

DOWNTOWN EXPRESS

Flipping the light fantastic: Shifting, multicolored light show transforms Oculus interior into work of art

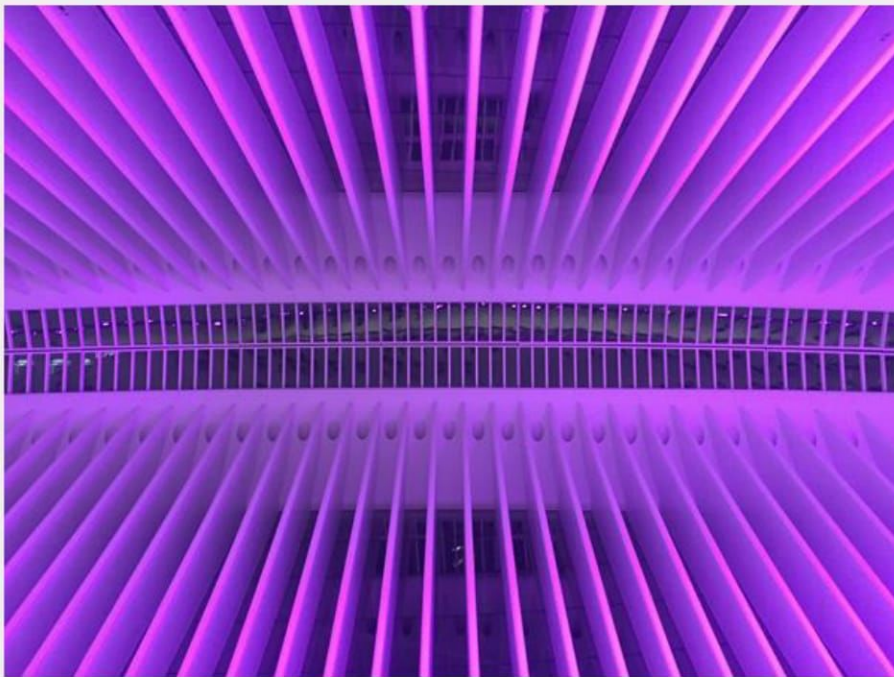


Photo by Dennis Lynch

By Dennis Lynch

This month the cavernous, angelically white Oculus has been transformed daily into a massive, multicolor art piece with the first-ever Oculus Holiday Lights installation running through the end of the year.

More than six dozen upward-pointing lights hang some 30 feet above the building's marble floors, bathing the upper expanse of Santiago Calatrava's celebrated transit hub in 4.6 million lumens of slowly shifting hues.

The designers, visual-light artists Susan Holland and Bentley Meeker, initially projected multicolored geometric patterns, but decided to scrap the patterns in favor of single colors after a test run. They wanted to enhance and emphasize the Oculus's grand architecture and felt a "radical attempt to transform any of the surfaces," would distract from that, Holland said.

“How could we respect the space but still shift the space?” she said. “After working through ideas of patterns, we decided a soft shift of color very gradually would speak to the elegance and grace of the building without distracting from it.”

Holland likened the feelings she has in the Oculus to the feeling of standing “at the edge of a mountain.”

“At one moment you feel tiny because the world is so enormous, but at the same time you feel enormous because of the landscape you’re seeing,” she said. “You feel tiny, because it feels kind of infinite, and at the same moment you kind of soar up and feel as big as the space and the lighting amplifies that.”

The lights slowly shift through a pallet of red, orange, violet, fuchsia, magenta, blue, and violet, using a complex color mixing system to render seamless transitions. Creating these beautiful light displays has always been Meeker’s *modus operandi*.

“I want people to be knocked out when they walk in and to want to sit there and watch this for however long,” he said. “For me, the quality of the light is most important, it’s totally the most important part of what I do, that really affects the experience.”

Meeker called it the most challenging project of his life, but also one of the most rewarding — and one he would do again in a heartbeat. It’s the first installation of its kind at the Oculus, which opened over the summer, so Meeker and Holland worked from scratch without any idea of what they could realistically accomplish — or get away with — in the space.

“I’m really proud of the way it looks,” he said. “I see people laying down with their camera’s pointing up in the middle of a train station. It’s really great, as someone who does things for private and corporate settings and for art installations on a fairly smaller scale. I don’t necessarily get that — no one is laying in the middle of 125th Street to look at the H in Harlem,” Meeker said, referring to one of his other projects.

Looking up at a deep blue from the center of the Oculus, teenager Kansan Davin Harvey said it created a tranquil and calming atmosphere. From what she said, Holland and Meeker succeeded enhancing the Oculus’ capacious interior.

“The art of architecture is the art of using space, I think it helps draw the eyes up. It makes it feel big,” she said.

Some of the colors might conjure up thoughts of blue snowflakes, the red costume of Old Saint Nick, or the orange glow of a menorah, but the “Oculus Holiday Lights” installation doesn’t particularly scream “holiday” — but that was the plan, according to the artists.

They didn’t choose the colors to represent any traditional holiday symbols and Westfield didn’t specifically ask for that either. If it weren’t for the wreaths hanging on the balconies underneath the lights, you wouldn’t be able to tell what time of the year it is. Holland said they wanted to create something “secular in the best sense of the word,” and focused on the “thoughts and feelings” of the holidays rather than their traditional material representations.

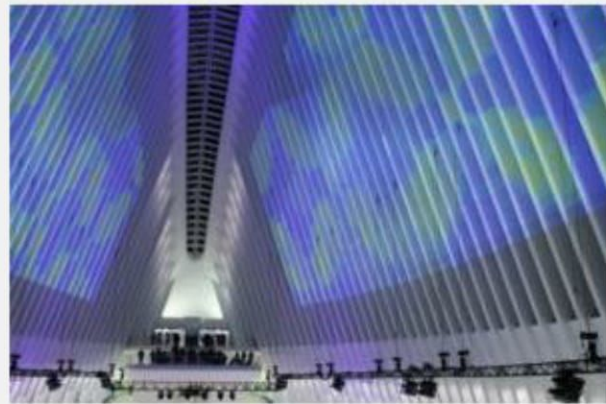


Photo by Tony Falcone

Visual light artists Susan Holland and Bentley Meeker, originally experimented with using geometric patterns in their Oculus Holiday Lights installation, which runs through the end of the month, but decided to go with simple, slowly shifting color washes that let the building’s architecture provide the texture.

“I think that part of what we recognize about the holidays, the same with birthdays, is that it’s a time to pause and look at things differently,” she said. “Thinking outside yourself has to do with the holidays. Of course, lights don’t make you think of others, but it makes you stop and look at something bigger than yourself.”

The Oculus Holiday Lights are on from 3:30 pm to 11:30 pm through December 31.



Westfield / Bjorg Magnea

The colored lights can also be seen from the outside once the sun goes down.