The world's largest public art installation

A major art project shining a new light onto the historic heart of London: one river, 14 bridges, five owners, seven London Boroughs, 30 planning permissions and 18 Listed Building Consents (so far). But just how do you deliver the world's largest public art installation?

IMAGE;
CGI of the Illuminated River Project – from Tower Bridge in the east to Albert Bridge ©Illuminated River Foundation

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The Illuminated River project is one of the most ambitious public art installations in the world. When complete, it will span 14 iconic bridges along 4.5 nautical miles of the River Thames – from Tower Bridge in the east to Albert Bridge in the west – and will be viewed 137 million times every year.

The installation is being delivered by the Illuminated River Foundation (IRF) and is a philanthropically-funded initiative of the Rothschild Foundation, the Arcadia Fund, the Blavatnik Family Foundation and The Reuben Foundation, and is supported by the Mayor of London. It will be the largest public art installation in the world, celebrating a part of London experienced by many but often taken for granted.

The Illuminated River concept was created by internationally-acclaimed American artist Leo Villareal and award-winning British architects Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands and uses the latest LED and software technology to paint London's bridges with light in a changing – but coordinated – manner to add visual interest to the installation.

It is the first artist-led, cohesive vision for the Thames bridges, celebrating them as architectural, social, and historic landmarks in their own right while creating a symbolic link across the capital by connecting them.

With support from Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands, Temple Group, and a large team of technical consultants and client, Montagu Evans managed the planning for the project, culminating in a single, coordinated submission of multiple applications for planning and listed building consents covering 14 bridges across seven London Boroughs.

Whilst complex, this approach provided a robust way of ensuring that each authority had control over the determination of the applications and accorded with the legislative requirements for cross-boundary applications.

Following planning permission in 2018, the first phase, incorporating London Bridge, Cannon Street Railway Bridge, and the Southwark and Millennium Bridges, was lit up for the first time in July 2019.

The next phase, lighting Blackfriars Road Bridge, Waterloo Bridge, Lambeth Bridge, the Golden Jubilee Footbridges and Westminster Bridge, will be installed over the course of 2020 and early 2021.

The Planning Challenge

It is not uncommon for London projects to span individual >>> Boroughs – Crossrail and the Tideway Tunnel are two examples

RIGHT:
Completed artwork on London Bridge looking west towards St Paul's Cathedral ©Matthew Anderson: PA Wire

BELOW:
Completed artwork on the Millennium Bridge, looking towards The Shard ©James Newton

that stand out. Normally, however, they are delivered through development consent orders or Acts of Parliament. The challenge for the Illuminated River project was to secure permission through the standard planning processes as this was not a piece of infrastructure – a first for London on this scale.

Other than London Bridge, which is within the City of London, all of the bridges fall within two or more Borough boundaries, which meant cross-boundary planning applications.

While there are statutory processes for schemes of this nature, the complexity of the task required individual applications to be made for each bridge. It was therefore vital to engage early in the process and share information equally between all the Boroughs involved.

Montagu Evans also encouraged decision makers on both sides of the river to agree a consistent planning approach for each bridge as a whole – during determination, condition discharge and installation – to ensure a cohesive design and implementation solution could be delivered.

