Learning about Light,

How lighting educators are contributing to the professionalisation of lighting design.

Malcolm Innes, 2011

The professional status of architectural lighting design varies in different parts of the world. Those of us practicing in countries with a long history of independent lighting design like to think we are working within an established profession. Yet, in 2009, a shockwave was sent through the lighting design community when an urgent IALD press release warned that "The Texas State Legislature has passed legislation that will have the unintended consequence of outlawing an entire profession--lighting design."[i]

The Texas politicians were trying to prevent the dangerous excesses of 'cowboy' electrical work. The shock for the lighting community was that, for the law makers, we did not exist as a profession, only qualified architects, engineers and electricians were to be allowed to design lighting installations. After much lobbying, the issue was resolved and the law was amended, but it should remain as a sobering fact. It is simply not enough for us to think of ourselves as professionals - it is essential that other professions and legislators recognise architectural lighting design as a unique profession.

Architecture is often cited as a role model for the lighting profession. Although there may be other people capable of designing and constructing buildings, architects are regarded as highly trained and experienced individuals who have a unique set of skills, backed by vociferous professional organisations that provide accreditation of the architect's skill level and competence. Lighting Designers would love to have the protected status for our job title that architects possess, but it seems we have a long way to go.

Above all, the chief requirement for an architect is education at a recognised institution. A fully qualified architect will have had a long education in the subject including work experience in professional practice, before sitting professional exams. Even after qualification, architects must commit to the constant upgrading and refreshing of their skills through continuing professional development. For the individual, education is key to becoming and remaining a qualified architect. For the industry, education is key to the protection of the professional status of architecture.

By comparison, architectural lighting design has evolved through the work of a disparate group of talented individuals who have often come to lighting from seemingly unrelated subjects. Alongside architects, engineers and theatrically trained designers, the industry includes established designers with training in graphics, film making, graphic design, literature, fine art and other exotic subjects. I started in lighting long before most lighting courses existed and, with a background in fine art, learnt my trade on the job. The diversity of backgrounds has been a strength of the lighting design community and, as a result, peer review has been the typical method of judging whether an individual is worthy of joining a professional lighting organisation. But, this process is often a measure of the experience and not the knowledge of the designer. Whether it is achieved through academic or practical learning, we need to advance the status of lighting knowledge to be recognised by others as a true profession.

There is now a wide range of architectural lighting design education around the world. With courses including, diploma, undergraduate, masters and PHD. Lighting educators are aware of the professionalisation issues and are working together to try and establish a framework on which professional lighting design can be constructed. In April 2011, the first International Lighting Educator's Summit was held in Milan. The event brought together

around 50 delegates from 17 countries to discuss how lighting educators and researchers can contribute to the professionalisation of the discipline.

In advance of the summit the author carried out an online survey to gather the opinions of lighting educators and researchers to questions such as whether lighting is best studied as an undergraduate or post graduate degree (majority for post grad); the mixture of skills required to study lighting; the range of skills students should be taught; the relative importance that should be applied to daylighting teaching and ways to create international standards for architectural lighting education. The survey laid the foundation for discussions within the six workshop groups at the summit.

A majority of survey respondents (55%) thought that lighting courses should have some form of validation from national or international lighting organisations. This would require standards that lighting programmes could be measured against. There was broad support at the summit for an internationally accepted basic course that allowed room for local differences. The summit thought that the diversity of approaches, specialisms and cultures between different courses should be maintained as the profession is strengthened by the diversity of people who work in the industry. There needs to be some minimum standards in lighting education, but the difficulties were summed up by Jan Ejhad who commented that, “lighting education can be standardised when the industry can be standardised”.

The existing PLDA “Architectural Lighting Fundamentals” (ALF) was thought by many (including non PLDA members) to be a valuable document that could be used to qualify the content of lighting courses without becoming overly prescriptive. Iain Macrae of Thorn Lighting also thought that the ALF document effectively captures what manufacturers expect lighting graduates to have been taught. Delegates noted that practicing professionals need to be able to place some value in the various lighting qualifications available while educational establishments need to be allowed to create unique programmes. It was suggested that what the profession needed was to be able to confirm that graduates were competent in various areas that were seen as essential to become a professional designer. If a list of desired ‘competencies’ were produced, these could be translated into the ‘learning outcomes’ used by academics to outline a programme of study. As workshop leader Alison Ritter noted from her workshop discussion, “For recognition of the profession by students, universities, other disciplines and politicians, we need to define what students know when they come out of the course.” For this to be of value, it is vital that practicing designers engage in the debate and help define what they need from future graduates.

Another strand of the summit was the role of lighting research. It was felt by many delegates that lighting relevant research was dominated by researchers from other disciplines, with the majority of work being done by medical researchers. The relatively small amount of research produced directly within the lighting community has sometimes been directly funded by manufacturers which has constrained the dissemination of the research results. Even with traditionally funded research, there were seen to be problem areas. Workshop leader, Glenn Shrum, noted that the current research model does not adequately address the ‘quality of light’ that designers work with. Instead, much research is focused on the science and the quantification of light. This was thought to stem from the way our international lighting codes and standards are produced with “research focused on verifying the existing standards”. However, if lighting standards addressed quality not quantity, research would be more likely to follow.

For the profession to receive the research attention it needs, those actively involved in lighting research believe that design practices need to engage with and be directly involved with more research. The profession also needs a better method of disseminating research results to practitioners. Ignacio Velero’s group thought that, instead of just receiving the

press filtered versions of research and using this as justification for applying a particular lighting approach, designers needed to be able to access the original research papers. The original test conditions or research methods may have little correlation to the real world situation the designer wants to apply the knowledge to and it is vital for designers to be aware of this.

The Lighting Research Database proposal presented by Jean Sundin [ii] is still a work in progress, but it was warmly welcomed by the lighting educators and could prove to be a significant step forward in the dissemination of lighting research.

Steve Fotios believes there can be a cultural and linguistic divide between the research community and designers. It was suggested that the profession could make better use of research if it was summarised through reviews of various topics of research. The workgroup also called on professional lighting design publications to include short summaries of current research as part of special single topic editions of the magazine.

In an effort to make lighting research more responsive, the profession as a whole should create a workgroup of manufacturers, designers, educators and researchers who could oversee a 'wish-list' of lighting related research. Even if no direct funds were available, such a body would provide powerful evidence of the commercial interest in relevant research.

Professionalism means specialism and this must begin with education. To become a universally accepted and valued profession, we may require future candidates to qualify to become an architectural lighting designer. We should also expect design practices to be more actively engaged in lighting research.

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[i] Press Release, International Association of Lighting Designers, May 27, 2009

[ii] http://pldaeducation.wikispaces.com/08.+Research+Database