blood, full of energy.

We are all part of a much bigger system that is also smaller than we realize. We are all connected and we all share, and share responsibility for, our world.

What is light for you?

Along with breath, light is life. Light is life and energy. The world wouldn't turn if it was in darkness, and plants wouldn't grow.

And it's the very basis of photography - the capture of light. It's the foundation of the image, of everything we see.

What does the future hold for the AIR Project?

I want to photograph Paris. I had permission, but last minute there was some event that meant we couldn't do it. As a French citizen, not being able to photograph the City of Lights hurts!

In Iceland, there's an island near Reykjavik that is quite isolated, a core of light surrounded by darkness. That would be great to capture.

And, of course, I have yet to photograph cities in Africa, which could be incredible.

This doesn't need to end; we can keep going, photographing cities around the world, showing the different types of development and lighting. This project can continue to show us how cities appear at night and how they take on a totally new dimension, which is fascinating.

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