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LED Streetlights in Brooklyn Are Saving Energy but Exhausting Residents

MARCH 23, 2015

The Appraisal

By MATT A.V. CHABAN

The future is bright on the streets of New York. For Jolanta Benal and her neighbors in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn, it is far too bright.

"It feels like I'm in a strip mall in outer space," Ms. Benal said while sitting in her house on Horace Court last week. Light from outside was spilling into the living room, around the velvet drapes she replaced her sheer curtains with. "I don't want to come off as melodramatic, but it really is horrible," she said.

To some residents, the new lights make it feel as though a construction or film crew is working outside all night. Others liken the lights to a prison yard, or joke about alien abductions.

Yet the lights on the street are the same as they have ever been, but for a small alteration, part of a campaign by the city to make New York greener.

"Each day that goes by, there is more of them," Ms. Benal said. "There is nowhere to run and hide."

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There really is no escape: Within two years, all 250,000 streetlights in the city will have been replaced. The orange haze of sodium-vapor lamps will be gone from the nighttime city, eclipsed by the washed-out intensity of energy-saving light-emitting diodes.

The new LEDs may be environmentally sensitive, but they are also optically harsh.

“The old lights made everybody look bad,” said Christopher Stoddard, an architect, who lives at the corner of Fuller Place. “But these are so cold and blue, it’s like ‘Night of the Living Dead’ out there.”

“We’re all for saving energy,” his wife, Aida Stoddard, also an architect, said, “but the city can do so much better.”

A few blocks away, Rose Gallitelli taped up black garbage bags on her bedroom windows so that she could sleep. “They’re the heavy-duty kind,” she said.

The changeover began in October 2013, toward the end of the Bloomberg administration. Having replaced incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent curlicues in many city buildings, officials wanted to bring a similar transformation to the streets.

After testing LEDs on highways and in parks since 2011, the Transportation Department began the first neighborhood installations last month, bringing hundreds of new lamps to the Kensington and Windsor Terrace sections of south Brooklyn.

“With the city reducing its overall carbon footprint by 30 percent by 2030, at our agency, this is one of the biggest contributions we can make,” the first deputy commissioner of the Transportation Department, Lori A. Ardito, said. “We’re always looking for improvements and innovations we can make on the streets, whether it is bike lanes or new parking meters, and the new streetlights are part of that.”

The city is spending \$75 million on the new lights, embedded in LED-compatible “cobra head” fixtures affixed to existing light poles. Annually, they will

save \$6 million on energy costs and \$8 million on maintenance because LEDs last up to 20 years, two to four times as long as most sodium-vapor units.

“To the degree you can make the city’s operations more sustainable, it just pays so many dividends,” said the LED leader in the Bloomberg administration, Margaret Newman. But she said that had the city done a little more promotion of the new lights, especially in eco-conscious Brooklyn, they would have been more readily embraced.

Jim Knowles, a longtime resident sipping a beer at Rhythm & Booze, failed to see the value. “They think we’re mad?” he said. “They’re lucky they didn’t start in Park Slope.” The lights were glaring not only outside his favorite bar but also outside his home on 18th Street.

This is not a problem in New York alone.

Cities like Davis, Calif., and Seattle have struggled with new LEDs, too, though others, including Philadelphia and notoriously dark Detroit, have embraced them.

The problems with LEDs are hardly imagined, lighting experts said.

“People are right to complain about what we call ‘light trespass,’ ” said Paul Marantz, a lighting designer who has illuminated such landmarks as Studio 54, Grand Central Terminal and ground zero’s annual Tribute in Light. “Even though the yellow light of the sodium lamps didn’t render colors well, there was a warmth about them that’s missing from the new lights. And because of the way the LEDs are designed, it’s a much more directed light, with more glare.”

Yet the lights have their fans, like the bartender who was pouring Mr. Knowles’s drinks. “People still get harassed around here,” Paula Burke said in a thick Liverpudlian accent. “I feel so much safer walking to the train now.”

“What are you doing staring at the lights anyway?” she added.

Some said people should be used to the bright white glow, since it is so similar to the light emanating from smartphone and computer screens.