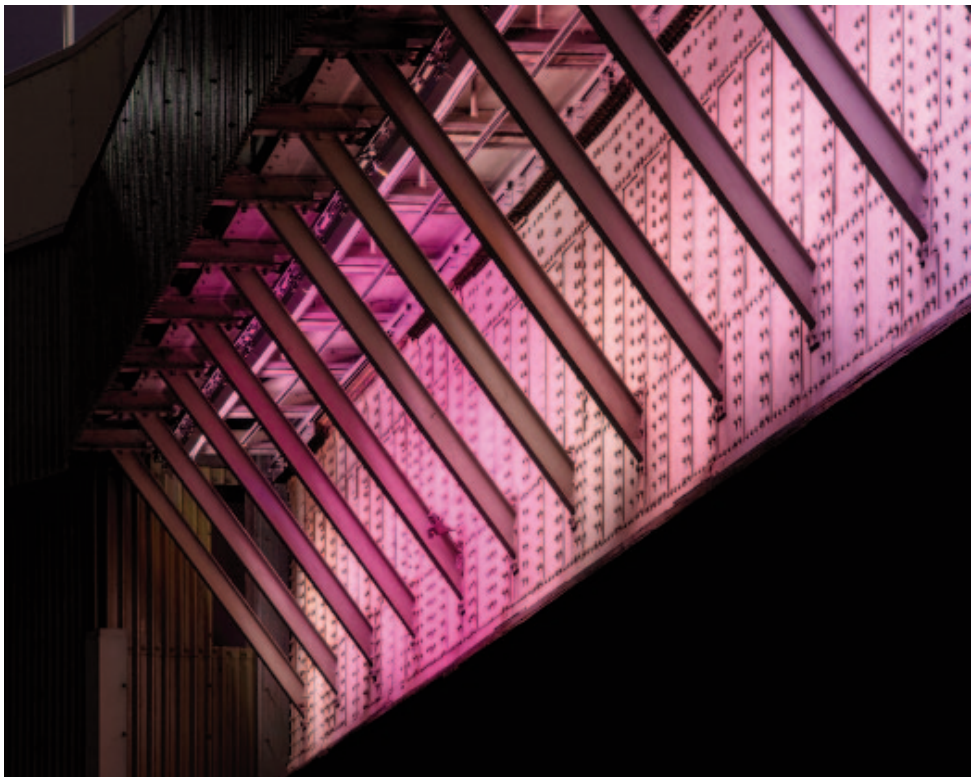
Historic significance

Nine of the bridges are listed to celebrate and protect their architectural and historic significance so frequent pre-application engagement with the planning and conservation officers at each of the seven Local Planning Authorities, as well as Historic England and local community groups, coordinated by Montagu Evans' planning and heritage team, was essential.

The IRF response respected this heritage down to the smallest details. Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands and Leo Villareal Studios worked closely with structural engineers Price & Myers to create bespoke fittings and fixtures, to ensure minimal physical intrusion and even colour matching where needed for limited visual impact.

The benefits of good planning

Throughout day and night, the river and its banks support a



RIGHT:
Completed artwork highlighting the construction detail of Cannon Street Bridge
©James Newton

BELOW::
Completed artwork on the Millennium Bridge
©James Newton

wide range of uses. While this project celebrates and promotes London's important night-time economy, proposals for lighting can often be contrary to policy and bring resistance due to assumptions around light pollution.

It was apparent early on that there was a lack of understanding of the existing light condition of both the bridges and the river environment, which was colouring the project's reception.

As a result, the Illuminated River Project facilitated an in-depth assessment of the relevant bridges, public realm and surrounding environment, providing an accurate baseline of conditions and enabling collaborative working between the London Boroughs, bridge owners and key stakeholders along the river to move forward positively.

Minimising impact

Safety is, of course, of paramount importance and the working operations of the river and the bridges that cross them had to be maintained. From the beginning, the Illuminated River Foundation engaged extensively with public users of river and bridges, from pedestrians and cyclists, to drivers and rail operators, as well as statutory bodies such as the Port of London Authority.

Underpinning everything was the need to ensure that the illumination did not result in light spillage or glare that would affect railway signalling systems or navigational lights – or shine into the eyes of drivers, train drivers or boat captains.

New approaches to controlling light pollution were also put in place, informed by the first-ever luminance study of the River Thames coordinated by Atelier Ten, ensuring that light spillage could be reduced for the benefit of ecological habitats along the river.

The proposals' Interactive Environmental Statement, led by Temple Group, was one of the first of its kind, presenting technical information in an interactive and user-friendly format and covering topics such as Thames Habitats and Species, Bat Surveys, Heritage, artist's impressions and drawings for each bridge.

Alongside this statement, the team put together a unique suite of application material including samples of the bespoke light fittings and fixings and interactive visualisations to bring the kinetic nature of the proposed illumination to life. It has been an invaluable tool throughout the application determination period and local stakeholder engagement process, all helping to show the care and detail with which the team has approached this project.

Long-term legacy

Good planning is more than the act of securing an implementable permission, however; it needs to deliver an improvement overall and a lasting legacy. Through the work of the Illuminated River Foundation and other stakeholders, this project is able to achieve much more.

For the first time, London's bridges have been assessed in a coordinated manner, bringing together their owners to consider their long-term management and upkeep. It has also created a new depth of resource and understanding of each bridge individually, including a library of 3D scans and measured surveys that will soon be available to the public.

Over its 10-year lifespan, 2 billion people will interact with the artwork and view the river, giving them a fresh perspective of both the Thames and its crossings. Beyond this timeframe, lights will remain >>>

RIGHT:
Completed artwork on Southwark Bridge looking towards The Shard © James Newton

on the bridges so that future generations can continue to enjoy their historical significance.

The bridges will be a physical reminder of London's progress and development, brought to life with new technologies and materials that complement their form and function.

Whether on a boat, the banks of the Thames, or on the bridge itself, residents and visitors alike will be able to understand and experience the historic significance of London's bridges in a new and exciting way.

Planning benefit is often thought about in terms of affordable housing and the provision of infrastructure, and in London the creation of new spaces is hard to deliver. This project should teach us that we should not take the spaces we already have for granted.

The Illuminated River has set a new benchmark for how our public realm should be presented. The challenge moving forward for London is to find new ways of taking this concept even further, developing the vision and encouraging ownership and public celebration of aspects and views that are often overlooked.

Fresh ways of discovering, enhancing and enjoying our heritage, existing public spaces and the places under and between buildings should be embraced and held in just as high regard as the creation of new areas of public realm.

We hope that by illuminating these bridges, we not only shine a light on London's heritage and culture, but also on what can be achieved through planning to improve our urban environments. ■

BELOW and BELOW RIGHT
Completed artwork on Cannon Street Railway Bridge
© James Newton


SEE MORE AT: https://illuminatedriver.london/