

Hart House throws its doors open to insomniacs for 'Night of Ideas'

All-night symposium lulls sleepless Torontonians with midnight swim and talks on nightmares and shift work

By Mary Wiens, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jan 25, 2018 4:29 PM ET Last Updated: Jan 25, 2018 5:22 PM ET

Insomniacs and shift workers are invited to the University of Toronto's Hart House Thursday evening for a all-night symposium on sleep.

It's a first for Toronto, as it joins 50 other cities around the world in what's billed as a "Night of Ideas." The event will bring together international artists, writers, philosophers, historians, neuroscientists to tackle everything from the neuroscience of sleep, the meaning of downtime, the health impact of sleep, the importance of dreaming, and the architecture and politics of sleep.

"Toronto is ready for an all-nighter for heavy ideas and debating about sleep," said Barbara Fischer, one of the organizers. "It's a subject that's getting more urgent daily."

The U of T Art Museum curator, Sarah Robayo Sheridan, had been planning an exhibit on sleep for some time when she was invited by the French Consulate in Toronto to make it part of a global event taking place tonight.

"It was a perfect marriage — to participate in an event that's about thinking at night, which can be a very creative space," said Sheridan. "Artists and writers see it as a troubled, but productive time."

Sheridan was also curious about the global event. "What would a discussion at night yield that talking during the day doesn't?"

New discoveries about sleep

As executive director and chief curator of the Art Museum, Fischer says the event is a chance to expand that conversation. "There are so many new discoveries about what is happening to sleep in the 24-7 world," said Fischer. "We are taking our cue from the idea of the global economy and how urban economies are becoming oriented to a 24-7 schedule. And all of this is undergirded by social media."

People are encouraged to come in their pyjamas and bathrobes, and to bring along swimsuits for a midnight swim under the vaulted glass ceiling of the beautiful Hart House pool. The exhibition, *Figures of Sleep*, opens at 5 p.m. at Hart House and the discussions begin at 7 p.m..

Architectural historian and feminist scholar Beatriz Colomina will kick the evening off in the Great Hall before a wood fire in the massive fireplace, with a lecture called *The Bed In The Age of Social Media*. Colomina, a professor at Princeton University's School of Architecture, argues that the bedroom today has become our work station.

History of nightmares, neuroscience of sleep

She'll be followed by other speakers, including U of T historian Janine Riviere discussing the history of nightmares and dreams in early modern England and neuroscientist Adrian Owens, who studies brain patterns of sleeping people at his lab at the University of Western Ontario and who has discovered ways to communicate with someone in a coma.

By 10:30 p.m., Sarah Sharma, director of the McLuhan Institute, picks up the theme of sleeplessness by talking about the collapse of normal work hours and her field work talking to taxi drivers and shift workers. Coun. Michael Thompson, who represents Ward 37, Scarborough Centr, will join the late-night speakers with a discussion about the conflicts as crowds and music keep some neighbourhoods awake, while other Torontonians flee the city on darkness trips to escape light pollution.

There are lots of couches in the Great Hall, says Fischer, for people who want to spend the whole night at Hart House.

If they can't sleep, there's an eight-hour orchestral lullaby by German composer Max Richter and a screening of the movie, *Sleep*, by Andy Warhol — five hours of someone sleeping.

"It might put you to sleep," said Fischer, "or you might be compelled to watch."

Fischer won't even venture to guess how many people will attend.

"When Nuit Blanche happened the first year, we thought there would be 200 people who might show up," said Fischer. That night in 2006, 425,000 people came out for the all-night celebration of contemporary art.

Insomniac cities

Fischer didn't have nearly as much money to publicize "Night of Ideas" but she's optimistic that people are ready for this kind of event. "Toronto is turning into an insomniac city. A lot of people are spending their nights awake."

Twenty years ago, Fischer recalls a Toronto where "the vacuums would be out at 8 p.m., cleaning restaurants," a time when Fran's was one of the few places still serving food after the theatres closed.

Now Toronto is joining other cities that have begun making fundamental changes to acknowledge the reality of people awake around the clock.

"Cities like Amsterdam are bringing in night mayors," said Fischer, "because they realize managing the night is just as big a job as managing the day."

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