

A photograph of the Hoan Bridge in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at night. The bridge is illuminated with warm orange lights along its arch and structure, with blue lights along the walkways. The lights are reflected in the water below. The sky is dark blue with some clouds.

An abundance of connections to uplift a community

Photo Credit: Kristine Hinrichs

Case study:
Hoan Bridge,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

How dynamic lighting
transformed Milwaukee's
Hoan Bridge into a
multi-faceted gateway

“ I want this to be a city where, in every single neighborhood on a summer evening, families can tune out everyday stressors, relax, and spend quality time with each other on their front porch.”

Tom Barrett
Mayor of Milwaukee, WI

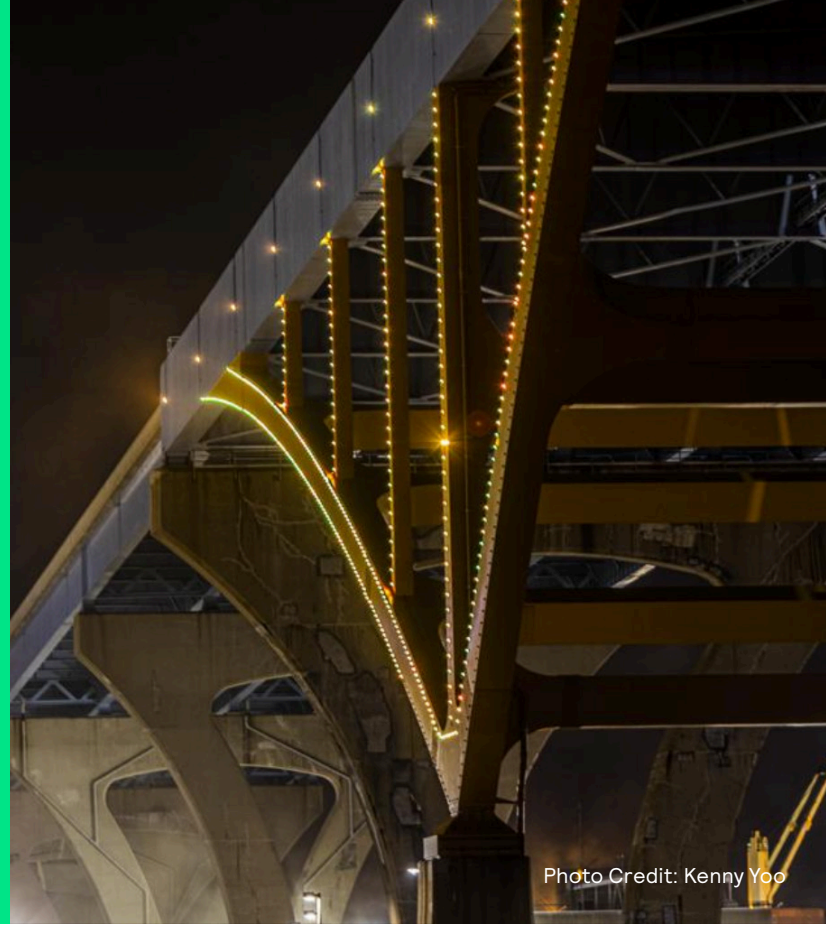


Photo Credit: Kenny Yoo

A good land by the water

Perched along Lake Michigan's southwestern shore, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is a flourishing embodiment of convergence. It is here that the Milwaukee, Menomonee, and Kinnickinnic rivers meet before ending their journeys. It is also where various indigenous tribes honored the land that they called “good,” “beautiful,” and “gathering place by the water.”

As the largest city in the state, Milwaukee offers a vibrant hustle and bustle, yet retains a quintessential midwestern charm. About 1.4 million people live in the greater metro area, and with no racial or ethnic group comprising a majority of the population, Milwaukee is proud to unite as one multiracial and multicultural community.

Ensuring that all citizens, regardless of race or background, have a chance to prosper is top of mind for Milwaukee's leadership. This goal is intertwined with Mayor Tom Barrett's vision for safety and security in the city.

