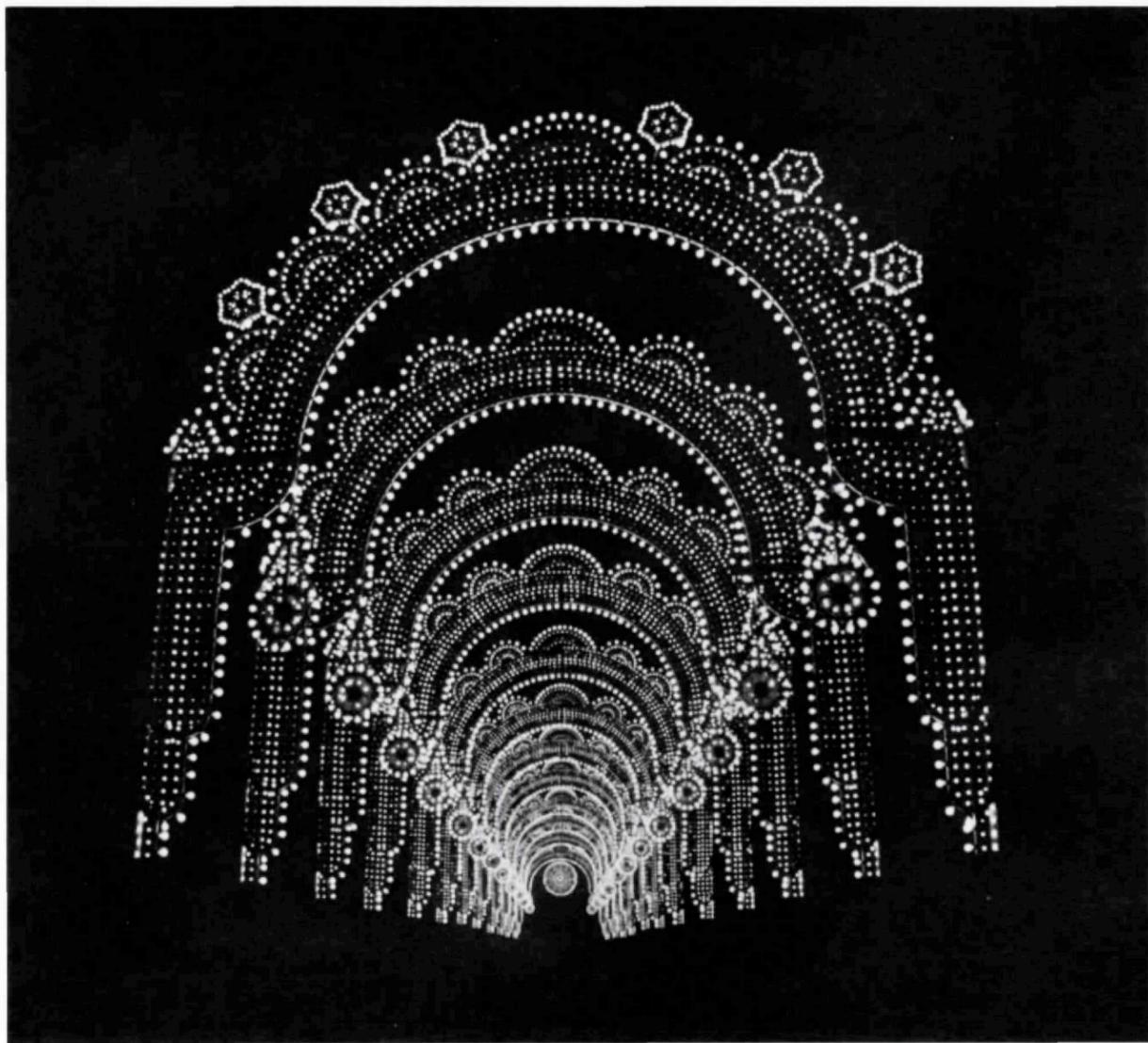


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George O. Jackson

Luminarie, Hermann Park, Valerio Festi, designer

Illuminations of the Ephemeral City

Bruce C. Webb

It's 9 PM on a Monday evening in downtown Houston, and something is going on. To the 9,000 or so travel agents who are in town for a convention, it must seem that something is not quite right. After all, the book on Houston has it that downtown is *nowhere* after dark. Even with all the big-draw performance centers grouped together – the Alley, Jones Hall, the Music Hall, the Wortham – the patrons slip in invisibly from underground parking lots and leave the same way as though they were being delivered like city utilities in hidden conduits. If you are looking for a crowd in the evening you better head out to the bright lights of one of the suburban shopping centers rather than risk the feelings of fear and loathing in the nighttime milieu of downtown Houston.

