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# LUMINESCENT DESIGN

*Light installation sculptor Cliff Garten finds inspiration in the ecology of space for his public design works*

*Text by Christopher Moraff*

**Spanish architect César Portela identifies** two types of lighting: good lighting, which “illuminates, clarifies, stimulates,” and bad lighting, which “dazzles, confuses and produces weariness.” For California-based light design sculptor Cliff Garten, light is one of several devices he uses to translate his vision of place into large-scale public art projects meant for the masses.

“I’m interested in creating a sculpture that operates at the true scale of the city,” says Garten. “It’s sort of like a body that you throw out there and the collective consciousness throws its expectations on it, and you have to make something that’s strong enough to have its own integrity when all of that stuff that happens in public *happens*.”

An intuitive artist and prolific craftsman, Garten began his career as a landscape architect, but for the past decade he has been creating large public installations that emphasize stainless steel and natural and artificial light. “I think that I’ve always been interested in the way that light interacts with material and changes [it],” he says.

Garten works out of his state-of-the-art studio in Venice, CA, and has completed 50 public projects throughout the US and Canada, many of which are collaborations between architecture, landscape architecture and engineering. Derek Pogany, an LED solutions consultant that works with Garten, says the artist designs his work to maximize the transformative quality of light. “We see a piece of sculptured steel in the daytime, and we see all of Cliff’s detail and these very intricate designs. Adding light to that design just makes it that much more interesting,” he says. “Different shapes come out and it reveals different facets of his work. And that’s what really stands out.”

That stand-out quality can be seen in two of Garten’s most enduring public installations: *Avenue of Light*, in Fort Worth, TX, and *Sen-*

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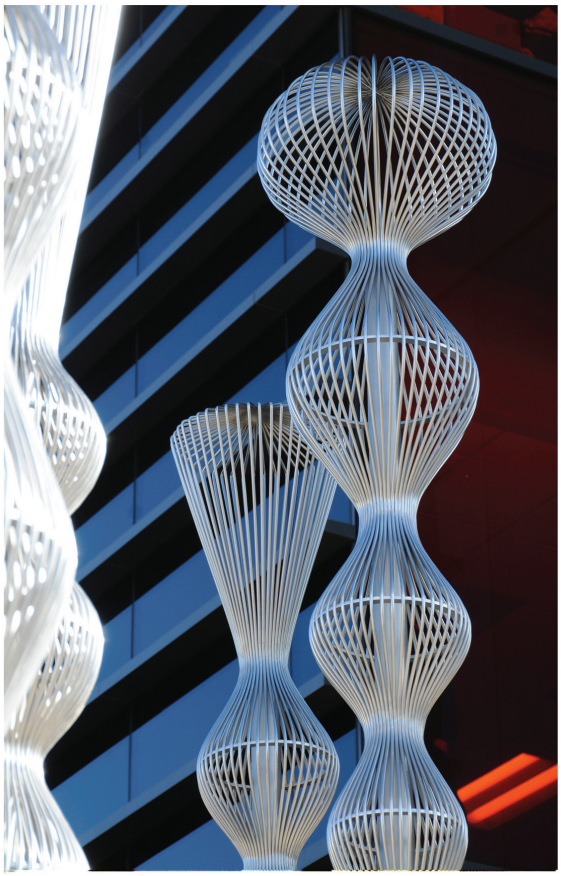

"I've always been interested in the way that light interacts with materials and changes it."
—CLIFF GARTEN

*Facing page: Cliff Garten's* Avenue of Light *is composed of six independent towers set on concrete pedestals. The towers run a half-mile along Lancaster Ave in downtown Fort Worth, Texas*
*Above:* Sentient Beings, *Los Angeles*

*tient Beings* in North Hollywood. Avenue of Light is composed of six 36-foot sculptures evenly spaced along a half-mile stretch of a highway median. Each piece is constructed using 100 stainless-steel plates designed to reflect attributes of the surrounding architecture. During the day, the sunlight plays on the steel, while at night the pieces are bathed in saturated hues of red, blue and green.

In Los Angeles, the human-like curves of Sentient Beings, a cluster of eight structures constructed from electro-polished, stainless-steel rods, evoke an image of dancers in motion, at once supple and rooted. The piece sits in the NoHo Arts District of the city and was commissioned through the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA/LA) Art Program, which requires developers working with financial participation from the Agency to contribute one percent of development costs to art projects. Garten was selected from a list of more than 20 qualified applicants.

"It's a timeless piece; there is an elegance to it," says Susan Gray, cultural planner for the CRA/LA Art Program. "Sometimes with public art it's a challenge to create something that's going to last the test of time, and this piece, I really believe, will stand up. It's a great standalone piece and a great complement to the site."

Other projects of Garten's include *Nano Plaza*, at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and *Harbor View*, in Long Beach, CA. But wherever his work resides, Garten's particular genius is his ability to create structures that look like they belong. He attributes this to his sensitivity to the totality of experience, or what he calls the "ecology of space."

"I read a site very quickly and I respond very viscerally. My work is a response to a site and to particular conditions. It grows out of the conditions of the site as a functional program, the ecology of a place, the social history of a place, the scale of a place."

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*Each tower in Cliff Garten's* Avenue of Light *is made up of 100 stainless steel plates that reflect sunlight by day and focused beams of colored LED lights at night.*

## THE BASICS OF LED LIGHTING

Unlike traditional incandescent light bulbs that use a heated tungsten filament to produce light or fluorescent lights that rely on charged gas particles, a light-emitting diode (LED) consists of a chip of semiconducting material treated to create a structure called a p-n (positive-negative) junction. According to the US Department of Energy, "When connected to a power source, current flows from the p-side or anode to the n-side, or cathode, but not in the reverse direction. Charge-carriers (electrons and electron holes) flow into the junction from electrodes. When an electron meets a hole, it falls into a lower energy level, and releases energy in the form of a photon (light)." LEDs are touted for their energy efficiency and long life, which, according to LED consultant Derek Pogany, can be up to 70,000 hours.