A prosperous and growing economy is also part of Mayor Barrett's vision. While Milwaukee's economy is bolstered by its strong historical reputation in manufacturing and shipping industries, there is room for improvement to keep pace with comparable metro areas. Additionally, attracting other industries and small business owners will help to balance economic diversity and ease the path towards Mayor Barrett's forward-thinking vision.

A vision to connect

Michael Hostad, Executive Director at The Commons, Greater Milwaukee Committee, and Ian Abston, Urban Alchemist at Wired Properties, also had a vision. Unbeknownst to them at the onset, it would evolve to dovetail with the mayor's vision.

These colleagues were motivated to support the Milwaukee business community by connecting emerging leaders with established leaders. It occurred to them that a bridge was the perfect analogy for the notion of connecting generations. This inspired them to consider naming the group after the largest piece of infrastructure in the city, the iconic Daniel Hoan Memorial Bridge.

As they started the process to create the group, the duo's lawyer encouraged them to speak with Daniel Hoan's grandson, Dan Steininger. Dan was fully supportive of the idea and mentioned in passing that adding lights to the bridge would be a great project. He shared an old newspaper article about how the bridge was supposed to be lit as part of a reconstruction project, but the lighting portion never came to fruition.

Although Michael and Ian left that meeting still focused on creating a group that connected new and experienced professionals, that seed of an idea – lighting the bridge – was firmly planted in their minds. The seed quickly blossomed into a new idea that would permanently transform Milwaukee's nighttime skyline and forge untold connections throughout the entire Milwaukee community.



Photo Credit: Kenny Yoo

The Daniel Hoan Memorial Bridge, or Hoan Bridge, was named after Milwaukee's longest serving mayor (1916-1940). Constructed in the early 1970s, this six-lane, tied arch bridge briefly earned the nickname "The Bridge to Nowhere" as the I-794 Lake Freeway construction project was stalled and the bridge had nothing to connect to. In the late 1970s, the interstate was completed, and the bridge finally opened to connect traffic over the Milwaukee River inlet between Milwaukee's southeastern tip and Bay View neighborhood.

Connecting from a different approach

Over a few short weeks, Michael and Ian mulled a project to light the Hoan Bridge. Their opinions morphed from “that’s just crazy” to “it could be pretty cool.” Then one night, and one impression, thrust the idea into reality.

Michael and Ian were separately watching a Milwaukee Bucks professional basketball game on television. It was the team’s first nighttime home game to be broadcast to a national audience. Bucks power forward Giannis Antetokounmpo was set to dominate the court. The team, the fans, and the entire city were electrified with anticipation and excitement.

Prior to the opening tip-off, a broadcast camera scanned Milwaukee and Lake Michigan from above. The resulting scene, sent to televisions near and far, panned around notable landmarks including the towering U.S. Bank Center, the elegant University Club Tower, and the sleek Northwestern Mutual Tower and Commons, which was still under construction at the time. The aerial tour ended in the Harbor District with the Hoan Bridge.

Unfortunately, the camera footage from the Bucks game was taken at night. It was an unlit bridge surrounded by a river of darkness. “It’s a beautiful bridge that won architectural awards, and during the day, it looks blue and gold,” Ian mentions. “That’s really nice because those are the colors of the city as well as the Milwaukee Brewers [professional baseball team] ... It really bothered me that this was the last look, and the lasting impression, that our city sent to millions of basketball viewers around the world.”

Their goal was clear. They needed to connect to people’s hearts. They needed to demonstrate that Milwaukee is a different and special city. They needed to light the Hoan Bridge.

The basketball game itself became a blur to Michael and Ian as the text messages flew between them in rapid succession.

And so, two private citizens embarked on a journey to light a municipal bridge. Light the Hoan was born.



