Reflections on Richard Kelly's Landscape Lighting

Linnaea Tillett, Ph.D., with Kate Gardner

To reflect upon Richard Kelly's landscape lighting engenders a somewhat speculative frame of mind. Kelly himself never treated landscape lighting as a subspecies of illuminating art. But, from archival material I've gleaned some clues as to how he addressed the particular discipline we've come to call landscape lighting. I tender this essay in the spirit of sparking further research and discussion on this topic.

As a working designer who specializes in landscape lighting, my concern is not only the historical Kelly, but what he may offer us today. Similar to Kelly in his time, we find ourselves in great transition, with new technology presenting new possibilities. But today, landscape lighting faces a tall order—it must be functional, evocative, and synchronized with urgent efforts to use less electricity and limit light's negative ecological consequences.

In this chapter, I want to tease out aspects of Kelly's approach that have been less discussed, but offer insight into his historical contributions and possible directions for the future.

Importantly, Kelly demonstrated a prescient awareness of the critical relationship between light's effect and affect. As a lighting designer who is also trained as an environmental psychologist, I am struck by his sophisticated understanding of the complex interplay between visual and psychological consequences of lighting.

In the 1950s, Kelly famously coined the terms 'focal glow', 'ambient luminescence' and 'play of brilliants'. These terms have sometimes been "referred to as 'three kinds of light'"[1]. But in a 1958 interview, Kelly indicates that he was actually talking about our responses to light:

> *…it must be clarified that the primary reason for establishing these categories is that they are significant in the immediate visual appreciation of the scene; and secondarily, they're significant in terms of human reaction.*[2]

I present here an exploration of this interplay of perception and emotion in Kelly's lighting for two different types of landscape: his small, domestic projects, which are oriented more (but not solely) towards 'visual appreciation'; and his ideas for an urban redevelopment plan that articulated his great concern for 'human reaction'. I also look at Kelly's writings on this dynamic and conclude with a proposal of how Kelly's conception of light offers a potential new direction in landscape lighting.

Landscape Close Up: A Perceptual Template

Kelly developed architectural lighting during a period when glass walls became the signature of modernist design. With technological advances in building materials, architects reconsidered the visual relationship between outside and inside. Kelly followed this with a reconsideration of the distinction between inside and outside light. This relationship is famously seen in Phillip Johnson's Glass House and beautifully dealt with by Phyllis Lambert in 'Stimmung at Seagrams'[3].

These large glass expanses presented Kelly with the need and the opportunity to create a luminous field for nighttime viewing. The solutions pioneered at the Glass House, became a prescription that is still in use today:

[1] Wright, H.; Is Lighting Architecture?; Progressive Architecture; September 1958; Pg. 179.
[2] Ibid. Kelly quote.
[3] Lambert, P., *Stimmung at Seagrams*; Grey Room 20, Summer 2005.

It's ridiculous to put in a glass wall and then cover it up as soon as its dusk. First you have to make the night brighter outside than in: and since you can't light up the whole outdoors, you illuminate the area most important to our seeing habits. That means the ground immediately outside as we look down more than we look up. This carries the eye along the plane of the floor right through the glass, and having done that, you light a significant object—perhaps a tree or a shrub-to complete the picture.[4]

Kelly designed panoramic scenes for observation from inside the comfort of one's home. Sofas, chairs and dining tables were arranged so that people could view the landscape as though it were a stage. Picking up on Johnson's description of this passive landscape as 'wallpaper', Kelly prescribed "us[ing] the terrace and garden as 'wallpaper' to ornament, enlarge, or even furnish the interior"[5]. In keeping with this scenic presentation, the light sources were situated so as not be seen from inside the house.

Kelly deployed exterior lighting in service of the interior experience. By grazing the outside of the glass and illuminating key moments in the landscape, he made the glass transparent and the surrounding landscape (or an abridged version of it) visible. Further, his exterior lighting contributed to interior illumination. Spotlights mounted on the underside of the eaves "showered their beams down to the ground immediately around the house, which then reflected a soft glow indoors[6]".

This clever scheme also acted as an exterior drapery that protected those inside from prying eyes, according to visitors[7]. We might speculate that Kelle achieved this through an elegant use of 'veiling reflection'—where vision is blocked by light reflecting off a specular surface. Kelly may have bounced exterior lighting off the glass in such a way as to obscure the vision of casual passersby.

Kelly used this method in many a private home sequestered in the woods. But he also developed successful variations of inside/outside lighting for public spaces in New York City. At the Museum of Modern Art, he again worked with Johnson. Together with

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[4] Nicholson, A.; *Mr. Kelly's Magic Light*; Saturday Evening Post; July 1958; Pg 64. Kelly quote.
[5] Kelly, R.; *Garden Lighting*; House & Garden; July 1956; Pg 54.
[6] Nicholson; *Mr. Kelly's Magic Light*; Pg 61.
[7] Ibid; Pg 64.

landscape consultant James Fanning, they made the museum's sculpture collection into an 'outdoor living room'[8]. Kelly also accomplished a domestic feeling around the exterior of the venerable Frick Collection in the midst of a residential neighborhood. Instead of floodlighting the building as a public monument, he selected key moments in the garden for theatrical treatment that interplayed with light glowing from the tall many-paned windows. As in the private landscapes of glass houses, he was attentive to the relationship between exterior and interior, but here he reversed the technique.

