



PEPPER BUILDING

# PEPPERED WITH CONTENT

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
SCHOOL OF THE ARTS STUDENTS  
CREATE LARGE-FORMAT PROJECTIONS  
ON WINSTON-SALEM'S  
PEPPER BUILDING

BY PHOEBE ZERWICK



» Student Alex Bright says his projections (pictured, with rendering inset) are just another way to paint with light.

PHOTO WILL WILLNER

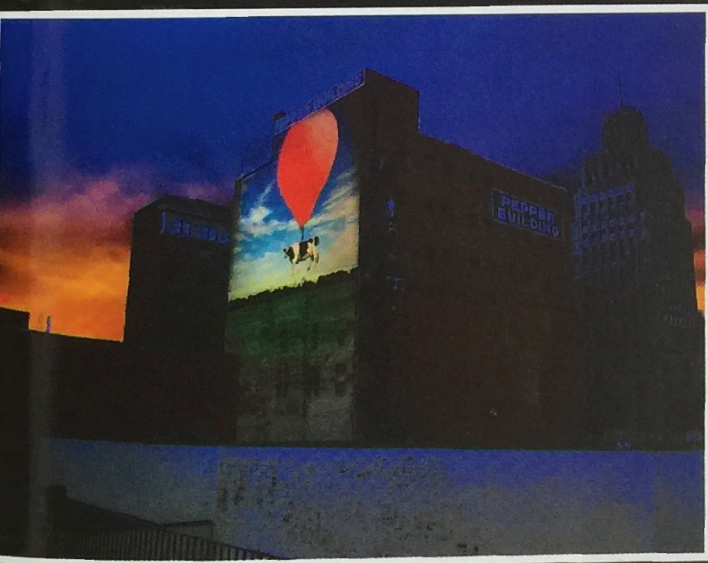
Have you ever wondered about the water wasted from a single leaky faucet? Or how much oil each of us consumes every day? Or what it means when the experts say that a cow produces 80 gallons of methane a day?

Lighting students at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts answered these questions, and more, last November with a series of images—at once whimsical, startling, and provocative—projected onto the bare brick wall of an empty downtown office building for the Winston-Salem Lighting Project.

One series begins with the image of Earth as a drop of water falling into a water tank. Soon the entire wall, measuring 65'x65', fills with dripping faucets. The water fills up a picture-perfect house, and the image fades. Another series gives meaning to the fact that every American uses 2.8 gallons of oil a day. It opens in the desert and fades to a world map covered with oil drums. Soon red oil drums fill the back of an SUV, then the shelves of a supermarket. As the story of our dependence on oil unfolds, a young woman out for a run struggles to hold her 2.8 gallons, while a man in a business suit briskly crosses the street with oil drums tucked beneath his arms.

"Sixty-five by sixty-five is really exciting," says Rob Ross, a fourth-year lighting student who designed the oil series. "We're so used to assisting in telling a story. Here it's just us telling our own story." The show lasted three evenings in November and attracted small but enthusiastic audiences in the downtown of a city that's been struggling to remake itself as a city of the arts. The school, a public performing arts college, timed the show to coincide with various other arts events, including a regional crafts show and a performance of the North Carolina Symphony.

Spectators settled into lawn chairs set up in a grassy courtyard that faces the brick wall. Some watched from a restaurant, while others simply stood in awe. "It really jumped out at you, because I'm not really used to seeing that building having any life to it," says D'Andre Mitchell, a college football player. Mitchell knew the building, known as the Pepper Building, in its heyday and was glad to see it brought back to life. "It was pretty powerful," he says. "This is a busy part of town, and this building is the dimmest, darkest part of town."





» Rob Ross, a fourth-year lighting student, designed the oil series of projections.

## WINSTON-SALEM LIGHT PROJECT EQUIPMENT LIST

- 2 Christie Roadster S+20K Projector
- 1 ETC Eos Control Console
- 1 ETC Expression 2
- 2 Green Hippo Hippotizer V3 Stage
- 1 Mac Book Pro Running Zoo Keeper Software
- 1 ETC 2-port Net 3 Gateway
- 3 ETC SP6 Sensor Portable Dimmer Pack
- 102 LED String Lights
- 2 Thinklogical Solutions Fiber VIS-23 DVI Video Extender Receiver
- 2 NEC LCD2080UX 20.1" LCD Monitor Package
- 2 Geffen DVI Detective DVI-EDID Dual Package
- 1 Netgear GS105 5-port Gigabit Ethernet Switch 10/100/1000Mbps

Students, led by Norman Coates, the director of the university lighting program, set up shop four days before opening night in a vacant apartment across the plaza from the Pepper Building. In a bedroom, they installed two Christie Digital Roadster S+20K projectors, rented from Scharff Weisberg, two Green Hippo Hippotizer media servers, and an ETC Eos console in another room. The four student designers had spent the fall putting their shows together with Adobe After Effects animation software. They knew how the images would look on a computer screen, but would they work on brick wall?

The view from the window showed the city skyline in the background and the brick wall, bare except for an advertisement in the top left corner for a local bakery dating back at least 50 years. Some had suggested Coates paint over the faded cake to create a blank screen, but by opening night, the students had worked their images around the old advertisement and the wall's other flaws. "I like dealing with what's there," Coates says.

In 2008, the first year of the project, students lit up the façade of a neoclassical post office about three blocks away from the Pepper Building ("From Theatre To Public Art," *LD*, January 2009). There were no facts and figures that first year. Instead, students drew inspiration from such artists as Monet, Chagall, and Peter Max, and bathed the white building in color.

Coates had originally hoped to use a downtown church for the 2009 project. When permission was denied, he drove around downtown on his Vespa in search of another building and saw the bare wall of the Pepper Building, which he had seen many times before, with fresh eyes. He noticed the grassy plaza and the skyline in the background. "I thought, 'This is perfect,'" he says.

In 2008, color, art, and architecture provided inspiration. This time around, students





PHOTO WILL WILLNER

» John Alexander created the dripping faucets imagery (above), and Emily McGillicuddy addressed the issue of CO<sub>2</sub> in her projections (right).



PHOTO WILL WILLNER

drew inspiration from more sobering facts. By this year, the world's population is expected to reach 7 billion. What, they asked, does that mean for the world's resources? Over the summer and early fall, students collected statistics about water, oil, methane, air pollution, and animal and plant ecosystems and thought about ways to interpret unfathomable figures with images, animation, and, in some cases, wit. They turned to such conceptual artists as Chris Jordan and graffiti artist Banksy of the United Kingdom for ideas. In the end, they came up with such enduring images as a cow floating from a red balloon and black spaces

in a blue sky. Their work involved painstaking calculations and much research.

"To me, the best way to illustrate the weight of the CO<sub>2</sub> we put into the atmosphere is by the weight of any of the bricks in that massive building," says fourth-year student Emily McGillicuddy. "Seven thousand three-hundred and twenty-three bricks equal one person's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions a year."

The biggest challenge this year for students was learning to use Adobe After Effects for animation. All four student designers had extensive experience lighting theatrical and musical productions, but creating

what amounted to four short animated films kept them all up late at night. Then came the task of representing the figure "7 billion" in binary code in the empty windows of the Pepper Building.

In the end, they all agreed that the audience and the subject moved them in new ways, but that public art is simply an extension of the theatrical design they've been studying for the last four years. "As lighting designers, we always create compositions on stage, and we always paint with light," says Alex Bright, who designed the image of the cow and the red balloon. "This is just another way." LD