Connecting around a common goal

The first step that Michael and Ian took after co-founding Light the Hoan was to acknowledge that they knew nothing about lighting. Or bridges, for that matter. What they did know, however, was how to ask for help and build connections between subject matter experts that could aid in the cause.

They enlisted help to build a website and put out a call for volunteers. The number of people who responded surprised them, although they admit that some were skeptical that the project could be fully realized. Undeterred, the fledgling group, including web designers, videographers, drone operators, and even T-shirt designers, soldiered onward, applying their individual skills to a shared goal.

Next, they needed money. Fundraising was critical for Light the Hoan's success. As one of the public outreach incentives, donors could symbolically claim a unique light location on the bridge and add a personalized dedication. The minimum threshold of \$25 was accessible to anyone and helped to instill a sense of ownership in the project.

The light's exact location and dedication could be viewed on the Light the Hoan website.

Although the public fundraising helped to raise awareness and instill a sense of shared ownership among the community, it wasn't enough to fully finance the project. Light the Hoan also needed private donations. For this, the group connected to, and shared their vision with, local foundations, corporations, and philanthropists.

WEC Energy Group was one of the corporations that Michael and Ian approached. After an initial meeting, WEC Energy's President and CEO, Kevin Fletcher, attended Summerfest with his son, who was visiting from out of state.

Summerfest is an eleven-day annual music festival held at Milwaukee's Henry Maier Festival Park. It features local and national musicians and attracts approximately 800,000 visitors on a year.

In an unexpected twist of fate, Mr. Fletcher's son pointed to the nearby Hoan Bridge and remarked how nice the bridge would look if it were lit at night. A very short time later, WEC Energy Group signed on to be Light the Hoan's first corporate donor.

“

It was amazing to see and hear so many stories that tug at the heartstrings,” Michael comments. “Even before it was lit, these stories told us that this bridge meant so much to so many people in different ways.”

Michael Hostad
Executive Director at The Commons,
Greater Milwaukee Committee



Connecting to facilitate the process

As more corporate and individual donors joined in Light the Hoan's mission, Michael and Ian were wondering how they would navigate construction logistics and the unfamiliar world of lighting systems. At this time, Signify reached out to lend a helping hand, get the project off the ground, and keep it running smoothly.

It started with building trust. The local Signify representative sat down with Michael and Ian and formulated a tangible process roadmap, including recommendations on how to best approach key steps along the way. The rep also walked the team through details of many other Signify bridge lighting projects from around the world. "It wasn't a sales pitch," Michael maintains. "It felt more like a comfortable partnership where we could rely on him to keep our best interests in mind." Ian adds,

"We wanted the best for Milwaukee, and Signify represented that. We knew that we were working with a leader in the lighting industry."

Signify's assistance wasn't just limited to knowledge of the lighting system. In fact, it helped to connect Light the Hoan with the proper government contacts and allies in other agencies.

Connecting to navigate bureaucracy

As private citizens trying to alter a municipal structure, the Light the Hoan team wasn't sure how they would be received as they interfaced with various government offices for the necessary approvals. They were delighted to learn that they had friendly advocates within Milwaukee's local Department of Transportation (DOT) office.

In recalling the old article about the bridge reconstruction project that Dan Steininger shared with them earlier, they learned that much of the upfront work completed back then, including detailed engineering drawings, was applicable and useful for the current lighting project.

"Even though Mayor Barrett and the city were helpful and supportive of our mission, it's still complicated to maneuver through the necessary government processes. We're so thankful that Signify was by our side the whole time," Ian conveys. He notes that Signify's reputation added credibility when meeting with various DOT officials, and their industry knowledge helped to address DOT questions and concerns regarding legal, technical, logistical, and other issues.

No detail was too big or too small to handle. Ian recalls Signify bringing together the Milwaukee and Minneapolis DOTs, and also bringing together people who worked on similar projects around the world, to discuss best practices. Additionally, Signify recommended having an economic development survey performed to gauge how much additional tax revenue the city would gain once the Hoan Bridge was lit.

