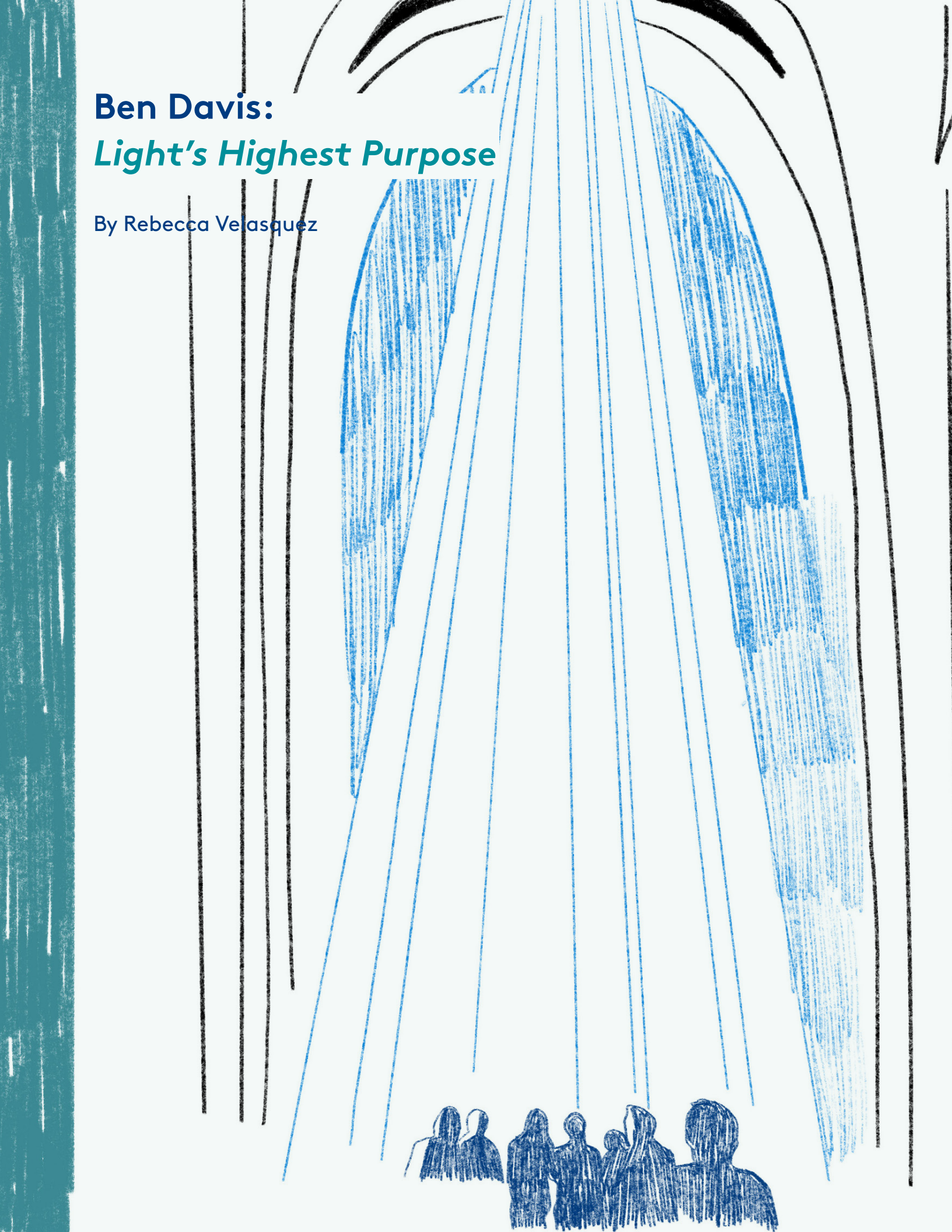


Ben Davis: *Light's Highest Purpose*

By Rebecca Velasquez



Stories allow us to understand the various processes that everyone takes to get to where we are today. Stories allow us to see connections and inspiration, and give us hope. The “Ben Davis: Light’s Highest Purpose” event hosted by CCA’s Architecture Lecture Series allowed visionary Ben Davis to explain his own life story and his projects’ stories in more depth. Ben Davis grew up in a shabby neighborhood in Boston, full of boarded-up houses and drug use in the streets. “It was challenging, it was violent, it was a strange upbringing,” he said. Davis decided to take life into his own hands and hitchhike through California, which led him to San Francisco. He met San Francisco in the ‘90s, a revolutionary time. Walking through Market Street, he realized San Francisco was chaos. People were openly naked and having sex. This was shocking yet beautiful and mind-blowing to Davis. He had come in an era of pride, a time when San Francisco was blossoming. Coming from a rough neighborhood, he was determined not to work a regular old day job, so he decided to study at Sacramento City College. During his academic career, he attended a job fair where he saw companies like Bank of America and Visa offering work, but he couldn’t stand the idea of sitting down in a cubicle. He also knew he didn’t want to be the guy who would get addicted to cocaine. It seemed like fate: one day, he saw that the Sacramento Bee, a local newspaper in Sacramento, spoke of a Boston Harbor Cleanup project. He instantly thought he could go back home and clean up the Boston environment. This cleanup sparked his passion for environmental science, and he aspired to open a small interior design shop but wasn’t qualified enough to do so. So, he moved to San Francisco once again in 1994, where he founded a creative agency called Words Pictures Ideas with the mantra “Do Good. Have Fun. Learn.”

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The San Francisco-based arts nonprofit Illuminate is a master at transforming emotionally overlooked forms of architecture into beloved civic expressions. Ben Davis recognizes that he needs community to make things happen. Illuminate's mission is to rally large groups of people together to create impossible works of public art that free humanity's better nature. Illuminate brings together world-class multidisciplinary teams committed to delivering safe, elegant, and soulful expressions.

You're likely already familiar with Illuminate's work and don't know it. Davis was biking to the farmers market one early morning when he biked underneath the Bay Bridge. Recalling that the Bay Bridge is the second busiest bridge in America, he asked himself, "What if the Bay Bridge were a canvas of light?" He was afraid to ask himself that question since he wasn't sure if this was a question that came out of love or fear. He knew it was not a crazy idea, but it was beautiful. Two years later, in 2012, he teamed up with artist Lea Villareal to plan the lighting of the world's largest LED light sculpture. The next step was funding. Though many corporations wanted to fund it, he