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Light Up the Skies

Somerville's Illuminations trolley tour offers views of the town's most dazzling residential holiday displays.

by Margaret Weigel



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The artists on Somerville's School Street in Massachusetts use their houses as canvases and work in light. The mix of elegance and spirituality in their creations is inspired by Santa Claus. One two-story

home wears a stunning gold fringe of icicle lights. On its front porch, a manger scene of lit plastic figurines features the usual Holy suspects. Mr. and Mrs. Claus stand guard at the front steps. Santa's reindeer, composed of small dots of light affixed to a white frame, graze on the front lawn, unfazed by two feet of snow. Next door, a toy train composed of colorful bands of light chugs across the rooftop. Strings of white bulbs are punctuated by snow flakes and colored lights, while an oversize inflatable Santa watches over the driveway.

School Street's festive homes are one of the main attractions on this year's Illuminations trolley tour, sponsored by the Somerville Arts Council on December

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20, 2003. Now in its seventh year, the 45-minute trolley tour cruises past outstanding [residential holiday displays](#) in the city. The trip weaves through narrow streets of triple-deckers and single family homes that are decked out, from gorgeous to garish, in seasonal finery. Coffee, cookies, and cocoa will be offered at City Hall, along with an exhibit of nighttime photography, choral music performed by the Somerville Community Chorus, and craft activities for children.

Fueled by such trends as 'icicle' lights and neo-retro 'bubble' lights, the multibillion dollar Christmas light industry shows no signs of dimming. People enjoy the glow of candles, neon signs, and fine electric Christmas tree couture. The desire for bright lights in winter may be hardwired into our biological makeup, since it extends back through human history. Long before we gussied up our homes with twinkling bulbs, our ancestors warded off December's cold gloom with an array of gas lamps and bonfires. Christianity, Judaism, and Kwanzaa celebrate early winter with traditions focused on the lighting of candles, such as Advent and Channukah. Lights signify prosperity, optimism, and good times, done without only during times of war and energy crises.

Electric Christmas tree lights first appeared in Manhattan during 1882. "I need not tell you that the scintillating evergreen was a pretty sight -- one can hardly imagine anything prettier. It was a superb exhibition," reported the "Detroit Post and Tribune." It was another twenty years before electricity became inexpensive and the average American had access to Christmas lights. Before long, homes were festooned with swags of cheery twinkling lights, inside and out.



[View more photos](#)

The first Illuminations tour was the brainchild of former Somerville mayor Michael Capuano and then director of the Somerville Arts Council, Cecily Miller. Old-style civic boosters, they both worked to "celebrate what the city of Somerville was all about" by respecting and utilizing the city's existing resources, says Miller, now director of the Forest Hills Educational Trust. That meant no fancy corporate alliances, no big-name celebrities, and no huge outlays of cash. The point was to foster a deeper appreciation of Somerville's [oft-overlooked charms](#). Back in 1996, the extravagant Christmas lights decorating many of the city's homes were seen as a neglected urban charm. An associate at the Old Town Trolley Tour Company helped make the first Illuminations tour possible.

Somerville was not the first municipality to offer such



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tours, but it is one of the few in the country that's organized by a city's art council rather than a chamber of commerce or a tourism board. The Illuminations tour focuses on [the displays](#) themselves and the artists responsible. Cash flow is not a priority. In fact, while the tour has broken even financially in recent years, it is by no means a huge moneymaker for the SAC.

But the tours provide a much-needed reputation boost for Somerville, Cambridge's doppelganger to the north, known more for its highways and industry than its art and culture. The Illuminations is one of many art-based community projects undertaken by Capuano, Miller, and the SAC. The tour also works as a sly but spectacular corrective to the stereotype of 'art' as something stuck in a frame. And the notion that creative types are a breed apart. "If you thought that artists were these wacky people in your neighborhood, they're not," stresses Miller. "They are your neighbors".



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As for [the displays](#) themselves, SAC staffer Greg Jenkins describes them as examples of folk art inspired by sincere expressions of religious faith. The 'superb exhibitions' showcased in this year's Illuminations are clustered in Somerville's eastern end. Geographically, as former Illuminations tour guide Jim Horan opines, "that's where the lights are," Al Capone-style. It's also

home to a high concentration of Portuguese and Italian immigrants who practice a more ritualistic, visual brand of Catholicism than their more buttoned-up Irish counterparts. Tour-takers should expect to view [an array of displays](#), ranging from the spiritual and tasteful to the spectacular and tacky.

Still, an essential question remains. Since viewing these folk art displays is free, anytime day or night, why would anybody shell out \$10 to take the tour? Trolley guide Horan cites the "communal atmosphere. It's more fun to go on a trolley, it makes it an event." One year, a woman celebrated her birthday on the trolley with her friends. Tour guides often depart from their scripts. Some even burst into song, especially when the trolley is stuck in traffic. In short, the Illuminations tour is about the primal appeal of leaving the house at night in the chilly dead of winter to seek out the light of community, be it the easy conviviality of a trolley ride, or the lights of friends and neighbors celebrating the winter holiday season in one of the most fundamental ways of all. Albeit light that comes from an inflated Frosty the Snowman, seated below a pair of gold and red plastic angels.

*The 2003 Somerville Illuminations Tour will be held*

*December 20, 2003. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$5 for children and seniors. For more information, visit the website of the [Somerville Arts Council](#).*

**Margaret Weigel reviews visual arts for [WBUR](#), Boston's NPR News station.**

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