

LD+A

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To make Uptown Houston more inviting to residents and visitors alike, new pedestrian luminaires are being installed along sidewalks. The luminaires provide glare-free illumination and complement the contemporary aesthetic of architectural elements throughout the district.



Along with wider sidewalks and landscaping, more than 1,000 metal halide luminaires encourage pedestrian mobility in Uptown Houston

WALK ON THE WIDER SIDE

A lot has changed for Uptown Houston since the 1940s, when a local reporter described the area as a “lonely, unlit, pockmarked booby trap for nocturnal animals and boozed-up motorists.” Over the past six decades, the district has seen an infiltration of commercial, retail and residential development that has taken it from bleak to booming. Now home to the Galleria—one of the largest retail complexes in the country—the 901-ft-tall, Philip Johnson-designed Williams Tower, and a cornucopia of other shops, restaurants, hotels, parks, offices and upscale condos, Uptown Houston has virtually every amenity a resident or visitor could need.

Well, almost everything. Until recently, it lacked something that

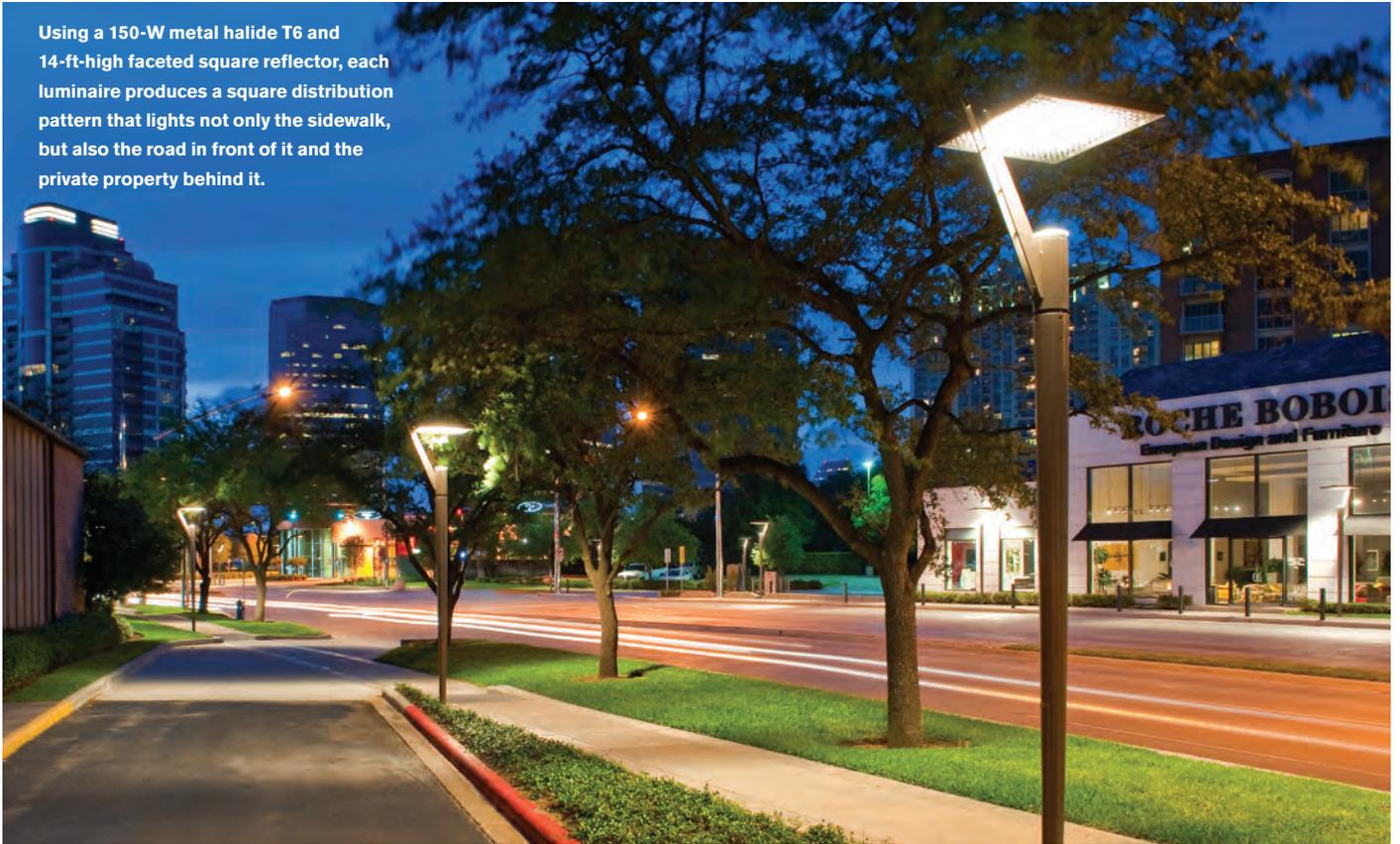
would pull all the development together: Despite major street improvements for vehicular traffic, the district had narrow, uninviting sidewalks with insufficient lighting, making it largely inaccessible for pedestrians. To create a truly vibrant urban center, the district knew the only way to drive pedestrian traffic was to make its streets more walkable. The Uptown Houston Development Authority turned to long-time partner landscape architecture firm SWA Group to design the transformation.

