

# City Weekly

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## Need a light?

Yes, Boston does, say these visionaries with bright ideas for the city's skyline.

By Kathleen Burge  
GLOBE STAFF

Imagine a city that doesn't sink into darkness once the sun sets. Otherworldly lights beam into the heavens from Rowes Wharf. The subway entrances near South Station glow deep red and blue. The Custom House Tower once again stands bright on the city's skyline, its clock face vivid in the night sky. The hulking metal counterweight on the Congress Street Bridge transforms into a soft lantern high above Fort Point Channel.

### South Station illuminated

Now, only the clock at South Station is lit at night. Here is how a team of designers propose to light the building's exterior:

#### Lower level

Arches above the entrances lit with a soft amber light

#### Upper level

Sixteen columns backlit with a soft white light to silhouette them

#### Top of building

Parapet lined with more than 300 feet of white light in a linear band

Clock tower lit with soft amber light to make clock easier to read

Eagle spotlighted

#### MBTA entrances

Glass structures over subway entrances lit internally, a different color for each

But Nathe's view of her own city's skyline, from her South Boston condo, disappoints her. The city, she said, seems to disappear at night.

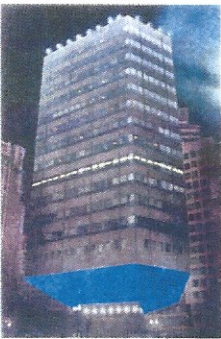
"Everyone knows what the Custom House or South Station look like in light," said Nathe, a lighting designer and owner of Light Insight Design Studio. "When you see it at night, it just completely loses any character."

Nathe and more than 25 other designers are proposing to illuminate five prominent buildings and four bridges for illuminaBoston 2008, which they say would be the city's first light festival. They have created designs for those structures and gotten initial approval for the festival from the Boston Redevelopment Authority and some building owners and managers. But before the festival can move from glittering dream to reality, their designs require approval from a host of city departments, including the Mayor's Office of Arts, Tourism & Special Events, and other agencies.

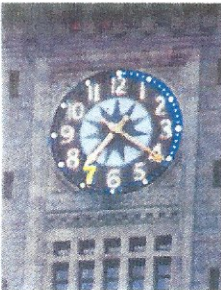
"It is a process," said A.J. Williams, owner of Creative Events, an event planning firm that is helping to raise \$300,000 and get permits for the festival. "We're still ironing out the details."

Much remains unresolved. In addition to a key detail —

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175 Federal Street



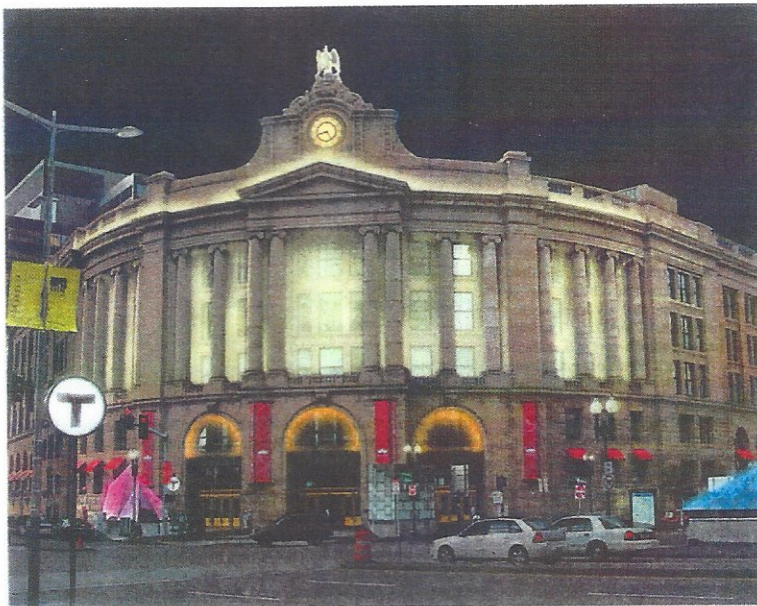
Custom House clock



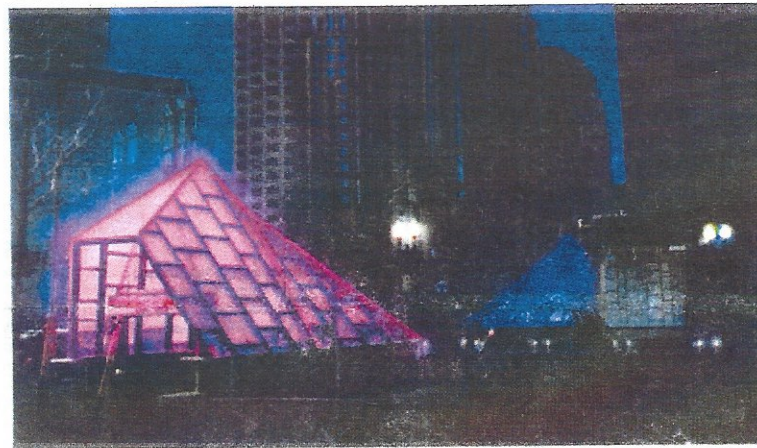
Rowes Wharf

### City of Light

Over a few days in October, organizers of illuminaBoston 2008 are hoping to light up buildings and bridges around the city. Although plans for the light festival are still evolving, these are some proposals for illuminating some of Boston's landmarks.



