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## 'Breathing Lights' winding down soon

Organizers deem public art project a success

By Amy Biancolli Published 7:45 am, Wednesday, November 23, 2016



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In this Friday, Oct. 28, 2016 photo, windows in a vacant building are illuminated with LED lights in Albany, N.Y. Windows in more than 150 abandoned buildings in three upstate New York cities have been fitted ... [more](#)

**If you haven't seen them, you still have time:** those huffing, puffing, empty buildings illuminating "Breathing Lights," the temporary art installation now dotting neighborhoods in Albany, Schenectady and Troy. But don't postpone. They'll start winking out gradually at the end of the month, when, one by one, the LED riggings of roughly 170 houses will run out of juice and return to darkness.

When the project first scored a \$1 million grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies last June, the plan envisioned as many 500 abandoned buildings. It also envisioned teamwork across cities, nonprofits and private partners in devising and maintaining a way to light them all up — in slow, heaving, rhythmic patterns that would mimic the tranquil breathing of large animals at rest.

As projects go, it was unprecedented: Nothing like "Breathing Lights" had ever been tried before, anywhere, on any number of buildings. The entire system had to be cooked up and then sustained meticulously for two solid months. Organizers were innovating on the fly — developing a complex prototype with countless moving parts and then troubleshooting, day after day and night after night, on the streets of the Capital Region.

[More Information](#)

**If you go****"Breathing Lights"**

**Where:** Various locations throughout Albany, Schenectady and Troy

**When:** Through Dec. 1

**Info:** Maps and events are listed at [breathinglights.com](http://breathinglights.com)

"We were kind of inventing it as the car was moving, in a way, said **Adam Frelin**, lead artist on the project and an associate professor of art at the University at Albany.

And it was huge. It remained huge after the number of buildings was cut back to around 200, and it's huge even now having lost structures to sales and demolition. "The scale of the project is so much smaller than we had originally aimed for," Frelin said. "And it's still — it's way too big. It's way too big to manage."

That said, Frelin and the "Breathing Lights" team have tried their hardest. They've scaled back in some ways, ramped up i

others — hiring extra "night watch" observers to drive around and scope out technical issues, plus extra tech people to then drive around and fix them. The batteries didn't always last as long as anticipated. The computer-controlled lighting systems, once installed, had kinks to work out. "You know, just a million little things that required constant upkeep," Frelin said. He's frank about the challenges: "It's not like we flipped on the switch, an everything worked out great. ... Really, the project in and of itself is kind of alive. Some nights it's grumpy, and some nights it's happy."

Developed by the **Lighting Research Center** at **Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute** with advice from General Electric, the lighting kits — and the entire system — were tested rigorously before the buildings were due to blink on at the start of October. "And everything looked flawless," Frelin said. Agreed lead architect **Barbara Nelson**: "The installation proved to be more technically challenging than we had expected. But we had all the right crews in place to take care of it ... They were just intrepid."

For all the challenges, for all the upkeep, for all the dead batteries and other assorted ills requiring emergency house calls, "Breathing Lights" is a singular feat of art intersecting with society. The measure of success, its organizers say, lies not in its maintenance record — or the numbers of homes sold, which is still a moving target — but something a little harder to quantify.

Simply put: The installation is arresting. It's unlike anything you've seen. And at the very least, those eerily glowing homes brought people together and got them talking about blight, the life of neighborhoods and the absent light of empty homes.

The houses are "beautiful," "poignant," "thought provoking" — all words used by Facebook commenters who had checked out various buildings in various places and came away awed by their quiet, respiring grace. "Windows are a building's eyes. The lights make them alive. It's like they are gradually nodding off, begging to not be forgotten," observed **Greg Popp**.

**Noted Lynn Lekakis**: "When you take something forlorn and neglected and literally breathe life into it, it transforms everything — the viewer, and the house. The ones on empty streets were the most remarkable since the warmth of the light in the desolation of the block brought a sharp contrast."

Back when the installation opened, Frelin told gathered press and participants that "the project could really easily be missed." To see it, residents and visitors would have to drive, walk or hop a bus to the communities in question, opening their eyes to corners of the region too often overlooked. Awareness-raising was a goal from inception.

Early on, organizers reached out to the communities involved, inviting feedback on the emerging project and coordinating with participating cities and land banks. And early on, the project drew criticism from skeptics questioning both the wisdom of lighting up abandoned homes and the sense in devoting such a big wad of money on art — when more fundamental needs cried out for aid. (The short answer: The competitive Bloomberg grant only funded specific public-art projects.) There was also some grumbling about outsiders swooping in.

"It's been our toughest criticism, that this project didn't necessarily bubble up from the neighborhoods," Nelson said. "If you ask neighborhoods what they need, they're gonna say, 'We need good housing, we need access to food.' ... They're not gonna say, 'We need lights in our buildings.' "

But once the houses switched on, much of the criticism subsided. In his own regular jaunts around the various neighborhoods, Frelin said, the reception has been overwhelmingly positive. "I encounter almost no reticence or resistance or anger about it myself in my dealings. I encounter a lot of enthusiasm and excitement."

"It kind of livens things up a little bit, you know?" said Joe, who lives and works at the [Salvation Army](#) on Clinton Avenue in Albany — right across the street from a breathing house. "Having lights on while it's dark out, it's kind of neat — it's kind of like having, you know, holiday lights."

After the installation opened back in October, Elle McGill of Schenectady was puzzled, initially, by the sight of a sighing clapboard house near her mother's home on Victory Avenue. "I thought, 'What is that? Is someone moving into that? I thought it was abandoned!'"

The installation — and all its supporting art and community events and walking tours — have helped pull disparate communities together, Nelson said. "It's acted like a lantern to show people, to allow people to get together on a stoop or a corner — and they might not have had reason to come together in that way until then, you know?"

Could "Breathing Lights" serve as a template for neighborhoods in other cities? "If a particular community or group of neighborhoods decided to use this as a tool to highlight their community, and their neighborhood, and issues of vacancy — by all means," Nelson said. "And of course if a city took it on, I would want them to learn from our experience. We had to work pretty hard, and we were very pleased that we were able to build the ground-level support and ownership of this."

Looking ahead, she said most of the equipment — LED lights, batteries, the wooden frames, the wire — will be recycled, donated or sold. She'll be incorporating "Breathing Lights" into her grant applications and work as executive director for TAP Inc. in Troy, an architectural planning office that renovates buildings. Frelin, meanwhile, plans to throw himself into the documentation phase of the project, working on photos and videos.

Both are looking forward to a little more free time.

"It's been wonderful, but it's been absolutely exhausting," Nelson said, noting three or four events a week and programming over multiple weekends. Frelin uttered nearly the same words: "It's been fascinating, and it's also been kind of exhausting. ... I'm looking forward to recapturing some semblance of balance in my life."

As for the installation, he said, "It's lived its life. I feel like I'm happy for it to come to a necessary end. It has to come to an end anyway. So I'm prepared."

And to all those members of the Capital Region who haven't ventured out at night to see the gentle, pulsing giants of "Breathing Lights"? "You could probably get in your car and drive 10 minutes to find one. Go find one. I would encourage people to go find one," he said, "before it goes away forever."

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