Activating Historic Spaces
You name it, and it has happened. The boarded-up church is reborn as a community center. The dilapidated warehouse is transformed into a charter school. The barn becomes a bar. More often than not, successful activation of historic spaces depends on convincing people to look at old places in a new light.

However, sometimes all the history and beauty and significance in the world isn’t enough to overcome the fact that—for many—perception is reality. In those moments, we have to actually flip a switch to ignite the public’s imagination, empathy, and hope.

From our day-to-day lives, we know that the lights being on means that someone is home (or at least pretending to be). It means something is happening, and people are watching. Though perhaps more figuratively, the same logic applies when, all of a sudden, a beaten-up old building comes beaming out of the dark. And that’s what this issue of Forum Journal is all about—the awe-inducing ability of lighting and other creative interventions to breathe new life into historic places.

Before you dive in, I’d like to share two examples that have proved this concept to me—one from my professional life at the National Trust and one that’s much more personal. Let’s start in Miami.

Built in 1963, Miami Marine Stadium once drew thousands to Biscayne Bay for everything from powerboat races to religious services to concerts under the stars. On any given evening, hundreds of boats would surround the floating stage vying for the perfect “seat” and waiting for the festivities to begin. The experience was authentic Miami, and there was nothing else like it in the world.

Fast forward to today. Shuttered after Hurricane Andrew, this National Treasure—a beloved place identified as endangered and selected for preservation by the National Trust—had been shut off from the South Florida entertainment scene for over 20 years. It remained intriguingly off limits by day and utterly out of sight by night until the Miami International Boat Show came along. After
years of hosting one of the largest trade shows in the world in a cramped convention center, the Boat Show decided to bring its 2016 event to a park created on vacant land surrounding Miami Marine Stadium. Suddenly a derelict structure purpose-built for boating events was about to draw a crowd of more than 100,000 people, many of whom had experienced the stadium at its peak. The situation was ripe for an intervention.

Working with a local visual artist, we decided to tug at those heartstrings by re-creating the stadium’s heyday: the sunny days and crazy nights when hydroplanes roared and Jimmy Buffett sang. Our showcase included an 18-foot LED video screen, hours of remixed vintage video footage, a Miami-themed Spotify station, and six dazzling spotlights.

As crowds watched and cheered from temporary docks installed in the stadium’s basin, it became abundantly clear that this South Florida icon had never actually left its fans’ hearts. That same weekend, thousands of people signed our petition urging city leaders to make its restoration a priority, one of them remarking with a smile, “I forgot how much fun I had here until I saw this.”

Now for a personal example. Three summers ago, my partner created a heart-shaped sculpture made of 25 interconnected bicycle wheels, two metal seats, and one shared pedal. When two people climb onboard and figure out the awkward and oftentimes hilarious dynamics of single-pedal riding (hint: one person has to go backwards), an intricate system of well-oiled bike chains starts to churn and all of the sculpture’s bright red wheels spin in tandem.
By design, the piece was meant to be an interactive tribute to the city Casey and I both love and call home—Buffalo, New York. In practice, it is a mesmerizing statement about love, relationships, and the give-and-take that’s required between two people to make both of those things work. Quite fittingly, he called it *CityHEART*. While the sculpture is a sight to behold in its own right, I will always remember its debut as one of the more visceral moments in my life.

It happened during *CITY of NIGHT*, an innovative event in Buffalo during which art collides with placemaking in rare and rewarding ways. (You can read more about it on page 37.) In 2013 the festival once again took over the grounds of Silo City, a beloved site that is home to the most outstanding collection of grain elevators in the country. Although rusted and unused, they still rise powerfully over the Buffalo River like our city’s version of the Parthenon. Until, of course, they blend into the night.

*CityHEART* was positioned next to one of Silo City’s true gems, Marine A. A monolithic, poured-in-place masterpiece, this concrete structure has long been a canvas for artists who don’t care about “no trespassing” signs. By day, its echo-filled silos serve as grassroots galleries where a vast majority of the installations are dedicated to Buffalo’s resurgence. By night, however, this monument to both a bygone era and a city’s renewed sense of hope falls away—unlit and undetectable.

That evening was different, though. For the cost of a $20 flood light and a single extension cord, Casey created a dramatic backdrop for his sculpture by illuminating one of our city’s most imposing structures. As the sun went down and the light’s intensity grew, I remember thinking that this was a preservationist’s version of the Bat signal—a sudden beacon in the night sky demanding recognition. In that moment, I was proud not only of Casey but also of my city—its past and its undeniably bright future.

At the end of each day, our world’s iconic landmarks are bathed in light because they are places that matter. Places that say something about our values and our identities. Places we can’t live without. Imagine stealing a glance down a midtown street and not
seeing the Empire State Building pierce through the night sky. Or floating down the Seine and not seeing the Eiffel Tower twinkling like a galaxy full of stars.

But buildings don’t need to be architectural masterworks to be elevated and celebrated in this way. No matter how small or how modest or how forgotten, the places we love light up our lives. Let’s return the favor. Sometimes all it takes is 20 bucks. Just ask Casey. FJ

JASON LLOYD CLEMENT, the National Trust’s director of community outreach, creates campaigns that engage local communities across the country in saving places that matter.

**VIDEO**
Watch a time-lapse video of the lighting of the Miami Marine Stadium.

**VIDEO**
Watch a video depicting the activation of the Miami Marine Stadium.

**TAKEAWAY**
Read Jason Lloyd Clement’s “9 Tips for Lighting a Building.”