THAT MEANINGFUL LIGHT
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO MEANING IN LIGHTING DESIGN

ABSTRACT
As lighting design matures into a stand-alone profession recognized globally, lighting designers find themselves compelled to reach beyond the functional aspects of lighting and join other design fields in a conscious intent to shape spaces which audiences assimilate as meaningful.

Responding to this challenge, the present study correlates the psychological processes that lead to the cognitive attribution of meaning with the perceptual aspects of light, aiming to outline a phenomenology of lighting, as means of enhancing the human experience within illuminated environments. Following an investigation of the available literature on the phenomenology of both meaning and perception, the thesis proposes a comprehensive structure of meaning accessible through lighting design, organized into three interrelated layers.

Thus, light gains meaning as survival factor catering to basic needs, as choreographer for sensual experiences triggering affects and as storyteller portraying our existential values. The study expands on how these three layers of meaning can be reached by designers who shape spaces with light, offering a perspective on the ability of lighting to impact human consciousness, which is the ultimate commander of meaning.

THE QUESTION
Out of the many spaces of light that triggered positive human response, can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that justifies the meaning identified by people in their illuminated surroundings?

METHODOLOGY

STRUCTURE OF MEANING ACCESSED THROUGH LIGHTING DESIGN

CONSECRATES MEANING
AWAKES CONSCIOUSNESS
LOWERS SURVIVAL ANXIETY
MEANING ACCESSED THROUGH
BASIC HUMAN NEEDS

**Light for Sight**
Identify stimuli for immediate needs

**Light for Orientation**
Set expectations in relation to the space

**Light for Safety**
Legibility of space

**Response**
Lower survival anxiety

Humans access a first layer of meaning through lighting when light supports survival and helps us see, orientate or feel safe. The positive response at this stage implies that we feel less anxious about survival and more open to other layers of meaning encoded in space.

MEANING ACCESSED THROUGH
TRIGGERED AFFECTS

**Affects**
Moods + Emotions

**Mediator**
The body, through the 5 senses

**Light as multi-sensorial stimulus**

Light becomes a stimulus for:
- hearing and touch, by recalling perceptual elements primarily used by these senses
- taste and smell, by triggering the memory of stimuli perceived through these senses

**Light as sensual stimulus**

Light becomes a sensual stimulus by rejuvenating the senses and reinforcing them with a joy of perception

**Response**
Awoken consciousness

A second layer of meaning is accessed when light arouses affects. The perception of light is joined by affective responses when light becomes a multi-sensorial stimulus and choreographs sensual experiences of space. Changes in emotional states awake consciousness, triggering a positive response by making people aware of the surroundings.

MEANING ACCESSED THROUGH
EXISTENTIAL VALUES

**Existential Values**
Identity, Beliefs, Aspirations, etc.

**Mediator**
Consciousness

**Light as Story-teller**
Lighting expresses existential values by telling a story about one or more coordinates of our existence

**Coordinates of Existence**
Extrinsic dimensions that humans internalize and that shape our existence

**Space**
Centrality, Path, Rhythm, Hierarchy

**Time**
Past, Present, Future

**Context**
Nature, Culture

**Community**
Interaction, Integration

**Response**
Permanent imprint of meaning

The third layer of meaning is accessed through existential values. When light tells a story about the coordinates of our existence, it in fact targets our deepest values, mirroring our identity, beliefs or ideals, strengthening our relationship with the illuminated surroundings and enhancing our feeling of existence. The positive response here is the permanent imprint of meaning of space into human consciousness.