

# Designers on the edge of a new epoch



Is architectural lighting dead? Is design just for the rich? And does supplying kit make you a bad person? Just some of the topics covered at the Lutron/PLDA Conference on the Future of Lighting Design in New York last month. **Ray Molony** reports

**Round the table**  
The conference was held at the Parsons The New School of Design in Manhattan

As Winston Churchill once famously remarked, the UK and the US are divided by a common language. But designers from both sides of the pond who took part in the Lutron-sponsored and PLDA-organised conference on the future of lighting design in New York were in broad agreement on the challenges and opportunities facing the profession.

The growing emphasis on the role lighting can play for social benefit was high on the agenda – in no small part because of Roger Narboni’s recent remark that ‘architectural lighting is dead’.

Narboni’s words are widely seen by designers as a challenge, to move away from prettifying buildings to creating schemes that benefit people.

“It’s an incendiary statement alright,” said Francis Milloy, lighting specialist at Brooklyn-based urban planners Terreform. “It’s about becoming more socially aware and it’s about where lighting fits into the wider community and the urban fabric.”

Milloy, formerly with Speirs and Major Associates in Edinburgh, believes designers should seek opportunities

  
LUTRON/PLDA LIGHTING DESIGN  
CONFERENCE NEW YORK 2010

to improve the lit environment around them. “As a profession we should be involved much more in urbanism anyway and working with communities.”

Michael Grubb of Sutton Vane Associates agreed: “We have to justify ourselves. It has to be about people or it’s just about creating postcards.”

## Not just for the rich

The concept of *pro bono* work, especially in deprived areas where lighting represents a powerful way to change perceptions, could be a way to balance the image of lighting design as a luxury for the rich. The pioneering work of Joran Linder and Erik Olsson of Olsson & Linder Lighting Design in Sweden was cited as model of how we could deliver benefits through public lighting for local communities.

“Roger Narboni is wrong,” declared Paul Nulty from Light Bureau in London. “But lighting design is changing in the way that we approach projects. It’s now less about the effect and more about sustainability.”

Fellow Brit Sam Neuman cautioned against forgetting our

Photo: Alexandra Pappas

traditional client base. "A lot of cities still need a lot of work so we shouldn't down tools yet."

The US, like the UK, has a number of practices that combine design with the supply of lighting equipment. It's a business model that will get you barred from some professional organisations but participants viewed those who supply kit with more than a little sympathy.

Milloy thought it was 'snobbish' to label someone who supplies product as less of a lighting designer, while Neuman said he understood why people went down the design-and-supply route because it was hard to make a living as an independent.

Brett Anderson of the widely-respected New York practice Focus Lighting, explained that Focus supplied kit, but this made for a much better final installation. "Our design is fee-based but we have a division that supplies fittings. When we decide on a specification we put it out to suppliers, including our own supply arm. The benefit to the client is that we can talk directly to the guy doing the purchase orders. Clients are not just getting boxes shipped to site, they're getting a team that ensures it works to the design. They get a lot of value."

Jonathan Hodges – now with independent design practice Jason Bruges Studio – won sympathy from the audience when he talked of the time he worked as an in-house designer for a manufacturer but longed to be accepted by the independent lighting design community.

## 5 BIG ISSUES

### 1 RECOGNITION

How does the profession gain acceptance – and get clients to appreciate independence?

### 2 TECHNOLOGY

The paradigm shift to solid state is changing design and bringing its own challenges

### 3 SUSTAINABILITY

An opportunity for a role in creating low-carbon schemes, but it can restrict creativity

### 4 INFLUENCE

The lighting design community needs to stop being reactive – and start to shape events

### 5 SOCIAL PURPOSE

How does lighting design move beyond wealthy building owners to help local communities?

Many believed there was a role for both styles of business – independent practitioners simply had to sell the benefits of their model to clients. London-based Karen Van Creveld pointed out the lighting design is still a young profession "and we have to define what we do to justify our fees".

