

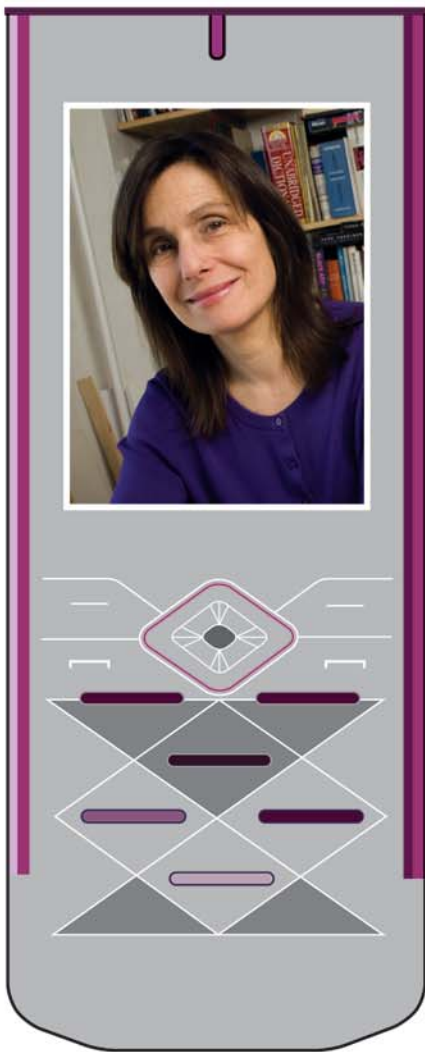
TEXT MESSAGE

art versus bling

sidewalks

magic lanterns

“My job is to inspire people to think of the night.”



Leni Schwendinger

answers a few questions on light design, inspiration, and process—using her thumbs.

JOB DESCRIPTION: To reverse the current perception that the daytime is the only time. My job is to inspire people to think of the night.

CURRENT PROJECTS: One is with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey for the bus ramps near Times Square. We're working on the Hoboken Ferry Terminal, interior and exterior, and the New York Botanical Garden, on their master plan plus lighting for the conservatory; and the East River Bridges Jewel-Light, our invention for bridge necklace lighting.

FIRST STEP ON A PROJECT: I approach design like an artist. It starts with research, from geographical and cartographical to the use of the site in history, aspirations, future use, and visitors. **LAST STEP ON A PROJECT:** Many of our projects have flexible aspects—that is, light that transforms or changes over time—so generally the last step is programming. Then you stand back and look at it.

HOW DO YOU BREAK A CREATIVE BLOCK? I'm a bather.

WHY DO YOU DO WHAT YOU DO? If I could create pure color suspended in air, I would pretty much have done everything I wanted.

EDUCATION: I went to the London Film School.

MENTOR: Ruth Lande Shuman, who runs Publicolor, a great nonprofit. She's also a color expert, and she works with at-risk teenagers in high schools.

WORLD-SAVING MISSION: To redefine the public realm that seemingly belongs to no one—like the sidewalks of New York City. To the citizen, the streets and sidewalks are not owned and not designed.

FIRST ACT AS “DESIGN CZAR”: We would proclaim vacant lots new zones for light and play.

DREAM TEAM: I did assemble it, and we came in second for a competition. It was Will Alsop, Arup, and us. Our project was pretty damn good, I think.

OFFICE CHAIR: It is a pure Ikea. It's more comfortable than the Staples one I had before.

OFFICE SOUND TRACK: Talvin Singh is really good. I'm a proponent of ambient music.

FAVORITE TCHOTCHKE: I have a narrow box of Bauhaus blocks on my desk.

MOST USEFUL TOOL: Black wrap. It's a lighting foil, like tinfoil, but it's stiff, holds its shape, and is black. You use it to control lights. It can take any form.

BOOKMARKS: Urban-news sites like Gothamist, community things, and associations like the National Audubon Society, every architect I'm interested in, and lots of material research

BEST PLACE TO THINK: Under my covers, in bed. It's a pretty creative space.

CURRENT READ: Martin Cruz Smith's Arkady Renko stories

SOMETHING OLD: My magic lantern

SOMETHING NEW: Blending urban design and lighting design

FAVORITE SPACE: Sidewalks of New York. They are available—to everybody.

GUILTY PLEASURE: A long evening at the El Quijote bar, at the Chelsea Hotel

UNDERRATED: Darkness

OVERRATED: Lighting, in some cases. When you weave that spell of description and then you see it, sometimes there's a real letdown.

LEARNED THE HARD WAY: My entire studio thought we should say the Coney Island Parachute Jump Illumination. Working in public design requires a lot of social and political communications skills. The Parachute Jump controversy over art versus bling reminds me that making sure we've smoothed the way and found the best solution for everyone is important in public design.

COMMAND-Z (UNDO): I was a rock 'n' roll electrician, and I remember coiling up the feeder cable, a really heavy copper cable, and thinking about the day when we wouldn't have any cables.

DREAM JOB: Lighting master planner for the city of New York

Photo, Kit Noble Photography; Illustration, Kara Sweeney