

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

April 15, 2015

FROM: Ms. Lionel Shriver, 23 Horace Court Brooklyn, NY 11218

TO: Mr. Brad Lander, 456 Fifth Avenue, 3rd Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11215

Dear Mr. Lander:

I am not one of those cranks who continually badgers civic authorities with petty complaints. In fact, I have never written a letter objecting to any municipal policy. But my feelings are so strong about the recent, radical transformation of Windsor Terrace that I am moved to lodge a protest.

An ill-considered technological “improvement” and a form of visual assault, the new LED bulbs in our streetlights have had a horrific effect on daily life. The hard, blue quality of the light makes everywhere look bleak and everyone look ghoulish. Even walking around the area evenings has become unbearable. Under that loud, prying blare, I am less likely to scan the night skies and reflect idly on the meaning of life than to confess. Indeed, if they need a new means of extracting information from terrorist suspects at Guantanamo now that water-boarding is uncool, you should send the CIA a box of these bulbs.

The streetlight at the dead-end of Horace Court is immediately outside our house—though the relentless, brutal glare is so penetrating that it accosts all of our immediate neighbors as well. The new bulb is multiply more invasive than the muted, mellow tones of the original one, screaming through the smallest crack in a blind or curtain. Many of us are having to tape black plastic bags across our bedroom windows just to be able to sleep—a look I doubt will catch on in the New York Times Magazine home décor section.

Several studies have demonstrated that LED lights disturb circadian rhythms. That may sound a bit mystical, but this advice is coming from the mainstream medical establishment: make sure not to look at computer, tablet, or smart-phone screens for at least an hour before sleep, and keep your children from taking these devices to bed. Exposure to LED light makes it much more difficult both to go to sleep and to stay asleep. This counsel pertains to iPhone screens as small as 2” X 4”. Can you imagine how much more destructive of a good night’s sleep these blazing streetlights are, beaming into every crevice of the house?

I realize the new bulbs have been chosen in the interest of economy and energy efficiency. I’m sympathetic with both purposes. Thus ever since we moved to Windsor Terrace in 2004, our household has forsworn air-conditioning altogether. We keep our bedroom windows open during the summer and run a modest electric fan, even through heat waves—when, as you know, temperatures can remain in the upper nineties throughout the night. Not only do I savor the

moist, soft feel of real summer air, but I am aware that forgoing air-conditioning is the single largest contribution we can make to reducing our carbon footprint, as well as our electric bills.

Should the city not reconsider its rash embrace of LED streetlights, we will be forced not merely to put a unit in our bedroom, but probably to invest in central air. Previous summer nights, we've dined on our covered front porch to candlelight, with the bank of four windows wide open, the front door ajar, the fan purring. With no change in the streetlight, that routine will be over. All the blinds and curtains will have to be drawn, the door soundly shut. With no airflow, the temperature will become intolerable. In order to defend against that ghastly, intrusive light, we will have no choice but to batten down the hatches and run our new, costly—and unwanted—AC all evening, and all night.

Assuming that other households have also been able to get by on summer breezes until now, can we really be sure that these LED bulbs will save energy? Isn't the electricity that the air-conditioning of our house alone is bound to burn likely to exceed the electricity that one bulb is supposed to save?

I gather that our neighborhood is a guinea pig for all five boroughs, and unless the many people in this area who are upset speak out the entire city will be blighted by these wretched light bulbs. In which case, prepare your political brethren to be deluged with letters of this sort, all of which will not be so polite. They've yet to roll out these afflictions in Park Slope and Carroll Gardens, much less on the Upper West Side. Those folks are going to go bananas.

Look, I love our house. I love Horace Court, and Windsor Terrace, and Brooklyn; at the risk of cliché, I love New York. Practically dysfunctional and aesthetically grotesque, these streetlights constitute municipal vandalism. Their high-handed installation expresses disrespect for the once homey, funky, warm ambience of our neighborhood and for the people who live here.

Many other cities are contending with the same desire to cut costs and reduce carbon emissions. There must be other answers. From what I've read, this decision was primarily made by one person. Surely we can go back to the drawing board and do our homework this time. The scale of the unhappiness that this seemingly small change of policy has wreaked is all out of proportion to its benefits. Can we please revisit the issue before New York-wide installation of LEDs makes a reversal of policy impossibly expensive and effectively impossible? When Frank Sinatra sang his tribute to "the city that never sleeps," he meant to celebrate our vibrant cultural nightlife—not an urban population of hollow-eyed zombies homicidal from insomnia.

All the best, and thank you for your consideration of our concerns,

Lionel Shriver

(also writing on behalf of my husband, Jeffrey L. Williams)