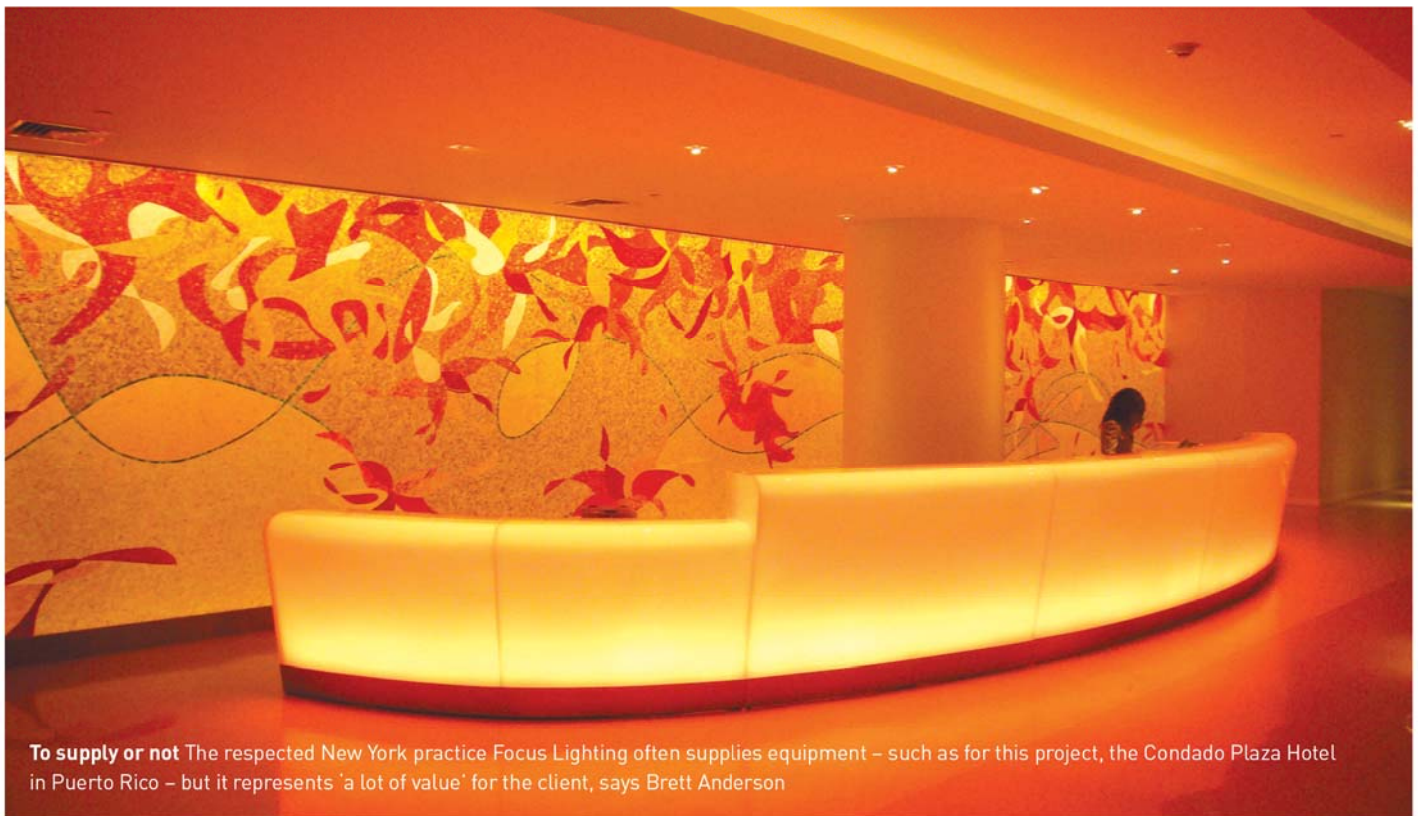
PLDA president Martin Lupton concurred: "We need to educate the market about what we can offer." Paul Nulty saw the existence of design-and-supply practices as a challenge to independents to offer the clients more. "If you've got someone giving free advice, then I've got to do something better as an independent lighting designer."