Photo Credit: Kenny Yoo



Connecting the broader community

After nearly four years, this community-led grassroots effort finally paid off. On October 22, 2020, the west side of the Hoan Bridge was officially illuminated to much fanfare, including a custom musical light show and live local television coverage.

Mayor Barrett states, “People love it because it’s fun, but it’s also provided a lot of very positive energy. The COVID-19 pandemic made 2020 a really challenging year, and the bridge lighting uplifted our entire community at a time when people were feeling pretty bleak and unsure.”

Even after the initial lighting event, the illuminated Hoan Bridge represented a unique opportunity for people to connect with each other outside in a socially distanced manner, creating a sense of community, joy, and unity during the pandemic.

Community engagement was a critical factor to bring this project to fruition, and today remains at the core of Light the Hoan. The lights are viewed as a community asset and something for people to unify around. As such, the community has a voice in how the bridge is lit.

The lights celebrate holidays. Christmas, Halloween, Independence Day ... holidays are more jubilant with light! Light the Hoan worked with the Milwaukee Jewish Federation to create a custom Hanukkah-themed light show featuring the eight bridge verticals. This light show may qualify for the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest lit menorah in the world.

The lights build awareness. The Hoan Bridge lights pulsed red, like a heartbeat, for three days as part of a Healthcare Heroes promotion honoring healthcare workers at the frontlines of the pandemic. A custom light show provided a solemn remembrance of those who died from COVID-19. Teal shone from the lights to observe domestic violence awareness. Light rainbows supported the LGBTQ community.



In times of crisis, light can be a symbol of hope and comfort. We know that lighting a bridge doesn't solve our health or social challenges, but from day one, we wanted this project to be about more than lights on a bridge.”

Michael Hostad
Co-founder, Light The Hoan



Dynamic architectural lights on the Hoan Bridge reflect the spirit of Milwaukee. The ability to change these lights at a moment's notice and create light shows means that every season, festival, or event feels even more special. The lights may be easily programmed, managed, or changed using an intuitive content app.



The lights enhance brand visibility. Corporations can sponsor light shows synced to live music. Every drum kick or bassline is underscored by a flashing, throbbing light. Corporations can also host a lighting scenario for a non-profit that is near and dear to their hearts. They can sponsor color-coded visual weather forecasts from a local weather affiliate. Fundraising galas on the water or under the bridge can playfully employ the bridge lights to articulate donation progress. Once the goal is reached, the lights dance like confetti falling upon, and reflecting off, the water below. These sponsorships are a key revenue generator in keeping the bridge lights operating without the need for municipal funds.

And of course, for Milwaukee's avid sports fans, the lights pay tribute to the Milwaukee Brewers major league baseball team, Milwaukee Bucks national basketball team, Green Bay Packers professional football team, and any number of local collegiate sports teams. The instant the home team scores, lights on the bridge provide a visual celebration that matches the enthusiasm of the spectators themselves.

In fact, on July 20, 2021 in front of a hometown crowd, the Milwaukee Bucks clinched the NBA Championship. As frenzied fans took to the streets

to celebrate this achievement, they were treated to a dazzling and animated celebration of sparkling lights, in cream and green per the team's colors, cascading across the bridge. The moment captured the essence that the entire city, from people to structures, was united in community pride. The bridge symbolized Milwaukee's moment to shine brightly on a national stage.

The Hoan Bridge lights attract visitors from near and far, helping to create and strengthen a positive emotional connection to Milwaukee. This also helps to boost tourism. Mayor Barrett says, "It is a wonderful atmosphere, and in less than a year, the bridge became a magnet and landmark for our community."

On any given day, visitors seen are photographing the bridge, using it as a background for selfies, capturing videos of the lights in action, or piloting drones for a bird's eye view. The visitors become unofficial city ambassadors as they upload this content on social media. The alluring scenes and stories beckon others to experience the illuminated Hoan Bridge, and all the greatness that Milwaukee offers, first-hand.

