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Key Bank's decorative exterior lighting has at least 45 potential variations in color. (Michael Greenlar / mgreenlar@syracuse.com)

The lure of LEDs

The right lighting lends a sense of comfort, familiarity to the heart of a city

By Sean Kirst
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Mike Leonardo has vivid memories of a yuletide ritual during his boyhood in Syracuse. Every winter, on Christmas Eve, his relatives would gather at the home of an aunt. By the time they left, it would be dark in the city, and Leonardo's father would go a little out of his way and take his family on a ride through downtown. Dozens of buildings would be illuminated, glittering with colored lights. For a child looking out a car window, it created an unforgettable atmosphere of warmth and community. Decades later, Leonardo is glad for the chance to be part of reigniting at least a touch

of the same feeling. Key Bank has added colorful new LED lighting to the exterior of its landmark bank at Warren and Washington streets, a building that serves as the bank's Central New York district headquarters. Leonardo, a vice president and regional facilities manager for Key Bank, said the project, in its early stages, focused on discovering the most efficient kind of exterior lighting. Therese Myers, a bank spokeswoman, said KeyBank discussed those plans with Lumenpulse, a Montreal company with American headquarters in Boston. Erik Turner, lead corporate real estate analyst for Key Bank in Syracuse, said that company responded with some striking options — including a decorative exterior lighting scheme, now in operation, that involves at least 45 potential variations in color.

I'd noticed those lights while walking to my parked car, and last Thursday night I met Leonardo and Turner at their building. They pointed out how the new lights illuminate the detailed cornice — replete with lion's heads — atop all three walls that face city streets. The lights also illuminate an entire eastern wall, visible from City Hall, Washington Street and from an adjacent parking lot where the old Yates Hotel once stood. We stayed outside and watched as Turner, in the bank, displayed a few options. There was red, green and white, in honor of Columbus Day. And orange and blue that can be used when Syracuse University has a big game. There were many shadings of red, the official Key Bank color. Red and green will be primary colors for the yuletide, while solid green will be turned on for St. Patrick's Day.

There was even a pattern of dark pinstripes that Leonardo and Turner describe as their New York Yankees colors. "This has been a lot of fun," Leonardo said. The place is already an extraordinary time capsule, a temple of marble and sleek wood. When Leonardo and Turner began researching that heritage, they discovered the bank is on the brink of a downtown centennial. Much of the lobby remains as it was a century ago, although the magnificent pillars — damaged in a fire — are now encased in wood. Upstairs, the bank retains the elegant president's conference room — complete with heavy curtains and elaborate chandelier — that must have provided a setting for many big financial decisions during the heyday of Syracuse. A century ago, right now, the bank was under construction. Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association, said OHA records indicate it opened in May 1915 as the First National Bank. Within five years, another merger turned it into the old First Trust and Deposit, the name it kept until it became part of Key Bank.

The illuminated exterior gives the bank a place in a more topical downtown movement. In the 1970s, as energy prices skyrocketed, skylines started going dark in many American cities. But LED lighting is helping to again throw light on many historic facades. Several Syracuse landmarks, including the National Grid Building and City Hall, are already illuminated at night. Key Bank has joined those ranks, and many of us hope the nearby State Tower Building — an art deco landmark bathed in light when it opened in the 1920s — will someday follow suit. A few years ago, Onondaga County used a plan developed

by lighting master Howard Brandston to illuminate Columbus Circle and the buildings around it, including the county courthouse and the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. At that time, Brandston — who also designed the lighting scheme for National Grid — described the goal as brightening downtown with what he called "enhanced moonlight." The proper kind of illumination, Brandston said, brings a sense of comfort and familiarity to the heart of a city — a place that Brandston said ought to serve as "living room" for a community. That's a feeling shared by many advocates for downtown. "It's important," said Anthony Catsimatides, founder of Open Apelier Architects and president of the Cathedral Square Neighborhood Association. He said the Key Bank project is another step forward: "Light." Catsimatides said, "does amazing things for a city." Darkness, he said, can make visitors feel edgy and unwelcome. Illuminate downtown buildings in a pleasant and evocative way, and dark walls are transformed; light and shadow provide beauty. "It creates a skyline," Catsimatides said, "and a sense of wanting to be in a place." Boil it down, and that's what Key Bank's Mike Leonardo recalls of downtown Syracuse, from his childhood. Decades later, he'd like to think some young parents — once again — might take their kids to see the lights.

Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. Email him at skirst@syracuse.com, visit his blog at syracuse.com/kirst, write to him in care of The Post-Standard, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202 or send him a message on Facebook or Twitter.



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