

*City Lights: Illuminating the American Night.* By John Jakle. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. x + 292 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, tables. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN 0-801-86593-X.

Reviewed by Craig Wollner

In *City Lights: Illuminating the American Night*, John Jakle has—one hesitates only fractionally to say—shed new light on an interesting but not much discussed subtopic of the history of electricity. His book works on a number of levels: as cultural history; as a description of the evolution of what would become a ubiquitous technology (but one taken more or less for granted); as a contribution to the understanding of modern urban geography; and as an account of the impact of a critical late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century technology on business and industry.

Jakle, a geographer, has undertaken in this slim volume to document the transformation of the American landscape, especially its urban aspect, by the development of lighting technology over the course of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Focusing on the evolving morphology of cities as the night was illuminated within their boundaries, Jakle notes that landscape has been discussed primarily as a daytime phenomenon, but that the geography of night is now receiving the attention it deserves.

The book is divided into two sections. The first deals with the evolution of the major lamp technologies, particularly street-lighting ones, and addresses their impact. This discussion, particularly of the triumph of gas lighting over oil, is useful. The 1880s and 1890s were a time of experimentation with electric arc and incandescent filament lamps as well as gas mantle lamps employed as street lighting. From the beginning of the next century until the twenties, electric incandescence became an important form of lighting for commercial purposes. The twenties were characterized by lighting exaggerated to accommodate the automobile. Neon came into use. Through the years of depression and war, little changed in urban lighting, although innovations in lighting technology occurred at a steady pace. In the fifties and sixties, the highest intensities of night lighting were achieved and, as Jakle notes, “[B]y 1970, Americans could claim that in their cities, at least, night had been turned into day” (p. 256).

The second section outlines the various applications of lighting and discusses their significance to the American economy, culture, and society. Promoters of municipal night lighting, of course, trumpeted its beneficial effect on crime and public safety. Statistics gathered over the years were inconclusive about the deterrent effect of lighting on crime (“a Policeman

Every 50 Yards,” read one ad about street lights), and Jakle suggests ironically, that in certain areas of large cities like New York’s Bowery district, better illumination actually increased vice in what had formerly been a sedate center of middle-class entertainment. The new garish lighting effects available at the end of the nineteenth century to businesses along Bowery Avenue, as in San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, Chicago’s “Levee,” and Seattle’s “skid row,” seemed to advertise gambling, prostitution, and drinking. In that sense, the new lighting assisted such areas in becoming magnets for debauchery rather than acting as a deterrent to crime. Still, Jakle concludes that lighting did have a positive effect on traffic safety. Accident rates following cutbacks during the Depression and in World War II blackouts, for example, compared unfavorably with fully lit periods.

Jakle also discusses celebratory lighting, analyzing the impact of lighting on world’s fairs held in the country over the last part of the nineteenth and through the twentieth centuries, and on amusement parks such as Coney Island, Disneyland, and Disney World. Perhaps most significantly, Jakle shows how nighttime lighting changed the city physically. The typical American city of the nineteenth century was compact, walkable, and largely animated by daylight. The development of reliable public lighting to increase nighttime visibility, coupled with the arrival of the automobile, with which it worked in synergy, enhancing and being enhanced by the car, changed the way cities were configured and the length of their business day.

Although this book was not written with historians of business in mind, they will find much in it to admire. The development of the technology and narratives of the individual inventors, entrepreneurs, and companies involved in advancing it make up the story of an industry unto itself. The impact of nighttime lighting on other industries—as noted the cases of entertainment and autos, to name the two most obvious—is clear.

Unfortunately, much of the entrepreneurial history has already been extensively rehearsed in such standard works as David Nye’s *Electrifying America*, Thomas Hughes’s *Networks of Power*, Forrest MacDonald’s *Insull*, and a host of other familiar histories of electricity and its avatars. Similarly, there are well-known works on world fairs, both consulted (Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*) and apparently unconsulted (Carl Abbott, *The Great Extravaganza: Portland and the Lewis and Clark Exposition*), as well as books of urban history and theory (Günter Barth’s *City People* and Jane Jacobs’s classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* spring to mind in this regard), which echo much of the foundational ideas in this work. This author does not transcend their well-known views.

But he has added a dimension to them. With a good deal of original research in primary sources, including trade journals, pamphlets, contemporary accounts of the effects of lighting

advancements, and the like, Jakle usefully explores an overlooked side of urban development. Furthermore, synthesizing this material allows him to show how nighttime lighting as a cultural artifact, like the gas station and fast food (which he has written about as well), has changed America's culture, business, economy, recreation, and the very landscape on which their histories have unfolded.

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