Connecting across generations

During the Light the Hoan fundraising process, the team's broad contact network opened a path for yet another unique and lasting way to connect Milwaukeeans. One such network colleague was Mark Fairbanks, Executive Director at Islands of Brilliance.

The non-profit Islands of Brilliance organization helps local children and young adults on the autism spectrum to develop technical, social, and emotional skills in an immersive, project-based learning environment. Various programs enable strong bridges to be built between volunteers and staff and their students.

As the Light the Hoan team talked with Mr. Fairbanks, they discovered an opportunity for the two organizations to leverage common ground for the greater good. They theorized that a virtual environment, using the Hoan Bridge lights, would be much more exciting and interactive than a traditional theoretical programming app as students learned these skills. It was feasible to expand on this opportunity, and align with other like-minded organizations, to promote science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines among developing generations. And so, Code the Hoan was born.

Today, Code the Hoan uses the Hoan Bridge lights as a teaching and learning tool to develop coding and programming skills among students in grades five through twelve. In addition to Light the Hoan and Islands of Brilliance, the partnership includes the Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE), the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, Signify, Discovery World, 88Nine Radio Milwaukee, and SHARP Literacy.

As they learn and develop skills, students can design custom lighting schemes, including syncing dynamic lighting designs with songs written by local musicians.

"Code the Hoan is one of the most exciting things to come out of this project," declares Ian. "The bridge looks beautiful at night and helps to build community and pride, but knowing that we can also inspire creativity and curiosity among the next generation here in Milwaukee is a testament to the lasting legacy of lighting the Hoan Bridge." He also notes that while this is unique to Milwaukee, a similar initiative could easily garner interest in other cities with Signify's lit assets.



Photo Credit: Kristine Hinrichs

“

I attended a Code the Hoan event where students were configuring different lighting aspects of the bridge, and it was great to see young people having so much fun while learning and developing skills that could shape the trajectory of their lives.”

Tom Barrett

Mayor of Milwaukee, WI

Connecting to the future

In less than one year since the Hoan Bridge's dynamic lighting system and Code the Hoan debuted, the emotional impact on individuals and the greater community has been palpable. During even the bleakest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lights symbolized beacons of hope. Donor dedications on the Light the Hoan website reinforced love for family, friends, co-workers, strangers, and the city itself. "Frankly, our biggest month of bulb dedications came after we lit the bridge, not before," divulges Michael. "People still want to engage and be part of a project that is truly community-driven, not owned by a corporation or funded by the government."

Ian adds, "Now the work is making sure the lights remain a community asset, while maintaining the fine balance of saying yes to the community and non-profits, but also connecting corporations into the equation so that we can fund all of these great causes."

Fortunately, their revenue model has ensured that the lights remain lit for generations.

And while the group's ongoing fundraising efforts now include lighting the east side of the bridge, they still consider the project to be a complete success today.

Beyond the emotional and community impacts, the illuminated Hoan Bridge is a harbinger of economic prosperity for Milwaukee, and especially for its Harbor District. The increased economic activity in this area will go a long way in supporting the mayor's vision and keeping pace with similarly sized cities. With expanded green space and additional focus along Milwaukee's lakefront, the area is ideal to host community events or visually highlight as part of Milwaukee's skyline. This attracts visitors and tourists from all over.

Frank D. Alioto

December 3, 2020

To Frankie. This bridge symbolizes the love you have for Milwaukee and the two neighborhoods it connects – Bay View and the East Side. For us, it also symbolizes your superpower of connecting the past to the present, people to each other, and denizens and visitors alike to the energy, culture, and beauty of Milwaukee. Love, Rachelle, Sam and Ally

Stacie H. Rosenzweig

December 3, 2020

"Ellison, where do we live?" I asked one summer evening, looking north at the skyline from South Shore Park. "More walkie," my then-toddler told me, before grabbing my arm to go for a walk on the beach. This light is dedicated to Milwaukee's next generation, so wherever their walks take them, they can find their way home.

