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Newsletter

The Society of Light and Lighting

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- **Colour rendering: does TM-30 measure up to CRI?**
- **Outside edge: the new LG6 on exterior lighting**

Out of darkness

More than a decade after he won the YLOTY award, Gerardo Olvera looks back at the impact it had on his career



After graduating from the MSc Light and Lighting course at the Bartlett, I decided to look for a job in London. Back in 2000 there were only a handful of established lighting designers so applying for a job in the lighting industry really narrowed your options. As luck would have it, Barrie Wilde – one of the greatest lighting designers in this country – and BDP Lighting decided to sponsor my work permit (I was born in Mexico) and take me on board as an assistant lighting designer.

It is worth pointing out that back then the Home Office had very little idea of what lighting design was or what it involved. It took a very long letter to the office of David Blunkett (then Secretary of Education and Employment) to challenge the Home Office's decision to deny me a work permit. Their decision implied that changing light bulbs and carrying out lighting maintenance was not a highly skilled profession. The lesson here is not to give up but to try harder, especially when it comes to red tape.

At BDP Lighting the team was very small. Barrie had only two designers – Nicky Burrige and Kate Lownes – to help on the vast array of architectural projects that the studio had to cope with. After two years' experience in the field of purely architectural lighting, with projects as varied as school buildings, shopping centres, facade lighting and the prestigious Royal Albert Hall, Barrie finally persuaded me to enter the Young Lighter of the Year competition in 2003.

Early on, Barrie expressed his interest in my MSc dissertation, which focused on the external lit environment in Nordic cities and its possible relationship with seasonal affective

disorder. I was very intrigued by the notion of lack of sunlight given that I was born and raised in Mexico City where daylight availability throughout the year is fairly constant. Spending one week in Helsinki during the peak of the winter was more than enough to understand the challenges and achievements of artificial exterior lighting in the built environment.

I carried out a detailed photographic survey of the most prominent streets and avenues of the city, as well as the key pedestrian areas of confluence and congregation. A photometric analysis of several streets and avenues also helped to understand the perceived brightness of the city after dark. This academic research was the perfect foundation for the topic of the YLOTY presentation.

BDP's myriad large-scale projects taught me the complexities of exterior lighting: the lengthy process of designing, testing, calculating and, most important, pricing. By combining this short experience and the concepts presented and discussed in my dissertation, I was able to present a much clearer picture of why Nordic urban environments required an overlay of architectural lighting (more precisely vertical illuminance) along the cityscapes in order to compensate for the long periods of darkness. The presentation was a success and I won the YLOTY award, much to Barrie's satisfaction.

It's been 12 years and three more challenging jobs (Speirs and Major, Isometrix and now Light IQ) since I presented my paper and I still hold that it was one of the greatest experiences of my, now lengthy, career in lighting.

It certainly helped me to expand my vision of how amazing and important lighting design is, even on a daily basis. Without a doubt if I were a young person with an interest in lighting today I would push myself to enter the YLOTY award. It is not a competition, it is a career move. ■



Buddakan restaurant, New York, winner of Best International Lighting Scheme 2007 (LDA UK) with Isometrix