

“Omnipresence” Weaponizes Light

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Imagine a blinding white floodlight aimed directly at your bedroom window. A cold, intense brightness that scours streets, structures, and people with oppressive glare and ominous shadows. Powered by noxious diesel generators that rumble endlessly, the light blazes through window shades and disrupts sleep – all night, every night.

Now imagine, in another part of the same city, neighborhoods with inviting illumination to welcome your presence. Light provides a reassuring balance of warm glow and gentle shadows. Attractive luminaires cast comfortable lighting on pathways for safe navigation. Walking home, you ease into a sense of wellbeing, without the feeling of being watched.

In New York City, the existing disparity between thoughtful outdoor lighting in affluent areas and the haphazard illumination of under-resourced communities has been intensified by the New York Police Department’s “Omnipresence” program. An attempt to provide alternative policing tactics after stop-and-frisk, the program was quietly initiated in 2014 without challenge from lawmakers or input from lighting experts. The NYPD placed 150 “temporary” floodlight towers in 15 public-housing developments across the city, each accompanied by police presence. Despite growing community concerns and occasional attention from the press, the number of “Omnipresence” light towers have more than quadrupled over the past eight years and have been integrated into the permanent arsenal of the city’s crime reduction tools. Worse yet, other municipalities are considering similar programs to weaponize lighting.

Since the implementation of the “Omnipresence” floodlights, public housing residents have struggled to find effective channels to advocate for their removal. In the meantime, these glaring beacons have come to visually define the homes of many New Yorkers. In Brooklyn’s Gowanus neighborhood, the floodlight towers aim directly at the brick facades of the NYCHA Red Hook Houses and into resident’s windows. Residents have raised legitimate concerns about the health impact of these floodlights; they report being unable to sleep and experiencing headaches. A resident of the Jacob Riis Houses in Manhattan described the floodlights as distracting sources of

intense glare that have the emotional effect of dulling everything they touch. She said, “I just don’t like how they make me feel. The neighborhood doesn’t feel good.”

Safe streets are a shared goal by communities and law enforcement alike. Thoughtful, well-designed street, sidewalk, and area lighting offers clear visibility for vehicular traffic and pedestrian navigation. Lacking any consideration for lighting design or visual quality, “Omnipresence” in fact makes streets feel less safe due to the abrupt contrast between intense light and deep shadow. It causes eye strain, interferes with facial recognition, and produces psychological and physical disorientation.

Taking advantage of institutional exemptions granted to the NYPD, the “Omnipresence” program outright ignores many New York City laws and ordinances designed to protect residents from environmental harm. The tower lighting significantly exceeds city, State, and industry standards for recommended brightness and uniformity for pedestrian sidewalks. The loud noise and exhaust created by the attached generators are in direct violation of NYC vehicular idling regulations. These transgressions come at a substantial cost to taxpayers. The budget required to continually refuel these diesel generators year after year far exceeds the long-term costs of installing permanent, well-designed street lighting.

In addition to being a direct source of noise and air pollution, “Omnipresence” lights contribute to the looming ecological issue of light pollution. Scientists link light pollution to insect decline and the death of millions of migrating birds, along with increased carbon emissions and disease. Excessive lighting disrupts sleep, harming physical and psychological health. Residents of neighborhoods impacted by “Omnipresence” have reported long-term stress and anxiety experienced from being unable to sleep, knowing that they must leave in the early hours of the morning for long subway and bus commutes to work. An exhaustive 2018 study by scientists from Harvard University, which followed 109,672 women over 14 years, found that women living in the most light-polluted areas had a 14% increased risk of breast cancer than those living in areas with low levels of light pollution. Research linking the impact of lighting on human and environmental health continues to build, adding weight to the need for more thoughtful, science-based applications of lighting technology as innovation accelerates.

The oppressive lighting of “Omnipresence” discourages social gatherings that foster community identity and build shared cultural values. It is a visual representation of environmental injustice. Black and Brown communities already suffer infrastructural racism from the pervasive effects of historic redlining and discrimination. The lack of intentionally designed and maintained lighting in these communities reflects the unjust distribution of public resources. “Omnipresence” underscores this absence with misapplied temporary surveillance lighting, making these multi-family housing areas look like crime scenes.

The justification for “Omnipresence” is crime suppression. In 2016, the city initiated an internal study to determine the effectiveness of the program. Researchers examined randomized data over three years during which the NYPD deployed an additional 397 light towers across 40 housing developments. The resultant working paper, “Can Deterrence Persist? Long-Term Evidence from a Randomized Experiment in Street Lighting,” was drafted by economists and criminologists. The findings indicate a 35% reduction in the nighttime index crime during the first six months in the vicinity of the lighting intervention and a 45% reduction estimated across the three-year span, apparently justifying the use of these floodlights. Without unquestionable separation of the effects of “Omnipresence” lights and the police presence that often accompanies them, the lighting-specific claims of the paper deserve to be challenged. This study fails to address collateral social and environmental damage caused by “Omnipresence” and concedes only in passing that “more research is needed on the long-term impacts of street lighting on public safety, derived from more traditional lighting interventions.” Unfortunately, without any clear opposition in view, “Omnipresence” tactics are being considered by other law enforcement agencies based on this study.

The study further neglects to acknowledge the real impact on people who live in neighborhoods where “Omnipresence” lights have become permanent fixtures. Residents have noted that, in their experience, the tower lighting “didn't deter shooting and getting robbed — [the lights] just dispersed the community.” As one person explained, “Everyone was kinda depressed because the lights hurt. The young people felt like the cops put the lights there to watch what they were doing. They did it without any input from the community. If you are going to do this to protect us, but without input... that isn't protection.”

Good, equitable lighting is a worthy investment, particularly when it benefits communities who have historically endured unjust lighting. If light is to be employed as an institutional tool that addresses and aids in crime deterrence, the answer must be better — not brighter — lighting. The lighting answer to crime reduction must arise from partnership with community members to better understand how they want to navigate the night. A truly effective lighting approach to making neighborhoods safer must find solutions that are rooted in community engagement, not imposed by law enforcement.

Light can amplify power or highlight a lack of it. Lighting technology is a resource that can be distributed justly or unjustly. “Omnipresence” does not offer cities an effective lighting solution to deter crime, only the precedent of misapplied lighting which damages both human health and environmental health. The use of light as a tool of oppressive surveillance has no place in neighborhoods, and must be challenged by policymakers and the public.

Omnipresence Images:



An “Omnipresence” light tower at Red Hook Houses turns on every evening.



The unit runs all night, discouraging outdoor activity and disrupting sleep.

Photos by Francesca Bastianini



The glaring beacon of “omnipresence” at Jacob Riis Houses.

Photo by Iris Ahn

For more background, consider:

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/28/us/lighting-study-new-york-study/index.html>

http://achalfin.weebly.com/uploads/8/5/4/8/8548116/lights_followup.pdf

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/the-controversial-floodlights-illuminating-new-york-citys-public-housing-developments>

<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/technology/surveillance-society-artificial-lighting-for-a-policed-public>

<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/right-to-light-illuminating-the-city>

<https://www.vqronline.org/essays-articles/2018/01/omnipresence>

<https://untappedcities.com/2018/03/07/cities-101-why-are-nypd-floodlights-illuminating-nyc-parks-and-housing-developments/>

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/z48j83/police-floodlights-are-unlikely-to-reduce-crime-but-could-harm-our-health>

<https://gothamist.com/news/do-nychas-80-million-crime-reducing-lights-actually-reduce-crime>