“In Houston, if you want people to walk, there are a few simple things that you need to do,” explains SWA Group managing principal, Scott Slaney. “You need to build sidewalks that are wide enough for people to

BY ELIZABETH HALL

PROJECT

Using a 150-W metal halide T6 and 14-ft-high faceted square reflector, each luminaire produces a square distribution pattern that lights not only the sidewalk, but also the road in front of it and the private property behind it.



walk on. Given our climate, you must have shade. You have to have a basic accessibility for people who want to cross streets, and if you want people to walk at night, you must have light.”

As part of an ongoing improvements initiative that aims to accomplish all four objectives, the authority is widening the standard 4-ft-wide sidewalks to 6 ft or more, planting additional trees for shade, altering grade for improved pedestrian access, and installing approximately 1,200 new pedestrian streetlights along roughly 14 miles of roadway.

WALK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

The streets of Uptown Houston may be a far cry from the “lonely, unlit” roads observed in the 1940s, but their widely spaced high-pressure sodium streetlights left

sidewalks dark and created little ambiance or intimacy for nighttime pedestrians. To enliven the streetscape, SWA looked for a pedestrian-level luminaire that would “create points of visible light [along the street], light people’s faces without being glaring or harsh and comply with the dark sky legislation,” says Slaney.

Moreover, SWA also wanted the fixture to be robust enough to withstand Houston’s hot climate and cohesive with other architectural elements throughout the district, such as signage and bus stops. “It’s a contemporary environment with largely contemporary architecture. Every element is dynamic in form, so it was important to find a fixture that carried forward that aesthetic of a contemporary, dynamic shape.”

After conducting on-site mock-ups with three potential luminaires, SWA selected an indirect metal halide (the Faro fixture from HessAmerica) for its light quality and “elegant” architectural design, says Slaney. “At the end of the day, aesthetically, the fixture met the criteria of being dynamic and contemporary without being too loud. Because when you put in 1,200 of something you don’t want them to scream at you.” As a finishing touch, SWA specified the luminaires in a custom “champagne gray” finish used on other architectural elements throughout the district.

FORM MEETS FUNCTION

The luminaire design is easy on the eyes in more than one sense. In addition to matching the clean-styled, contemporary aesthetic of

the district architecture, its sleek pole and reflector combination produce bright, even illumination with minimal glare. Though SWA had hoped to find an LED solution, it found the LED luminaire it mocked up to be too glary. “To get a level of light that worked on a pedestrian level, the source was incredibly glary, and it seemed like if you tried to baffle the glare, you were really impeding the performance,” says Slaney.

In contrast, the metal halide luminaire, which uses a 150-W T6 metal halide lamp and a 14-ft-high faceted square reflector, “puts out a beautiful distribution of light evenly with a fairly large pattern, and there’s a point source of light that you see from the reflector but it’s not glary. The way the reflector is engineered, it’s very difficult to get a glare spot coming back in

your eye, whether you are a pedestrian or a driver. The light quality was amazing to us,” notes Slaney. Lamps with a 3,800K color temperature complement skin tones without drastically contrasting with the warm-colored HPS roadway lights.

The square shape of the reflector produces a square illumination pattern that lights not only the sidewalks, but also the streets and property behind the sidewalks. “This is a good thing because as the area continues to develop, we find that private developers want to touch the street with outdoor cafes or plazas. So it’s nice that the pedestrian fixtures provide illumination for that zone between the street and the architecture,” says Slaney.

The expansion of private development isn’t the only thing SWA and Uptown Houston want to spur with the new lighting. “Houston isn’t known

as a walking city,” says Slaney, who hopes the new lights will revamp its image. After all, Uptown Houston is no stranger to change. 🗺️

METRICS THAT MATTER

Uptown Houston Pedestrian Mobility Project

Number of Luminaires: 1,200

Watts per Luminaire: 150



About the Designer: Scott Slaney, ASLA, is a design and managing principal in the Houston office of SWA Group. He has been practicing landscape architecture, planning and urban design since graduating from Texas A&M University. Mr. Slaney has designed projects throughout Texas, the U.S. and internationally in the Middle East, Mexico and China resulting in more than 30 professional awards. www.swagroup.com

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