South Station



MBTA Entrances

RENDERINGS COURTESY OF ILLUMINALEBOSTON 2008



# Their vision: come October, a city shining on a hill

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Whether City Hall will fully sign off on the festival — Nathe and the other lighting designers, who are donating their time, are trying to persuade some manufacturers to donate lights.

Light Boston, a nonprofit group dedicated to fighting the city's historic and cultural buildings and sites, is a partner in the festival. Illuminale organizers are hoping that two of the buildings — South Station and the Custom House Tower — can remain permanently lighted, even once the festival ends.

But as oil prices continue to rise and energy conservation becomes more desirable, some environmentalists have criticized light festivals as whimsical wastes of energy. The illuminaleBoston designers say they use energy-efficient lights whenever possible to minimize their use of electricity. But they also argue that the festival is a temporary work of art.

"There's a balance you have to find in your work that thinks about not only energy conservation, but celebrating human activity and endeavor and celebrating the city," said Steve Rosen, a principal at Available Light in Salem and team captain of the Rowes Wharf project. "If you tried to do this 365 days a year, that would be a hellacious waste of energy."

The designers behind illuminaleBoston also argue that the festival would bring tourists to the city. Earlier this year, the Frankfurt light festival, paired

with a trade show on architecture and technology, attracted about 167,000 visitors.

Nathe said she was inspired to create the festival by her parents, longtime volunteers in her hometown in Minnesota, where they helped build a baseball field and created two baseball teams. Last fall, Nathe renovated the lighting at Old North Church before former president Bill Clinton visited. She donated her time and persuaded Phillips, the lighting manufacturer, to donate the lighting.

At every level of planning illuminaleBoston, there have been hurdles to clear. First the designers needed to get access to the buildings to draft their proposals. Then, armed with their design concepts, they began getting approvals from layers of building owners, management groups, city departments, even, in some cases, federal officials. Some sites fell through when building owners declined to grant permission for the lights.

At Rowes Wharf, designers have proposed sending seven high-powered spotlights into the night sky. Whether those lights will be colored, Rosen said, will depend on the air in early October. Searchlights can be seen best if their beams hit particles of fog or

moisture in the air, so if the sky cooperates, the lighting designers will send colored rays of light into the night. (They cannot use red or green, the colors that light runways at Logan International Airport, according to Federal Aviation Administration guidelines.) But if it's a dry night, the colors won't show up well and the designers will probably stick to white light.

At the Custom House, about 80 percent of the bulbs that once lit the building are burned out. The team behind the illuminaleBoston design for the building hopes to replace the tower to its 1980s state, the last time all the lights worked. They could either add temporary lights to the building for the festival or replace the old incandescent lights with new, energy-efficient LED lights.

"It's old technology," said Will Lewis, an associate at Lam Partners and team captain of the Custom House project. "It's got a lot of what we call missing teeth."

Lewis and his team would also like to make the clock near the top of the tower readable at night. That is more difficult than it sounds, since the clock will not work if lights are added to the hands. One possibility is to put lights behind the numbers and

the minute dots to show the time digitally: At 7:20, for instance, the number "7" and the first 20 minutes of dots would glow.

At South Station, where the exterior of the building is mostly dark at night, designers have proposed adding subtle lighting that highlights the arches above the entrances and the columns above.

"I wanted to use something that was going to be highlighting the beautiful details on the building, but something that would not require much maintenance, and something that would be energy-efficient," said Doreen LeMay Madden, owner of Lux Lighting Design in Belmont, and team leader for the South Station project.

Madden and the other designers also proposed lighting the nearby entrances to the T station. Since the clear glass entrances would be lighted with LED lights, the colors could change. Madden and other designers have suggested different colors for each of the four entrances to would help travelers find their way.

Still, this is Boston, where contemporary notions of architecture are often viewed with suspicion. The lighting designers take pains to point out that they don't want to light up the city like Las Vegas.

"You don't need a lot to make a difference," Nathe said. "It's a black canvas."

Katleen.Burge can be reached at kburge@globe.com.