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Exploring lighting cultures

Beyond light and emotions

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Abstract. *A qualitative research, set up in September 2007, was the first global study on the work of lighting designers. Synovate was selected by Philips Lighting to work on this study. Forty seven lighting designers have been interviewed. What are the results on lighting ambiances? What are the main message lighting designers would like to convey? What are the influences? What is the approach taken? How to evoke the desired emotions? Summarizing the research, Birkhäuser published in 2011 a book including project images discussed and the synthetic conversations. Our ultimate ambition is to promote the lighting design competencies and create a platform for sharing ideas and experiences.*

Keywords: *light, emotion, culture, lighting design, brightness, color, direction*

Exploring lighting cultures

Light triggers ambiances in different ways and has a profound impact on the way people perceive and experience their environment. Professional lighting designer's insights have shown that lighting affects people emotionally. The same lighting concept can mean different things to people, depending upon their cultural sensitivities, individual taste and past experiences. As new technologies make it possible to do things that were not possible earlier, this question becomes increasingly important.

Forty-seven highly experienced lighting designers were interviewed between December 2007 and June 2008 in twelve countries. The selected lighting designers are considered to be trendsetters and opinion leaders in different lighting fields: indoor, outdoor, art, stage and cinema. Most are active members of local or global lighting design associations, e.g. PLDA and IALD – the Professional Lighting Designer's Association and the International Association of Lighting Designers.

We have tried to understand the subject through the eyes and ears of professionals who are passionate about improving the quality of lighting. We seek to understand the challenges they face, the trends they see and anticipate, and the meanings they associate with what is happening around them.

The research reveals certain trends, but the number of interviews conducted per country/continent is too small to support generic conclusions. The Synovate report focuses on the differences – and similarities – between lighting cultures. The results may be used to provide hypotheses for further research.

What is the main message?

All lighting designers interviewed indicated that the fundamental objective of great lighting design is to provoke an emotional response in the users of buildings and spaces. Lighting plays an important role in evoking emotions. The interviews indicate that this can be done in two ways. A lighting design can be used to make an architectural space more aesthetically pleasing or it can create an atmosphere in that space; both affect people's emotions. In addition, the user's well-being can be directly influenced by light.

"Light controls people, their behavior and emotions."

Kiyoung Ko, South Korea

"I think you always have to see that you're doing something for human beings. For people or for society. [...] I think it's always a social task."

Ulrike Brandi, Germany

"Lighting, not just one scene or some moving objects. The comfort of the people is very important and a fundamental aspect for architecture design. [...] What kind of feelings do you want people to feel when they come to this place?"

Kaoru Mende, Japan

What are the influences?

A number of factors influence the desired emotional reaction: the context, the users and the profile of the lighting designer. The interviews showed that educational background or a role model can have a strong influence on lighting designers, especially in the first years of their career.

"Red is not anger and blue is not peace [...] Emotion is created by contextualizing and not by labelling."

Nissar Alana, India

"Do you want drama in an office? No, certainly not. But you might want zones in the building that create drama. It is all about context. Whether the context allows you more contrast."

Michael Rhode, Germany

"We don't have lighting from the ceiling in Asia, and we have daylight that is always coming from the side."

Kaoru Mende, Japan

"I think the 24-hour society and the night-time economy and all the rest of it are going to grow as a result, so lighting can play a bigger and more interesting part than it is doing now."

Tapio Rosenius, United Kingdom

"What interests me and gets me excited about light in Scotland is the nature of change. It changes constantly in quality, in brightness, and this change affects the very nature of things."

Kevan Shaw, United Kingdom

What is the approach taken?

Among the interviewed lighting designers, different design approaches can be identified: in some cases the lighting design supports the architect's original idea, while in others it actually changes the experience of a building or space in a positive way. The execution can differ too, the approach taken varying from, for example, an artistic content-based one to a technical expertise-based one. The style of a lighting designer – in essence determined by education, personal profile and inspiration – is reflected in the design approach as well.

"I often say that we're there to enhance the work of others. When you enter a building you're not going to say that it's the lighting that's great."

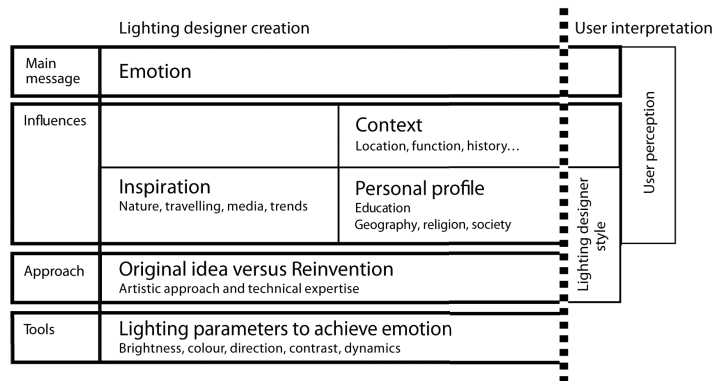
Michel Pieroni, France

"I just try to see what's possible to express with light with the different tools and how you can paint pictures with it."

Jurgen Hassler, Germany

How to evoke the desired emotions?

In the end, all lighting designers work with the same tools: brightness, color, direction, contrast and time. Generally speaking, they also use similar combinations of lighting quantities for a given emotion. The wide diversity of lighting designs and executions is a result of the individual lighting designers' personal style combined with the specific context of the projects in question.



Synthetic drawing of the research showing the relation between creation and interpretation, lighting designer and users

Whereas the interviews give some insight into the way a lighting design can evoke an emotion, it is clear that the user's personal experience and the context will influence the perceived – as opposed to the created – emotion as well. This was not part of the project, but might be of interest for follow-up research.

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