

and out – Ross Lovegrove

Solar trees bloom in the streets

Ross Lovegrove *re-envisioning the future of that most ubiquitous of street infrastructure; – city lights*

If over Britain's long wet 2012 summer you happened to be walking along the Farringdon Road, amidst London's self-conscious design square mile, the chances are that you might well have come across an otherworldly ganglionic street lamp. Like some refugee from the high tide of the wilder end of seventies biomorphic design; think Roger Dean crossed with Future Systems and turning up in the parallel universe of Philip Pullmann's *His Dark Materials* – the Solar Tree street lamp featured a central trunk, plus ten further tentacle-like stalks reaching upwards, as if, and in reality, fed by the warming light of the sun. On each tentacle large lily-like suction pad leaves splayed out, the upper reaches of this exotic seabed tree.

It was an exotic sight in the St John Square courtyard, where the Solar Tree had taken up temporary residence as a showcase attraction for the Clerkenwell Design Festival, but it wasn't its first showing. The Solar Tree is the design child of Ross Lovegrove, a well-known Welsh designer, with a penchant for futuristic organic curvilinear forms fused with hi-tech materials, which are a signature of his long career in lighting. First unveiled in front of Vienna's MAK museum (the Museum for Arts and Industry) in 2007, a series of further high profile sites in Milan, Paris and Frankfurt followed. In Vienna, a street long row of these plant-like trees lined the front of the museum, providing light through the nights, with the pads soaking up sunshine, recharging and storing solar energy in batteries during the day. Each of the pads is fitted with 38 solar cells, which power some reputedly sophisticated LED light bubbles, developed by partner Sharp Solar, while the steel stalks reach upwards to an overall height of five and a half metres.

Lovegrove, on hand to plug the Solar Tree during its inaugural Design Festival showing, spoke of how the tree's latest iterations will have a much wider palette of applications, including powering live web-information. He also talked of how the tree would continue working for upwards of a week, although the Solar Tree's third partner, the stalk form manufacturers Artimede, state more cautiously, three days. If the Solar Tree is a naked promotional showcase – which it unambiguously is – it does so in provocative style, pushing the possibilities of what lighting could become, if economics and other constraints were beside the point. It doesn't require boundless imagination to envisage the future eco-urban districts, linear parks, cycle network routes being lit by a panoply



of design and art led light experiments. With city map signage, cycle storage and street furniture undergoing eco-makeovers the potential for lighting to do likewise is both provocative and appealing. Different cycle routes could be guided not by signposts, but by different strings of light and street lamps systems. It would make traversing cities that much more novel and fun. And why not? Demand the impossible, rather than accepting the obvious and orthodox. Utility is the mother of convention, after all. *OL*

FURTHER

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