To My Parents,
for being the wind beneath my wings.
A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Textiles in the Department of Textiles of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

By
Harsha Kejriwal
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Approved by Master’s Examination Committee:

Anna Gitelson-Kahn
Graduate Program Director
Textiles, Thesis Chair
Rhode Island School of Design

Lisa Scull
Senior Critic
Textiles, Thesis Advisor
Rhode Island School of Design

Anais Missakian
Interim Provost
Thesis Advisor
Rhode Island School of Design
When I first arrived in New England, I was accustomed to thinking of winters as short but pleasant periods. For me, winter was a break from the strong and relentless sunlight of summer in Central India. But the contrast between my childhood winters and the same months in the Northeastern United States was dramatic. Statistically, Providence has an average of five hours of sunlight a day whereas Central India enjoys 9.5 hours during its coldest months. This pronounced change in light piqued my interest. I was struck by the various phenomena created by natural light during these cold months. Sunlight, in its ephemeral and ethereal nature, possesses a unique ability to activate stagnant spaces. It was this interaction of light with its environment that caught my interest.

As a textile designer, I aimed to translate this visual quality and the resultant activation of space through the medium of textiles. I aimed to capture light’s translucency, ephemerality, luminosity and, most importantly, its movement through pattern, colour and weave structure. While the ambient quality that light holds is intangible, I believe it can be interpreted through the tactile medium of textiles. Through researching different phenomena of natural light and interpreting the resulting illusions it creates, I aimed to translate the qualities of light onto a flat surface – in this case, woven fabric for an immersive experience in interior spaces.
the monsoon season, rains cool down the earth—their winds providing relief from the unrelenting heavy heat. Until I moved to the United States’s Northeast Coast, I fully believed in my preference for cloudy days. My introduction to the term “seasonal depression” happened some time around last October. Those around me, who’d spent years in the States, anticipated and prepared for it by purchasing S.A.D. (seasonal affective disorder) lamps. In light of my enjoyable experiences of winters, I confidently dismissed this concept of seasonal depression. To me, winters meant outdoor activities under a gentle sun. It had always been a time to travel.

Ask anyone who’s grown up in India, and they’ll tell you that an overcast day is the kind of day they’d like to be outdoors. On a day without clouds, one becomes used to an ever-present and robust sunlight, a sunlight so harsh that it burns through your skin. In light of this reality, an overcast day becomes a momentary relief from this scorching sun, accompanied by winds dense with humidity. The evenings bring a glimpse of this relief during a 30 to 40 minute pause in the day where the sun sets and the balmy summer becomes bearable, dare I say, even enjoyable. An overcast day—full of grey, simmering clouds—is welcomed. It’s something to look forward to in anticipation of the rains. During the monsoon season, rains cool down the earth—their winds providing relief from the unrelenting heavy heat. Until I moved to the United States’s Northeast Coast, I fully believed in my preference for cloudy days.

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within my country, a time where all the best fruits and flowers bloomed. Back home, winter mornings were spent under an otherwise harsh sun, and evenings were meant to enjoy whatever little cool winds India had to offer, accompanied by an Indian barbeque, or sigdi.

When November in Providence came along, daylight savings time ended. In the absence of the sun’s warmth, the cold, biting wind against my skin felt miserable. The morning ceased to feel like a new day. At 6:00 PM, the walk back home became hauntingly eerie. It took me a solid three weeks to come to the realisation that my productivity was lower than ever and that I was, in fact, experiencing a concept I had confidently but ignorantly dismissed.

This experience piqued my interest about an element I had previously detested: sunlight. As I took notice of each day from my morning window, I began to appreciate the dynamic diversity of light quality. The light of sunnier days played with the structures in the alleyway outside my window, casting the most interesting projections on the ceiling of my bedroom. Meanwhile, gloomier days felt as though they were awash in shades of blue and grey.
Natural light varies greatly in its colour temperature which contributes to its ever-changing mood. Morning and evening lights tend to be warmer while the midday light often has a tinge of blue, making it seem cooler. The temperature shift depends on various external factors including but not limited to, atmosphere, weather, geographical location and the position of the sun. These temperature shifts in colour contribute greatly to the experience of a space that could be awash in shades of orange and gold or grey and blue. The most intangible aspect of light ends up being the most activating in a space. Light has been at the centre of artist research and study for centuries. Painters have used light as depictions of the divine or today, through contemporary, expressive lenses. Poets have used it literally and metaphorically to describe various spaces, scenarios and situations. To me, it is the fluid nature of light, the “nothing-ness” of it that makes it personal to each individual and yet universal in its reception.
Monet is known for giving light the centre stage and making it an important element in his paintings. With his haystack paintings, the haystacks begin to diminish in importance and what remains is light. The hierarchy shifts. The light becomes the subject and not the supporting element. James Turrell, an American artist whose extensive works in light have been revolutionary, talks about this in the book James Turrell, A Retrospective. The Monet painting served as one of many inspirations for Turrell to not make art with light but make light the art. His works are great examples of creating spaces solely with light. The impact of light is elevated with the use of large scale space and by making the space devoid of any object. Light, unless pointed out as the main element, tends to be a supporting character. Not easily registered. Not easily taken note of.
Olafur Eliasson, an artist of Icelandic-Danish origin known for his art installations, addresses the relationship between light and the viewer in “Room for One Colour” from 1997. A large-scale spatial installation in which a closed room was lit by mono-frequency lamps, this piece reduces the visitor’s perception of colour to yellow and black. In doing so, Eliasson intends for his viewers to experience the colours present by limiting other colours. It takes this exaggeration of one single colour in an empty room to make the viewer more attentive to everything else. He famously reasoned with the director of the gallery to make the space devoid of any physical object. He argues that it would be the absolute omission of any physical object that would let the artwork be about the light and light only. His works further confirmed my observation that despite it being essential, the presence and impact of light goes unnoticed unless explicitly pointed out.

