



**LightSpell, 2017**  
Interactive art and lighting installation for a Toronto subway station

**Location:** Pioneer Village Subway Station, Toronto, Canada  
**Architects:** Will Alsop Architects, London, UK  
**Dimensions:** approx. 130m length  
**Materials:** LED Chandeliers, Wiring, Light Control System, Computer System, Custom Software  
**Project Status:** Completed (currently not in operation)  
**Realization Budget:** approx. 500.000 CAD (approx. 370.000 US\$)  
**Performances:** Artistic & Technical Concept, Design, Planning

The art and light installation *LightSpell* is an oversized text display, ca. 130m long, that hangs from the ceiling of the "Pioneer Village" subway station in Toronto. The display consists of an undulating band of 40 special chandeliers. Each individual lamp forms a "16-segment display" typical of the early phase of digitalization in the 20th century, on which letters, special characters, and numerals can be shown.

Placed at intervals along the entire length of the station, several keyboard terminals are available to passengers waiting for their trains. There they can easily enter symbols and words that appear directly in the light installation as a repeating chain of characters. No matter what sequence of characters is displayed, the system regulates their illuminating power to keep the brightness on the station platform constant.

*LightSpell* is an experiment on open-ended communication and interaction in the public space. A central theme is the definition of "public space" in a situation in which new digital means of expression increasingly and significantly extend the range of communication of each individual within the public space. The system does not exercise any form of technical censorship of the input contents. An input terminal allows every conceivable combination

of letters or characters, with the resulting "text" appearing directly above the heads of everyone waiting on the train platform. The people on the platform are the only influencing factor and the only public corrective. Some messages will remain for only a few seconds, others will remain visible for hours and days. Every passerby has the opportunity to overwrite, correct, ignore, or answer the existing message. But however different the messages may be, there is one simple and unchanging constant: whether witty, intelligent, or meaningful, whether senseless, stupid, or insulting, whether read and understood by all or overlooked by all – each utterance inevitably becomes the platform's illumination and in this way serves to fulfill a simple, basic need.

*LightSpell* also permits flexibility between the roles of sender and recipient. The installation thereby transforms the classic public space of the subway stations into a site of reflection of the increasingly digital public sphere. This sphere obeys different laws and it changes ever more spaces and aspects of the present, opens up new spaces of action for the individual, and at the same time permits ever fewer possibilities of escape, because it is becoming a basic component of even the simplest and most everyday things of life.

*Surprising to the artists, the installation, whose concept realities:united had developed and had received approval from the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) in 2009, was not activated at the opening of the stations in December 2017. The TTC justified its decision to censor the artwork on the grounds that "inappropriate" text content could offend other passengers or may result in unacceptable interference with general safety.*

