

arts

Radiant river — the team illuminat

The first four bridges of London's Illuminated River project will light up next week. **Jonathan Morrison** reports

Stretching five miles from Tower Bridge in the east to Albert Bridge in the west, comprising some 69,000 LEDs and costing £45 million, the world's largest work of art is about to be unveiled in London. At least, the first section of it is.

Illuminated River, financed largely by the Rothschild Foundation and the brainchild of Lord (Jacob) Rothschild, is an ambitious project to return the dark and once dirty old Thames to the centre of life in the capital, sprinkling sparkle on to its banks and imbuing even the unloved Victorian railway bridges with a new grandeur.

The plan is to transform a handful of spans at a time until 2022. The first four — London Bridge, Cannon Street, Southwark and the Millennium Bridge — are to be lit in the middle of next week. The organisers won't say exactly when "health and safety grounds", to prevent a crowd gathering, even though it will be all over social media within a millisecond.

While such quibbles are irritating in a project that is supposed to be public — and which represents a magnificent gift to the city — the results promise to be spectacular. Not least because Leo Villareal, the man tasked with creating a light display unlike anything that has been seen before, has had an enviable success with a similar project, lighting up the Bay Bridge in San Francisco in 2013. What was initially intended to be a temporary installation, using 25,000 white LEDs attached to the suspension cables and coming to resemble noctilucent clouds, proved so popular that it had to be reinstalled in 2016.

Villareal, 52, is one half of the team that won the international Illuminated River competition at the end of 2016 and is responsible for the art direction of the London project. Meanwhile, the British team of Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands — which built the Hungerford footbridges over the Thames in 2002 and bring local architectural and aquatic expertise — are laser-scanning the 15 bridges selected, installing the LEDs, co-ordinating 40 planning applications for often grade II* and grade II listed structures, instructing teams of abseilers and generally handling the seven councils, 100 stakeholders and all the ecological and engineering challenges.

That's not to say that Brooklyn-based Villareal,

who started experimenting with light some 20 years ago at the anything-goes Burning Man festival in California, hasn't spent a long time trying to get to grips with the history, heritage and eccentricities of London. For a while the softly spoken New Yorker walked the banks of the Thames every night, listening to stories and canvassing opinion. He watched sunrise and sunset. He drew inspiration from the painters and musicians who trod the walkways before him — George Frideric Handel with his *Water Music*, Claude Monet with his paintings at Westminster, James Abbott McNeill Whistler in Chelsea — and he began to paint in his own way, creating bespoke software and an algorithm that will generate a shifting, kinetic pattern of light for the decade-long project, no two moments quite alike.

Some bridges, such as the Millennium, will be monochromatic — reflecting the never-quite-realised vision of its architect, Lord Foster, to construct a "blade of light" — while others will be much more colourful. But Villareal is keen to emphasise that it's not about "disco lighting" and drama so much as creating places for calm and reflection; the light show he has devised, or at least that his ever-evolving algorithm has, is already being compared to gazing at a waterfall or a log fire.

"I've never done anything on this scale," Villareal says, "but the commission allows me to come up with a range of treatments for the great variety of bridges. It's interpreting the site in the way that artists have always done, just using very contemporary materials, but it's exciting that people are really getting it. It doesn't demand attention, and maybe people won't even realise it's

Leo Villareal, Sarah Gaventa and Alex Lifschutz



new, but you can spend lots of time looking at it and be rewarded.