Yet here it is a Monday night and the usually invisible plateau of Holcombe Plaza is fairly swarming with a party crowd basking in the spectral glow of a light show which looks like it has been mistakenly redirected from its intended destination at Astroworld. The crowd spills over into other downtown spaces – City Hall Square, Tranquility Park – where similar displays have relined the city for nighttime use. Cars circle the block at a crawl, passengers craning to catch a glimpse. Someone passing through might wonder if a band of clandestine, metaphorical pranksters had snuck into the city and were working on a diabolical plan to convert the stern-faced, functional city into a frolic.

The real culprits were the Italian government and their Ministry of Tourism and Performing Arts who gave Houston one of the best Octobers ever. The small spectacle they included in the downtown plazas was showing just how

easy it is to get Houstonians out after dark. Valerio Festi delighted the city with his baroque fireworks display for the September opening of the George R. Brown Convention Center. Set to music provided by the Shepherd School Symphony Orchestra, Festi's fireworks lit up the nighttime sky with a gracefulness as different from our multi-megaton, Fourth-of-July power shows as an NFL blitz is from a performance of Swan Lake. Here Festi had frozen his pyrotechnic art in a collection of light sculptures set up in five locations around the city and had fashioned his nighttime magic into a more prolonged event.

The sculptures, on view from 12-18 October, were an enticing combination of the tawdry and the magnificent: thousands of tiny colored lights strung out along rickety wooden frames created fantastic pointilistic drawings in the night, recalling in their shapes architectural themes and ceremonial banners of the traditional *luminarie* used to celebrate saint's days and town festivals in the Publia region of southern Italy.

The displays in City Hall Square, Tranquility Park, and Holcombe Plaza made an illuminated, strolling circuit in the downtown; a fourth near Miller Outdoor Theatre provided the most surreal experience – a procession of lighted arches in forced perspective, leading from nothing to nowhere, incongruously discovered in the terrifying darkness of Hermann Park. The smaller crowd at this location was more reverential and studious. One man, who was obviously an architect, was pacing off the spacing between the arches and explaining to anyone who would listen how the diminishing sequence in their

spacing caused the procession to appear longer in one direction and shorter in another.

For seven days, Festi's lights redefined a portion of the city, lining ordinary and familiar spaces with an extraordinary collection of tiny, lighted jewelry. It was a delight to know that the grey-suited, self-important business buildings and formal spaces in the downtown could be glitzed up and made into characters in a street entertainment. It reminded me of my hometown in Pittsburgh where the meanest looking houses in the neighborhood frequently were decked out with the biggest extravaganza of Christmas lights and decorations, and for a short time the streets were transformed into a Christmas village. Even when the lights came down and things fell back to normal, there was anticipation of the next Christmas and the renewal of the ritual of transmutation.

Festi's lights showed the magnifying potentials of the smallest scale of things and the catalyzing powers of the transitory event. I have always had the belief that a feeling for the ephemeral is a big part of the Houston psyche – a city that prizes events more than places. In Houston things are where they are for no symbolic reason – the price of a piece of real estate or the facilitation of business dictates location. Like most modern cities, Houston is a diagram, a calculus of locations. But the *spirit of place* is carried around like a medicine show – set up, taken down, moved to a new location – subtly redefining the urban maps we all carry around in our heads. The most spectacular example of place being worked over by an event was Jean-Michel Jarre's super-sized concert two years ago, which used a big chunk of the downtown skyline as a stage.

The audience stretched for three miles along Allen Parkway, bringing the city's form into a momentary conjunction with itself as a work of performance art. And all those things lost to pernicious function and utility – lights, energy, tall buildings, even the highways – became again pure phenomena.

Musing about these things has led me to a modest proposal. Perhaps we should stop making our public places and our public monuments in concrete and steel. We have enough of them already. Instead, let's set to work turning the city into a continually evolving festival, one which will catalyze and recipher what is already there. Give the local artists and architects, and sometimes an invited outsider, the chance to make the city over and over again with projects which reuse, re-view, and re-line the functional city. Then when someone asks for the locations of Houston's great civic monuments and ceremonial spaces, the city tour guides, having lived through no periods of great beliefs or enduring accomplishments, would refer him to both a map and a calendar and tell him he missed a great one last week, but if he hurries he may still be able to catch something going on in the parking lot at Almeda Mall.

Festi's lights, and the real gift of the Italians, is a little metaphor for the spirit of Houston, a city much like Italo Calvino might have written about in *Invisible Cities*: a place that never repeats itself and is never seen to be quite the same. ■