

GLOW lights up Eindhoven

Every year, surprising installations by artists transform Eindhoven into a huge light art exhibition. With GLOW, Eindhoven pushes the boundaries between art, design and technology. While all the time the festival seeks the right balance: what will the public still find credible?

Positive boost

It all started quite modestly back in 2006. Eindhoven was a little deflated by the relocation of the Philips head office. "There are many tales about how GLOW was born, but a popular one is that the idea for the festival originated in the pub", says Ronald Ramakers, both business and artistic director for the festival. "We were looking for an event that would be right to give the city a positive boost."

GLOW emphasizes Eindhoven's strong connection with light. In 1870 the match industry got established here and in 1891 Philips founded a light bulb factory. But besides being the 'city of light', Eindhoven is also the city of design and technology. A light art festival seemed a logical choice for boosting and propagating these different elements. The pioneers were inspired by Lyon, where the 'Fête des Lumières' attracts millions of visitors every year.

Lighting festival for pioneers

In the first year the light art could mainly be seen in the Stadswandelpark and along the banks of the river Dommel. In subsequent years the installations and works of art branched out across the city centre. On festival evenings, visitors could stroll around thirty locations, where the architecture and public spaces were transformed into fairy-tale or futuristic scenes.

GLOW Eindhoven has now firmly established itself in the top five of the 'best visited light festivals in the world'. "Its strength lies in the continual innovation," says Ramakers. "It's a pioneers festival, where forerunners come for inspiration. We are different from other light festivals because we produce and bring in special projects. Light art has been democratised, but we don't just want to offer pure entertainment. We like to challenge the perceptions of residents, companies and institutions through using light to create new forms and stories."

Wide audience

The festival aims at attracting a wide-ranging audience, from a multitude of backgrounds and levels of education. Whereas Dutch Design Week - Eindhoven's other showpiece - promotes innovation, GLOW's focus is trained on broad accessibility. "We operate in the mid-ground, where there is space for both innovative art forms and clichés. For example, traditional Chinese light art still has an interesting story to tell. This is also true of the Sunflowers for Van Gogh, which are reproduced in light on a gigantic scale."

Canvas for light art

A motto that Ramakers likes to spread is that the city makes GLOW. In its philosophy, Eindhoven is the canvas, where participants from all walks of life contribute and share their innovative discoveries with the public. Many of the projects originate in Eindhoven and are conceived and made on site by internationally renowned designers, technicians and artists. With high-tech companies and educational institutions in the region working together with young up-and-coming talent in so-called GLOWlabs.

Sources of inspiration include light therapy offered by GGZ Eindhoven. Another example is the Eindhoven University of Technology photonics, that was put to use for a work of art. "Light that is invisible to your eyes is used in photonics for ultra-fast computing power. Designers create their stories with locally available technology."

Brabant event

Ramakers, originally from Limburg, lives in Amsterdam, and yet he considers GLOW quintessentially Brabant. "This is a horizontal society with hard workers and there is a lot of cooperation. The Brabant mindset is one of never giving up. I keep hearing, it will be alright on the night. And I also hear a lot: nobody's perfect. People here just accept what they have to work with."

At the same time, GLOW is exploring its international ambitions. GLOW strives to have as many projects as possible made in Eindhoven. The organisation brings new talent to the city, from the Netherlands and beyond. "That is how we keep things fresh. We hope that they feel at home here and act as ambassadors for the city. A metropolitan climate has developed here, an attractive city to live and work in. That is how we hold onto talent."

Opening the doors to Eindhoven

There is plenty of opportunity for generating revenue for the city. GLOW opens the doors to Eindhoven, says Ramakers. People are willing to travel for up to two hours to see the festival and get to know the city. In addition, GLOW is also a showpiece for international trade. Companies like to promote their involvement in the event in Eindhoven when presenting themselves abroad.

Besides large companies, local businesses and restaurants also benefit from the event. Retailers enjoy excellent turnover thanks to the many visitors that GLOW attracts to Eindhoven city centre every year. Educational institutions deploy GLOW as a teaching tool and give teachers time to get involved.