Kelly was a master at manipulating our patterns of seeing—what he termed "illuminat[ing] the area most important to our seeing habits"[9]. From the inside, Kelly's illuminated landscapes drew the eye out into the scenery. From the outside, the glowing interiors captivated viewers with a suggestion of the building's interior life.

Kelly's approach continues to be a template for lighting designers looking to create these same perceptual effects. I am struck by how similar some of my own lighting layouts are to his 1960 lighting plan for the Sonnabend's private landscape.

Photographs of Kelly's artful marriage of interior and exterior, spectacle and domesticity, theatre and architecture are far too few, and most are black and white. But the lyrical words of one journalist writing of the Glass House bring a vision of his composition to our mind's eye:

> …*when you approach the property at night and great sweeps of light become visible over acres of landscape. The house is a gleaming rectangle at the heart of this outdoor illumination, with the interior obscured by reflections from the glass walls. Yet I felt shielded and secure once I stepped in through the doorway and entered Johnson's home.*[10]

Urban Space: Approaching the Emotional City

In 1970, late in his career, Kelly consulted on a redevelopment project in downtown Norfolk, Virginia. The program called for a redesign of the water front, a new

[8] Anonymous; *Museum Garden is an Outdoor Space for Living;* Architectural Forum; July 1953; Pg 136.
[9] Nicholson; *Mr. Kelly's Magic Light*; Pg 64. Kelly quote.
[10] Ibid.; Pg 61.

civic axis/mall, parks, historical buildings, and residential housing. Although the project was never implemented, a transcript of his discussion with the client provides a window into his skillfully nuanced approach to illuminating a modern city.

While detailing numerous instances of how the city should look at night, he also constantly refered to how he wanted people feel. For example, the mall is "largely illuminated all the way… mak[ing] a focal element in the heart of the city[11]". However, it should not "so bright that you feel uncomfortable[12]".

Kelly's comments continually swung between a birds-eye-view of the entire area to detailed descriptions of how to light (or not to light) a particular building or park. This constant shifting of perspective seems related to his desire to both distinguish and unify disparate elements, and to highlight the role of changing scale as one travels through the city.

> *I see some variation in lighting intensities though I would like to have the entire thing fairly light all the way, though not to outshine the domes in intensity.*[13]

> *I certainly would not want the light to be equal at all points because that would reduce the sense of scale of the dome itself and would also reduce its magnificence.*[14]

Within the flurry of detail, Kelly returned again and again to the connective role that lighting must play—to create a sense of wholeness—bringing together small, medium and large buildings, the parks and streets between them, and the project's different sections. "But the mall must be the thing that people feel and not any one piece of it," he said.[15]

Kelly addressed many specific elements, including historic buildings. Before lighting a building exterior, he wanted to see the "tracery of column lines and buttresses

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[11] *Lighting Downtown Norfolk;* Transcript of dialogue between Richard Kelly and Errol Adels; August 24, 1970; Pg 9.
[12] Ibid.; Pg 3.
[13] Ibid.; Pg 3.
[14] Ibid.; Pg 6-7.
[15] Ibid; Pg 9.

which will be seen in silhouette[16]". He counsels his client to "balance the general illumination with sources of light which emanate from the buildings[17]". As he did with the modern Seagram Building building[18], Kelly strongly advised against floodlighting the historic exteriors[19].

As for the area parks, Kelly said, "I don't want extremely intense light in park areas where I assume we will have seating units and pleasant places to pause. If we light a good bit of greenery it will add up to a lighted way that people feel[20]". He adamantly insisted that there be no "bright globes"[21], just invisible sources of greenery illumination.

It is important to note that Kelly's ideas were remarkably sensitive to site and city. His comments don't add up to a simple prescription for urban lighting—probably because there isn't one, or at least not a good one. Rather, Kelly's thoughts on Norfolk point to the possibility of better cities through his kind of passionate specificity—one that rejects traditional solutions in favor of more sensual and meaningful elucidation:

> *…this water inlet should not be considered as a series of reflection pools.… They are too pompous; they don't bear any relation to the original character of Norfolk. The purpose of this water penetration is to bring the original nautical character of Norfolk into the city… let the lighting dramatize the embankment.*[22]

The Theatrical Landscape: A Multi-Sensory Experience

Kelly's integration of his theatrical training into the lighting of architecture and landscape is well known. Much of the discussion has focused on the purely visual aspects of Kelly's lighting. To this valuable dialogue, I suggest adding another dimension imbedded within Kelly's theatricality.