EMBRACING LIGHT IN ISOLATION
Eliasson addresses the question of “how do I show nothingness?” Nothingness could mean the atmosphere in a dark room, as in the artificial rainbow he created in his installation “Beauty” in 1993. The rainbow is created with the help of a hose dispensing droplets of water and beams of light interacting with it, thus activating the space. The idea that the atmosphere in the room needed to interact with water droplets and beams of light to get activated enough to have a presence supported my research of elements interacting with each other to create an impact. [3]
Peter Zumthor, a Swiss architect, takes a holistic approach to architecture that pays close attention to the sensory and emotional experience within a space. In his book, Atmosphere, he addresses the various elements that come together to create ambience. The elements of light, material, and colour are all tackled with equal importance. He is attentive to the space that the building is situated in and how the space and the form have a symbiotic relationship. He considers the atmosphere an aesthetic quality. He further expands on the idea by describing a geographical space and addressing not only the object in his direct line of observation but everything else around it: the forms, sounds, temperature, textures. These elements complement or contrast with each other, creating a complete and immersive experience.

Zumthor’s ideas further led me to take notice of light’s interaction within my surroundings. On all my walks this winter, I found myself captivated by the dappled light from the trees outside. The classroom windows framed the shadows of Providence’s giant buildings – bending at all sorts of angles and onto the sidewalks. Even more interesting was to see how these shadows changed so quickly. With a change in the movement of the light, my point of observation, or the direction of the winds, the complexity, intricacy and dynamism of these shadows all contributed to my interest. Ever more engaged in this phenomenon, I was pleasantly surprised by my sudden fascination with such a seemingly mundane topic such as sunlight. Without conscious effort, I now always took note of the quality, hue, intensity of light and the variations in all of them. It felt natural and almost automatic to be aware of the difference in my engagement with the light and ultimately, my state.
Like the air we breathe...

we take light for granted. It is so fundamental to our being that we don't tend to dwell on it. And yet it is light's elemental nature that gives it the potential to be so powerfully enlightening," Lynn M. Herbert notes in her essay titled "Spirit and Light and the Immensity Within."  
Light is a crucial element for human creativity and wellbeing but can still go unnoticed. Light, to me, is best registered when it interacts with its environment. It’s the ephemeral quality of light that activates everything stagnant, thus giving it life.
Petra Blaisse, Dutch designer and founder of the design firm Inside Outside, seamlessly incorporates textiles, interior design, landscape design and interaction of interior space with the outside light to create interactive and dynamic spaces. Her work sits at the intersection of art, design, and functionality to create pieces that transform spaces. Blaisse challenges the notion of traditional interior spaces by blurring the line between the inside and the outside to create experiential designs through employing her understanding of light and materiality. Her installation “Re-Set” at the 13th Venice Biennale is a spatial intervention through textile. It consists of large curtains suspended from tracks on the ceiling that assist in its movement and change positions at regular intervals. The curtain in the empty room interacts with the sunlight outside and the movement of the curtain along with the sun changes the light projection and shadow formation being cast on the textile, ceiling and floor. The employment of light is further accentuated by placing mirrors on the roof to catch light from the rising and setting sun. The textile activates a motionless space not just by its presence but by capturing the movement and ephemerality of light to further elevate the interior of the space, by making it dynamic. It is the employment of the dynamism of the exterior integrated in the stagnant interior that, to me, serves as one of the inspirations for this project. [8]
The activation of still, monotonous structures and spaces through the intervention of light has been my primary point of interest. The element creates a sense of movement and vitality in an otherwise stagnant space. At first glance, the registration of the various objects within a space in their three-dimensional forms is easy to comprehend and does not require continuous observation. But with light activating these objects, they cast the most intricate, complex, and layered shadows. The complexity results in a certain lack of comprehension of the resultant visual. The non-continuous imagery in these projections demand prolonged engagement. A need to keep observing it, enjoying the constant sense of movement. It is this phenomenon that served as my inspiration for the project. The idea of layers, movement, and complexities in my primary source of inspiration flowed into this process of developing these images by continuously layering the visuals with various techniques like paper cutting, origami, projections and collaging.

A final reflection

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A memory so clear, like I experienced it yesterday. A cloudy day casting a grey veil across the sky during a sweltering hot summer. The cool breeze providing respite from the relentless heat wave that gripped the city. A temporary relief. Ethereal ambience created with the unparalleled blend of the smell of the earth and soil in anticipation of rains, the gentle movement in the trees- the yearning and eagerness, evident. The diffused light filtering through the clouds-soft, inviting. The ease of the breeze and the softness of the light that entered my room to create ever changing tapestries on the walls captivated me. It was the momentary transformation of my room into this sanctuary where I found myself mesmerised and lost and comforted all at the same time.

Sanctuary attempts to capture this captivating visual narrative by transforming a space to create an immersive experience through textiles. The rectilinear forms, upholstered in Jacquard woven fabric come alive to create visual kinetic energy. This combined with the backdrop results in a space that invites the viewer to engage, observe and immerse themselves in a sensory experience.
Bibliography


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