Erik Kennedy

December 3, 2020

To all of my favorite Milwaukee leaders and treasures who continue to be committed to building more diverse, inclusive, accessible #onecommunity for all while changing the narrative of Milwaukee. Thank you to these leaders/friends for allowing me to be a part of this movement and embracing a transplant, who has made Milwaukee his foundation and helping me fall in love with it.

What sets the illuminated Hoan Bridge apart from most other lit assets around the world is that procuring, designing, installing, operating, and maintaining the lighting system is fully funded by private dollars. No government funds are used.



Photo Credit: Kenny Yoo

Since the Hoan Bridge was lit, the area has been revitalized from a nondescript industrial area to the alluring mixed-use Harbor District. Companies across varied industries, including two large corporations, are moving into the Harbor District and providing local job opportunities. Local housing development has also increased.

In kind with the energy-saving lighting system, much of the Harbor District development is being executed with a strong emphasis on sustainability.

“We’re so proud of Light the Hoan and what it’s done for Milwaukee,” affirms Mayor Barrett. “The Hoan Bridge is so much more than a community asset that connects people, places, and things; it’s a gateway to engage with others to move the city forward in a socially and environmentally responsible manner.”

Connecting with other visionaries

Time and time again, light can be used to positively impact moods and communities. Light the Hoan continues to find new ways to encourage connections throughout Milwaukee. It’s co-founders, Michael and Ian, also seek to connect with other people around the world who have a vision for their own community. Ian relates, “To those with an idea ... don’t be discouraged if you don’t have expertise. Just dive in headfirst and the rest will fall into place.”

They are eager to connect with others, learn from them, share their Light the Hoan experience, trade best practices, and discuss any aspect of a community-driven lighting project from start to finish. In essence, they are in a position to create and strengthen a welcoming community of lit asset enthusiasts who want to enrich their own hometown communities.

The position is unique in that, as private citizens, they had to approach the project differently than government entities—including scaling and profitability and sponsorships. The common trait that this group shared with government entities was that Signify was by their side helping to bring the multi-year project to fruition and remaining a strong partner to this day.

Signify's Interact Landmark software is used to remotely monitor, manage, and maintain the dynamic architectural lighting assets and content of buildings, bridges, stadiums and iconic structures, including the Hoan Bridge. This cloud-based platform makes it easy to create and trigger color-changing light shows on a smartphone, tablet, or PC from anywhere in the world.



Photo Credit: Adam Pinson

Connected lighting system details

As a global leader in lighting innovation, Signify frequently supports non-profit, private, and government organizations to incorporate unique and effective lighting solutions into landmark buildings, bridges, stadiums and other high-profile structures around the world.

Fixtures

Color Kinetics offers rugged, outdoor-rated white and color-changing light in a wide range of form factors, output levels, and light distribution patterns to bring each project's unique vision to life. The LED chemistry provides high quality white and dynamic color in the same luminaire with maximum color consistency. These lighting systems can be designed and installed quickly and easily to create the exact configuration necessary for each unique project, bringing bright and beautiful illumination to structures of all sizes and shapes. Color Kinetics luminaires deliver superior light output, long life, highly reliable operation, simple commissioning, and secure remote monitoring and management.

Light the Hoan utilizes 1,851 Color Kinetics luminaires, including our FlexElite and ArchiPoint LED fixtures, to illuminate the architectural outline of the bridge's west side.

Software

Interact Landmark software is used to remotely monitor, manage, and maintain the dynamic architectural lighting assets and content of the Hoan Bridge. This cloud-based connected lighting system makes it easy to create and trigger color-changing light shows on a smartphone, tablet, or PC from anywhere in the world. The Interact Landmark system uses advanced encryption techniques to meet top cybersecurity standards.

Installation

Signify supported Light the Hoan with the full, turnkey installation and commissioning of the bridge lighting. The company will help remotely monitor and manage the lighting to ensure that it is performing at its best.



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Case study: Hoan Bridge, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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