

# FRESH

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# A Question of Culture



Left | 21 Manresa Road Chelsea | Sophistication and discretion meets advanced technology for the lighting in this historic 19th century building sensitively repurposed by Brookfield Multiplex

How does culture inform our views or define our appreciation of space?  
Why would we add a lamp to a window sill? Why should artificial light predominate on ceilings?  
Why have we been so slow to adopt new techniques and ideas?  
Why do so few architectural and interior design programmes focus on natural light?  
How can we design a space if we don't know what we'll see?  
Could or should I design a home in Hawaii if I have never been there?

Rebecca Weir & Gerardo Olvera  
Light.iQ

So what contribution does a lighting designer make and what makes a great lighting designer? Perhaps we should first reflect on how many spaces are great that did not employ a lighting designer in its creation. We might also reflect on the memorable moments defined by space or place and consider just how often lighting is an integral part of our fondest memories . . . a candle, a bonfire, a sunset or sunrise . . . and even darkness, despite its ability to engulf or suffocate.

How do we consciously assimilate and convey the brilliantly diverse skills of a lighting designer? How do we describe the complex web of knowledge developed over years of practice, observation, research, sitting in meetings, walking through projects, listening to the tangle of talk from interior designers, architects, electricians and, of course, our clients?

Why do the Americans prefer lower light levels in restaurants - a softer, more flattering experience and a deliberate attempt to deflect attention away from the diner? By contrast, the Japanese in their quest for the perfect photo opportunity prefer more experimental showcases, more unique experiences and a desire for newness that courses right through their DNA. Japanese eccentricities spill though into their design ethos leading to the most extraordinary attention to detail in every project, from the humble burger bar to a high end restaurant.



Left | **The Hansom Lobby** | Created by Space Copenhagen at the Grade 1 listed St Pancras Hotel, accent and ambient lighting meet the strictest controls over interference in the building's fabric to illuminate architectural detail and intimate spaces



Right | **Boucheron Paris** | By Lecoadic-Scotto Architecture with our bespoke dynamic white and miniaturised lighting designs for jewellery displays and feature installations



Above | **Yaumay** | Alan Yau's first fine dining venue in Tokyo with a menu to impress the palette and a dramatically lit industrial entrance for the perfect selfie moment



Left | **Endo at Rotunda** | Sushi restaurant in Soho House designed by Kengo Kuma Architects. Soft illumination from a complex system of stem-mounted spotlights is discreetly positioned within the cloud-like fabric ceiling panels

What are the components that collectively constitute a lighting designer and why are some better than others? What is the magic ingredient that allows one project to blossom while another fails? What conscious or unconscious set of rules guides the design process, allowing the subtle integration of so many invisible, intangible threads? And will lighting design evolve to a point where we create lighting doctors and psychiatrists, skilful enough to supersede our dedicated lighting project managers, creatives and technically brilliant engineers and installers? If lighting is now so fundamental to our wellbeing, should we not be studying our craft for 5 years like medics and architects before being allowed to practice?

Today there are many small lighting design practices and it's a challenge to understand how they can all deliver the same strength and depth of value. Empathy, a passion for design and the relentless quest for perfection are possibly the most important ingredients in the pursuit of success. Without empathy we won't care about the user experience, without passion or the quest for improvement, we'll never push the boundaries or find better ways to illuminate our built environment.

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with mediocrity - we are surrounded by it - but if we're going to invest our experience and expertise into a project, why settle for something less than brilliant, something less engaging, less persuasive, something ill-defined or uninspiring? And how do we better engage our clients? Surely, we must develop stories that help our clients understand both the physical and emotional aspects of lighting.

They already understand that, without radiators, a space will be cold. They know that, with underfloor heating, radiators no longer unnecessarily occupy space - a huge step forward in technology. They know that lush carpet will provide a soft and silent cushion while timber offers clean lines and durability. But what do they understand about light and why should it be a lesser consideration?

I have never heard of heating being value engineered so why should we do so with our visual and emotional comfort? We can now be smart, changing the colour temperature of lighting to create better impressions of coolness and warmth and its visualisation would have a direct and positive impact on clients' appreciation of our proposals. If great lighting is to be more than a prescriptive application, we require method, science and explanation. We need to recognise that, in order to understand the whole is it essential to understand all its parts. Lighting is increasingly complex, it's essence variable and our opinions subjective. Our views and beliefs are informed by culture and historically biased. The lighting designer's responsibility is to translate these variables into something comprehensible and attractive to clients.

We have all spent months at home, cocooned in our own little nests and this will have allowed time for reflection. We can ask ourselves what it is that we provide and how it adds value. We may ask if we are distinctive enough - perhaps because we care more or are more curious about our craft, our technology and the opportunities for improvement.

When lockdown eventually eases and we're gradually liberated from our homes, we should take a little more time to reflect on what matters most. Will lighting have a stronger role to play in a story that's yet to unfold? We believe it will and we have seen already a trend for corporate brands to provide a more local experience, a focus on the location and the cultural heritage of new ventures. As designers cross-pollinate to help forge a world with fewer boundaries, we pray the lighting industry will continue to break new ground. Now is the time for our story to be heard.

Rebecca Weir is the Founder and Creative Director of Light.IQ and Gerardo Olvera is Design Director

lightiq.com +44 (0)20 8749 1900