



DON'T STAY IN THE DARK ABOUT LIGHTING

By **Nevil Bounds** 19. April 2018



There is no shortage of design skill sets, technical ability and implementation. So why are lighting experiences often disappointing or underplayed? Nevil Bounds puts the focus on light.

- My lighting experience
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- "Why do you need lighting?"
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MY LIGHTING EXPERIENCE

'Give us 1500 words about lighting' they said. Oh. Where to begin?

I'm not a lighting designer, board operator, rigger, CAD expert, fixture specialist, nor a director. Probably a bit like someone asking me to write about art I guess: 'I know nothing about art, but I know what I like,' would probably be my retort. In fact, I have hardly any professional lighting experience. Unhelpful when writing a blog about this subject matter I concede. I can change a light bulb though. Not helpful in this context probably.

However, I have always been impressed by excellent lighting design and execution. There's something exciting about a Broadway show, a well-lit exhibition or a beautifully presented atrium in a building. It can be very special.

Lighting creates atmosphere that can be difficult to achieve with other forms of communication. The way that lights dim just before a film starts at the cinema, bring incredible levels of

anticipation; that simple act is really powerful. Television studio lighting is massive in its complexity but makes for exceptionally good pictures when executed well in the hands of professionals. Stage lighting is incredible with the different colour temperatures, dynamic range and mechanical possibilities that are available to the Lighting Director. These are just three examples of effective use of lighting and there are many more of course.

WHAT'S NOT COOL

My wife and I moved into our house in 2006. A brand new one. Everything was perfect, except the lighting. In fact, nothing was right about the lighting at all – none of the overhead sockets were in the right place, the kitchen downlighters put out incredibly high temperatures (so much so, that you didn't need the central heating radiator on) and were casting perfect shadows over the food preparation area so that it was impossible to see what you were doing. All of the light switches were in odd places too. A less than optimal experience one might say.

So why did this happen? Well, I think that cost came into it and the fact that the builders were probably under a penalty clause if the property wasn't finished on time – in fact, it could have been any number of reasons. We really had the impression that someone had said: 'That'll do,' and signed it all off. Nice, considering that buying a house is likely to be the most expensive thing you will ever purchase!

I mention this because I often see examples of poor lighting in so many day-to-day environments: my local railway station, my favourite restaurant, many types of shops, the Town Hall and the Public Library spring to mind as massive fails when it comes to not hitting the lighting target. This is a pity as the correct lighting in a space makes a huge difference to how the space is perceived.

'WHY DO YOU NEED LIGHTING?'

A very good Producer friend of mine, **Richard Cobourne** reminded me of a conversation that he once had with a procurement department of a large corporate company. Richard's company specialises in large-scale exhibitions for the pharmaceutical and medical sector and they were submitting a tender for an event.

During the post-tender interview and particularly during the 'value engineering and cost saving' discussion, he was asked: 'Why do you need a floor when the convention centre already has one and why do you need lighting when there is already house lighting in the exhibition space?' I think that those questions tell you all you need to know about the misunderstandings that can take place when you start to get into trying to optimise the experience for a client.

And that's what lighting is about, surely. The experience. The ability to control the environment in such a way that makes a difference to the way people view what is being shown to them. A series of cues of subtle colour changes and beautifully choreographed moves that can transform a scene into something that is completely different to how it started.

There are times when using a space with no lighting at all can also be extremely effective. Over the last 25 years I have been working with Mike Jones of [Film & Video Umbrella](#) and he works for an organisation that commissions, curates, produces and presents artists' moving-image works that are staged in collaboration with galleries and other cultural partners across the UK.

The quality of video playback that Mike achieves is phenomenal. With the use of projectors that have stunning black levels and high contrast ratios, he is able to create an amazing atmosphere in a space that has no lighting. Complete black-out in fact, except for the artists' work that is being projected onto a screen.

LED LIGHTING – THE GAME CHANGER

I often look at the AV industry and think to myself, what technology shift has made a real difference. In the case of lighting, the answer has to be LED.

In almost every sector of where lighting is used, the move to LED technology has enabled massive running cost savings, more accurate colour temperatures and possibilities that we could only have dreamt of 20 years ago.

Back in the late 1990s I was writing for Dataton's News & Views magazine (when it was a paper version) and I asked [Kevan Shaw](#), a highly respected lighting designer, for his thoughts on the direction of lighting technology and how we were going to be using it in the future. He spoke a lot about the controllability of lighting, the types of protocols that we would be using and also about the fixtures themselves, I seem to recall. The LED discussion was had, but the technology was barely developed, not adequate for many applications and it really couldn't be taken seriously for project-based work.

Fast-forward rapidly into 2018 and we are spoilt for choice. The range of fixtures, the systems that we use to control LED lighting and the design possibilities for indoor and outdoor applications are incredible.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

There have always been large lighting exhibitions and conferences where vendors go to show their products and services and I would say that [Light Fair International](#) in Chicago, [Live](#)

Design International in Las Vegas, **PLASA** in London and **Prolight + Sound** are good starting points to explore some of this technology. In fact, there are many lighting and show events all over the world.

When I have been involved with AV projects that have encompassed any kind of lighting, I have always gone to a professional to help. A little knowledge in this area is not helpful and would always sub-contract this part of a project to a company or an individual that is fully qualified and has a vast amount of experience in the business.

It's important to work with a good lighting designer and **The Association of Lighting Designers** in the UK is a very useful source of information with a **long list of Lighting Designers** that are able to assist.

Often, I see projects that could have benefitted from better lighting design and execution. Even more often, I have heard that 'we can't afford an LD' or 'we don't think we need one.' I have first-hand experience of why this element cannot be overlooked or not given the priority that it really deserves. We have the best technology available to us now and we must employ the professionals in order to get the best out of it.

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Topics: **audience engagement**, **lighting**, **LED lighting**, **lighting design**, **PLASA**, **LDI**, **PLS**, **visitor experience**



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