Students can develop something for GLOW as a minor. For example, Fontys ICT students created a project with light and colour to raise awareness about the perils of public Wi-Fi networks. Ramakers: "GLOW is a gentle force interconnecting the city. The festival is a source of pride, innovation and charisma."

Spectacular design

Sometimes the energy it emits is quite literal. With his project *Something Blue* the Finnish light artist Kari Kola soaked Eindhoven's skyline in a deep blue and purple light each evening in 2018. The bright rays of light could be seen from far and wide and were also visible for people in aircraft.

However, it is not the intention that the festival should become ever more spectacular, says Ramakers. "If you just keep getting bigger and bigger, people lose interest", he believes. "Which is why we look for the dynamic through switching from large installations to something soft or small."

In doing so, he also ensures that GLOW will not become a victim of its own success. "The greatest danger is posed by the festival attracting more than a million visitors. This would create bottlenecks of visitors along the route, although we could do more to distribute things across the region. We want to surprise, move or fascinate people with a dynamic presentation that tempts them to walk the entire route."

Corporate sponsorship

GLOW underpins the identity of the city as a beacon of innovation and design, just as the originators had intended. But how do you balance sponsorship funds and credibility, popularity and innovation?

We are constantly working on this balance, says Ramakers. He wants to work with companies on innovation and sustainability, but without it becoming a proliferation of company names. The trend is to display brand names everywhere. "But I don't like that Formula 1 look. The company names are currently on a small sign. Art is quite sensitive to this. Most people are uncomfortable with omnipresent sponsorship."

He also wants GLOW to remain free of charge, because he believes everyone is an art connoisseur. He likes to emphasise this with what Gerard Philips said in 1925: 'Light is life, light is happiness, light is celebration'. "We want to keep this sentiment in GLOW. Although, GLOW must continue to deliver value, so that it remains interesting for the municipality, companies, schools and other participants to continue investing in it. We do this through building a festival together and not just trotting out ready-made attractions."

Becoming energy-neutral

Another Ramakers motto: balance is better than growth. One of the future challenges is to focus more on sustainability. GLOW wants to become energy-neutral, but to combat waste in a broader sense, too, with the focus on recycling.

"We are looking at how Eindhoven companies can save energy for GLOW throughout the year, for example by switching off lights a minute earlier. More importantly, this is a statement that raises awareness. Fortunately, more and more projects employ LED light, which is much more energy-efficient than incandescent lamps. In our annual children's project, we employ recyclable materials wherever we can."

"Light beacons used for previous editions will be reused differently next time. This is an integral part of our constant search for innovation and balance, without this becoming a bore."

Two elements will continue to form the heart of GLOW: the outdoor space as a backdrop and, of course, light itself. "We will continue to opt for a route with about thirty locations. This is the framework on which all other decisions are dependent. The public knows what to expect and it keeps the crowd flowing steadily. We want to motivate people to observe the art works collectively and at a steady pace."

People give energy

Throughout the year, a close-knit team makes every effort to ensure that the route, safety, planning and everything else is ready in time for GLOW. Once the festival starts, lots of other people help out with all the activities. Approximately 25 volunteers take part.

They all work with tremendous excitement towards the opening of the festival in November. Ramakers is especially looking forward to the people in the city. He walks the opposite way around the route to see how the visitors respond to the installations. "On day one you can feel the energy of the people. I watch the pace, how the masses divide and how they observe. Every year we wonder how our ideas will turn out. This is what inspires the next edition each year. It is not a problem that GLOW is temporary. As humans, we are composed of memories. It is wonderful when this art finds a place in the hearts and minds of the public."

Glow in figures

GLOW is the largest and longest running light festival in the Netherlands. The first edition in 2006 was an immediate success with 45,000 visitors. The event grew to a record number of over 750,000 visitors in 2018.

Local and international light designers, designers and artists exhibit their work for a week and a half. A route will be set out visiting all the light installations, which you can explore yourself or with a guide.

The festival has a different theme each year. The works often have interactive elements, allowing the public to become part of the lighting installations.