## Competency

In the US, some clients such as local authorities ask for a 'lighting design competency requirement' in their pre-qualification material, but this was described as "a low bar" by former IALD president Phil Gabriel. Some independent lighting designers believe the obvious next step would be to introduce a form of registration similar to that for architects such as RIBA in the UK or the AIA in the US.

But Gabriel ruled out a full certification system for independent lighting designers, because the profession was too small for a complex regulation system. "When you get down to the practicalities, we are still awfully small for this."

Similarly, a qualification for lighting design competence was unsatisfactory because it was "easy" to pass a technical, >>



**To supply or not** The respected New York practice Focus Lighting often supplies equipment – such as for this project, the Condado Plaza Hotel in Puerto Rico – but it represents 'a lot of value' for the client, says Brett Anderson

Photo: Ken Ventry

**British perspective**

The UK delegation at the conference included Gary Campbell of dpa, Martin Lupton of Light Collective, Philip Rose of Speirs and Major Associates, Graham Rollins of LDI, Paul Nulty of Light Bureau and Sam Neuman of Neuman Lighting Design.



» objective test, and often the real innovators in a field were excluded. Gabriel pointed out that pioneering architect Philip Johnson, who created the influential Seagram Building in New York, failed his architecture exams.

The current system of peer-review was the best system in the circumstances, felt Gabriel. "You submit examples, the number of years you have worked etcetera and then you are either admitted to an organisation or not."

**End of an epoch**

There was a feeling at the gathering that the profession was at a crucial stage. Hodges summed it up: "We're at the end of an epoch in lighting and we're entering a new one. All this new technology is coming and we have to change the way we do lighting."

Hodges believes with LEDs and OLEDs we are "tantalisingly close" to a time when we can use light itself as a tool rather than luminaires with cable and controls. "You simply won't have to worry about changing lamps."

But lighting designers have been complaining about LEDs since they arrived, said Sharon Stammers of Light Collective, and now many are embracing its freedoms.

We have to think differently, warned Charles Cameron of Meeker Cameron, and not make the mistake of trying to

use the old methods with new technology. "When gas lamps were first brought into the home they were put beside the window or above the fireplace because 'that's where light comes from'."

Gary Campbell of UK practice dpa felt that new sources allow us to make architectural lighting more integrated and sculptural, but Milloy cautioned against getting seduced by innovations in equipment. "Technology has run amok in our society," he said. "We have to focus on lighting for people and not the building."

There was broad agreement that lighting designers need to broaden their education to be prepared for the future. As Cameron said: "We're going to have to get a lot better at what we understand."

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**FRANCIS MILLOY, TERREFORM**



Photos: Alexandra Pappas

**Gearing for the future** Themes of sustainability, designing with solid state technology and recognition were all high on the agenda at the New York event

» Human health, psychology, solid state technology and systems integration were all cited as areas in which designers would benefit from a deeper understanding. Design itself needed to change too. Philip Rose of Speirs and Major Associates said the practice's master plan for Durham was as much about what they didn't light as about what they did. "When we were asked to prepare a scheme for the Sackler Crossing bridge by Kew Gardens, we asked them: 'Why are you lighting this?' We had the same issue with the tree-top walkway at Kew, which they wanted illuminated. We said you need to light the trees, not the walkway – people won't come here just to walk 18 metres up in the air."

**Reactive**

The design profession was fundamentally reactive – reacting to technological developments from manufacturers and legislation such as the bulb ban – but many felt the time had come for the community to shape the future. "Lighting has become politicised," said van Creveld. "At what point do we say: 'It's not about the source, it's how you use it.'? We haven't been very active in saying 'it's about controls and turning off light when you don't need it'. We simply haven't been pro-active enough."

Glenn Shrum, US co-ordinator of the PLDA, said the problem was that lighting was a conspicuous consumer of power, and that was why it attracted the attention of authorities. Lobbying had been left to the manufacturers, said Gabriel, while the IALD was being criticised in the US for not taking an active role in influencing state and federal legislators. But small organisations could have significant influence. "Look at what the Campaign for Dark Skies has achieved," said Lee Waldron of US-based Grenald Waldron Associates. Nulty said he couldn't help feeling "we are going down the carbon credit route". ■

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