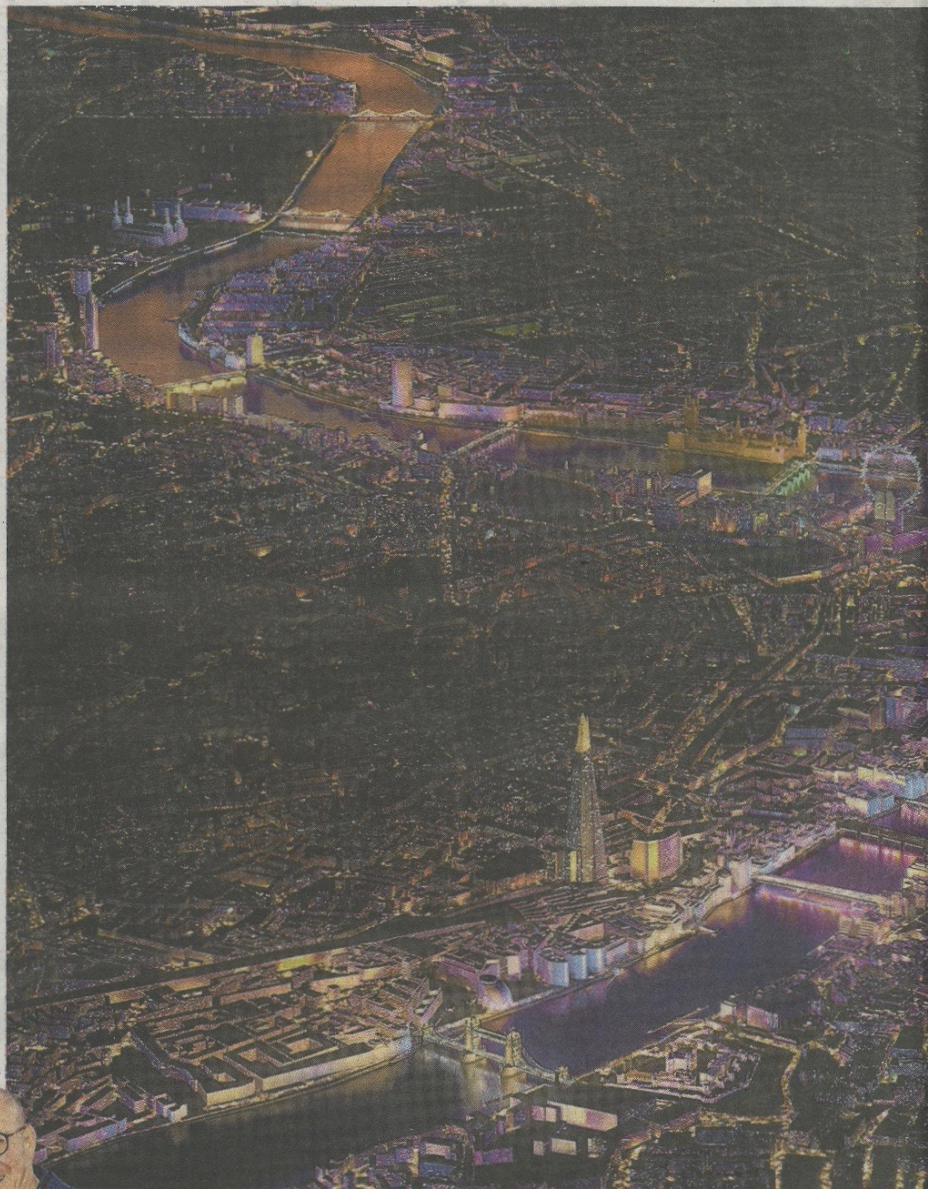
"The Thames is like a living thing — there's so much movement, and it rises and falls 5m every day — so the piece is like a mirror for all the activity around. But at the same time I've had to think hard about how to activate the bridges whilst being sensitive to the environment and using the least amount of light possible. We wanted to set an example of how to reduce the glare, whilst still being legible, and help others think about how the city could be lit."

As well as using less energy than the existing fittings on the bridges, many of which have fallen into disrepair anyway, the LEDs, with their precisely focused beams, should reduce light pollution in the centre of the capital.

One beneficiary is likely to be the wildlife; after all, fish, like London's 16th and 17th-century Puritans, prefer to have sex in the dark. And now that the Thames is one of the cleanest rivers in the world, a surprising number of species have made their homes there, from molluscs on the foreshore to seals farther out.

"It concerns me that light can be used badly," says Villareal, who studied sculpture at Yale University and once worked in a Silicon Valley research laboratory. "Let's put light where it's needed and bring out the beauty that's already there."

This emphasis on enhancing, not overawing, is one of the main reasons that Alex Lifschutz of Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands thinks that Villareal won the original competition,



ating the Thames



beating Sir David Adjaye, who is working on the controversial Holocaust Memorial by the Houses of Parliament, and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, which built the acclaimed High Line urban park in New York. "The others were one-trick ponies," Lifschutz says, not particularly diplomatically. "You got the feeling with the other entries that the bridges were just backdrops to the lights, but with Leo his work is for the greater glory. He's sensitive to the architecture, but not too sensitive. A good example of that is what he's done with Cannon Street Bridge, a robust Victorian construction, but one that's also quite majestic. It's really a symbol for the whole project: it was neglected and dark like the river and will now be painted with colour and rhythm,

patterns and intensity, and become a thing of beauty that we'll never get bored with. For me that's magic. It's pure joy in a time of furrowed brows."

Lifschutz, 67, who studied biochemistry and psychology before turning to architecture, thinks that the *Illuminated River* project could become a catalyst for a London-wide "light plan" that dims empty glass offices in favour of picking out monuments and places of cultural interest, but acknowledges there's a long way to go before it becomes policy.

"We like to think of ourselves as well governed, but it's actually quite chaotic," he says. "There's no sense of a long-term view of the city, yet most of these bridges were built at a time of great confidence and at a time when people wanted to get things done. Perhaps the real purpose of *Illuminated River* is to tell ourselves that we can do it and should get on with it."

One of the things Lifschutz wants to get on with is a new pedestrian and cycle bridge that would run alongside the Thames Barrier in east London, an area earmarked for 55,000 new homes and 75,000 new jobs. His solution is innovative in the extreme: a 530m double-leaf bascule bridge that would open to provide four channels for shipping (much like the Thames Barrier) and could accommodate four million journeys a year. But he doesn't hold out much hope of getting it funded, at least for now. "We're in a funny place right now and the government has taken a back seat," he says. "We seem to have lost the art of building cities. And, of course, Transport for London were scared off by the Garden Bridge. Maybe I should talk to the Rothschilds about it."