knew they thought of the bridge as a sponsorship, looking to add their logo to the bridge. Davis was determined that corporate money would not touch the art. "We will live and die with integrity in this project," he said. With this, David and Villareal produced a project entirely from the generosity of various small organizations in the community. This piece of public art inspires hope for people who constantly use the Bay Bridge and honors it after 75 years of being open and in use.


Today, 11 years later, Davis has visions of what San Francisco can and will be, and how the city can speak through the use of art. Davis knew there was an opportunity to create more art since he saw how

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artists worldwide began imitating the Bay Bridge LED sculpture. He knew he wanted to make more than a piece of art—he wanted to expand a collection of expressions, changing the energetic shift of San Francisco. With future projects, he says he is “creating with a sense of purpose and purity.” Biking in San Francisco allows him to understand the city and see its beautiful opportunities.

One of these opportunities is located in Golden Gate Park. There, Davis created a project called Photosynthesis. This flower-powered light art exhibition glows from sunset to midnight to celebrate the 50th anniversary of 1967's Summer of Love, a social phenomenon where young people gathered in unity to have fun, be free, and have hope. The installation transforms the Conservatory of Flowers into a unique illuminated canvas inspired by the rare flowers grown in the Conservatory. These events significantly increased attendance at the Conservatory even after being a staple in Golden Gate Park for so long.

The Grace Light at Grace Cathedral is another opportunity in which Davis saw his story. Davis was inspired by the sound of God within the Cathedral, leading him to consider the light of God. This helped them reinvent the idea of this piece. This project now needed to be fused with the sound of light, meaning the result would be unpredictable. Getting this project up and running took a lot of trial and error. At first, cables for the light installation were everywhere and created a tripping hazard. The sound of light had to be thought through and decided what type of sound the light best represented. He reached out to UCSF to make sure the project could happen, working with electricians and engineers to carry out the vision of light throughout the space in relation to the sound of the light.



Regardless of the many opportunities that San Francisco offers, Davis explains how he has always been intellectually insecure. He feels like his brain is a spiderweb where he could screw around, and anything big would make a hole, and he would have to mend it. This transparency shows all of us that even the greats have insecurities. We are all humans trying to make a better world. Davis tells us that you never know when opportunities can arise, but it is up to you to make it go from impossible to possible. All you need is vision and people to share that with. In the artist's words, "It takes faith."

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