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[16] Ibid.; Pg 7.
[17] Ibid.; Pg 6.
[18] In 1960, Kelly told Architectural Forum, "You don't just floodlight the façade after the building is complete and call it exterior lighting." For the metal and glass curtain-wall Seagram Building, he achieved a "tower of light" effect through a separately circuited interior lighting for night, with some incidental sparkle on the exterior.
[19] *Lighting Downtown Norfolk*; Pg 8.
[20] Ibid.; Pg 3.
[21] Ibid.; Pg 4.
[22] Ibid.; Pg 16-17.

In theatre, the designer sets up a series of lighting schemes that are moved through via a sequence of lighting cues. When a lighting technician "takes the cue" and changes the lighting, the stage transforms in tone, mood, and emotional and visible intensity—often without any change of scenery or cognizant realization by the audience.

Each lighting scheme (and the transitions between them) gives more than a visual experience to witnesses—it transforms their psychological states.

Kelly understood the power of light to affect our awareness at conscious and unconscious levels. After his site visit to the Lodge at the Rockefeller Estate, he wrote, "any lighting...must be distributed with such care, and the intensities controlled with such subtlety, that the resultant effect would be almost below the level of conscious awareness".

Kelly's mid-twentieth century intuition of the role of emotion on perception presaged what 21st century neurobiologists and neuropsychologists are only now beginning to substantiate. In Kelly's time, the brain was thought to be a fairly simple cognitive machine—information came in and went directly to the higher processing centers. What we now know is that information received through the eyes is also routed through the limbic system—a so-called 'emotional' brain that determines the relevance of information through a framework of habit, culture and desire.

Kelly is well known for giving us a language of light: "focal glow", "play of brilliants", and "ambient luminescence". These are expressions of multi-sensory experience, not merely architectural description.

In his 1952 seminal article "Lighting as an Integral Part of Architecture", he conveyed what he meant through a poetic accounting. His images are sharp, vivid, archetypal, and evocative of sensation and mood.[23]

Focal glow, Kelly said, was a "campfire of all time" or "the shaft of sunshine that warms the end of the valley". Through his words, we feel the sensation of light on skin, its tactility, proximity and warmth. This composite of familiarity goes far beyond the relationship of eye to object.

[23] Kelly, R.; *Lighting as an Integral Part of Architecture*; College Art Journal;1952; Pg 25.

The play of brilliants, Kelly called "Times Square at night." He encapsulated in one phrase the sensation of being out on the town—of celebrity, bright marquee lights, theatre and nightlife.

Ambient luminescence was a "foglight at sea in a small boat." He articulated a vastness, a quality of light that "minimizes the importance of all things and people".

Kelly was not only a designer. He had an extraordinary capacity to communicate the ineffable relationship between human beings and light. Surely, his ability to put words together in new ways and create new meanings played an important role in bringing architectural lighting into existence as a bona fide practice.

Potential Contributions to the Future of Landscape Lighting

> *I'm sure that the best we can do today will be inadequate tomorrow... I can logically project a great many techniques in lighting to improve people's lives or to make a house more beautiful…but it's all theory until we have the record of experience, which we are only beginning to write.*[24]

It's been over half a century since Kelly made this statement, and the demand for lighting has exponentially increased worldwide and continues to do so. The sheer quantity of it is far beyond anything he could have imagined. In his day, Kelly was already bothered "to think of all the energy we'd need, with present equipment, to give us the proper sort of artificial light."[25] But, innovator that he was, I like to think that he would be in the forefront of our efforts to develop both better technology and new practices of lighting that can meet the complex claims made on today's landscape illumination.

Kelly and his fellow lighting consultants emerged during a time when the technology of building materials and lighting equipment was radically changing. (He helped to design the equipment needed for his ground-breaking designs.) We live during a time of rapid and revolutionary technological change. Light is now flexible, portable, powdered, liquid and more energy-efficient.

[24] Nicholson; *Mr. Kelly's Magic Light*; Pg 65.
[25] Ibid.; Pg 64.

But, perhaps we would do well to listen to Kelly's caution about "This overwhelming development of technical devices to create and control light". He urged that we not lose sight of how a "device may be new, wonderful and ideal for its special purpose…but this purpose may be very small in the whole range of living activities".[26] Nowadays we are inundated with a range of technology alternatives that allow us to create nearly unlimited effects. However, while the individual sources may be more energy-efficient, with more and more lighting being installed, the net result is not. In addition, we are just becoming aware of the ecological consequences of over-lighting, which threatens to extinguish nocturnal species that play a critical role in the web of life sustaining us and our planet.

The question we face isn't just about energy, it's about light. We need not only better lighting technology; we need more thought in applying that technology, as Kelly seemed to urge. He intimated an approach to lighting geared not just to our eyes, but to our multifaceted lives. Lighting does more than just illuminate our surroundings. Light links our surroundings to us—to our psyche and our civic, poetic and emotional lives.

I would argue that Kelly's approach as communicated in his language points us towards a more sensitive, subtle and nuanced understanding of lighting—its effects and affects. With this kind of consideration, I believe that we could design with less light a luminous landscape of function, comfort and beauty.

[26] Kelly; *Lighting as an Integral Part of Architecture*; Pg 28.