The charming Lifschutz, whose 80-strong practice is based in Chiswick, west London, is a fan of Gilbert and Sullivan and maintains that, based on a lifetime of experience, every engineering project, like every good comic opera, has three immutable characters. A hero is required (or perhaps two heroines in this case: the project director, Sarah Gaventa, and the principal sponsor and driving force, Hannah Rothschild, Lord Rothschild's daughter), plus a villain, and there's always a damsel in distress.

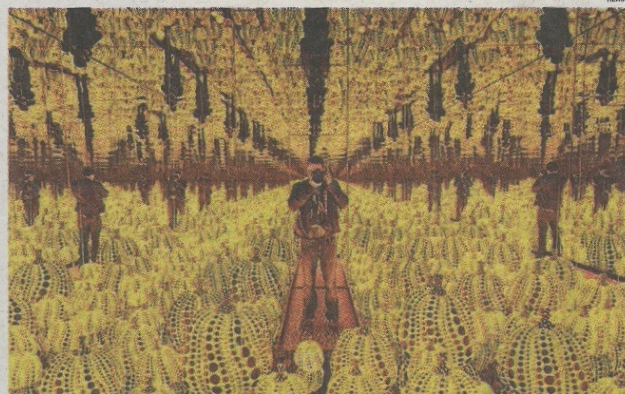
He's confident that the villain — contrary to expectation, not Boris Johnson, the principal instigator of the £53million Garden Bridge debacle, who seems born to the role — is light pollution, a luminescent miasma that threatens to overawe his project. "If you're going to light the actors on the stage, you don't need to light the ushers too," Lifschutz says.

However, he needs a moment to think about who the damsel might be. "It might be me, I suppose," he replies drolly, no doubt reflecting on the scale of the logistical challenge he accepted a year and a half ago and all the minor delays along the way. "I keep imagining them pulling the lever to turn it on and all the lights in London go out."

Still, as long as the four bridges are all aglow, maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing for once.

***Illuminated River* begins in London next week (illuminatedriver.london)**

“It’s magic. It’s pure joy in a time of furrowed brows



All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins by Yayoi Kusama. Below: *Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh and Gianfranco Iannuzzi

Let there be light! Art to brighten the place up

by Madeleine Constant

Volume by United Visual Artists, Victoria & Albert Museum, 2006

UVA is a London-based collective founded by the British artist Matt Clark that melds new technology with traditional media, often employing light and sound in striking site-specific installations. One of its best-loved works, *Volume*, was a field of glowing, sound-emitting columns in the V&A's John Madejski Garden that responded to visitors' movements. The exhibition travelled to Hong Kong, Taiwan, St Petersburg and Melbourne, and the collective has since moulded light in further works with pendulums, kinetic sculptures and curved floors.

For the City by Jenny Holzer, New York, 2005

Always looking to illuminate ineffable truths, Holzer spoke directly to New Yorkers via fragments of poetry projected at night to scroll like film credits down iconic buildings. In the same series Holzer lit up New York University's Bobst Library with excerpts from recently declassified government documents. In 2007 she went to Washington with *For the Capitol*, in which she cast on to the Potomac River quotes from two presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and John F Kennedy, about art in American society.

Bindu Shards by James Turrell, Gagosian Gallery, London, 2010

Visitors described an almost spiritual euphoria as they left James Turrell's "perceptual cell" at the Gagosian, a white metal sphere in which they lay on a bed and were sealed in to experience a psychedelic light show that bombarded them with intensely colourful, quicksilver sequences of projections. The postminimalist American artist, who is also acclaimed for his *Blinded by the Light* rooms, which saturate the viewer in coloured light, has compared his art

to "wordless thought that comes from looking into fire".

All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins by Yayoi Kusama, Dallas Museum of Art, 2017

Kusama's signature Infinity Mirror Rooms experiment with innumerable reflected, strikingly illuminated objects and tiny points of light. In this recent installation, large gourds painted in yellow acrylic with black dots populate the floor of the mirror room. The effect is enchanting and slightly trippy, and has become a favourite with art critics and selfie-takers (not mutually exclusive) the world over.

Field of Light by Bruce Munro

In landscapes all over the world British artist Bruce Munro has been sowing his *Field of Light*, comprising thousands of solar-panelled, stemmed spherules that glitter chromatically against the

dusk sky. *Field of Light* debuted at the V&A in 2004, and its 2016 reincarnation on the dusty red plains around Uluru, central Australia, was an international sensation.

Starry Night by Vincent van Gogh and Gianfranco Iannuzzi, Atelier des Lumières, Paris, 2019

Atelier des Lumières is submerging visitors in brilliant, expansive projections of Van Gogh's paintings, which span the floors, walls and ceilings of a disused foundry in the 11th arrondissement of Paris. Wandering across *Starry Night*'s glimmering river is especially magical, as is watching the digitally animated *Almond Blossoms* billow. To complement the projections and immerse us in Van Gogh's internal life, Luca Longobardi has also curated a striking modern playlist, including tracks such as Nina Simone's *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*. To December 31, atelier-lumieres.com

