



An interview with Paul Pamboukian

Julia Rowand interviews lighting designer Paul Pamboukian who established Paul Pamboukian & Associates in 1990, the successful lighting design consultancy in Johannesburg, specialising in architectural, interior and landscape lighting.

Where did you grow up and what one endearing childhood memory comes to mind?

I grew up in Johannesburg. My family is Armenian and emigrated from Europe shortly before I was born. I am always amazed at how vastly Johannesburg has changed since I was a child. Sandown (now in Sandton – which didn't exist then as a town) was a few kilometres down the road from my school, St David's Marist College in Inanda. We used to ride our bicycles from school down to the riding school near the then famous Grayston Stables. Sandown was like being in the country with horses and cows grazing in post and rail paddocks and the hearty

smell of hay and manure filling the air. Such a different world from contemporary Sandton with its high rises and choked up roads.

What did you study?

I was always keen on music and bought myself an ancient clarinet from a pawn shop in Market Street and taught myself to play. This led to my studies at the South African College of Music at UCT in Cape Town. I then went on to study at the Guildhall School of Music in London to specialise in composition. A rather obscure start to a career in lighting design!

How did you achieve the career position you're in today?

Some weird karmic path took me on a wild journey to my present career. I had been working in the UK for some years before an unemployment situation overtook the profession and, in short, my work permit was withdrawn and I was forced to return to South Africa. I had always wanted to write music for the theatre and got an *ad hoc* job as a stage hand with PACT Opera. Soon I had a permanent job as an assistant stage electrician earning fifty rand a week. This was the start of my adventure with light. I worked my way up to chief lighting designer at the State Theatre, Pretoria; I then ventured into a new enterprise, a theatre lighting and staging company, called Production Projects, with two of my colleagues Nic Michaleto and Rudi Kesting. We did product launches, shows and consulted and supplied lighting equipment for theatres. After nine years I had the insane idea that I could make a new career out of architectural lighting design as architecture had always been a passion. The rest is history.

Who is your mentor?

My father, who was a Freemason and one of the luminaries of the Freemasonry movement in South Africa. Through my father I met someone who became another mentor. This was an incredibly eccentric gentleman of aristocratic Armenian-Belgian descent known as Monsieur Missak. He lived in the huge mansion on Westcliff Drive at the bottom



The ninth-century church in the north of Armenia

of Valley Road. M Missak had the appearance of a nineteenth century gentleman of means, with a long beard and gold rimless glasses. He was incredibly well read in all subjects. As a young student I would visit him, be admitted by his butler and wait for him in the dimly lit study, the only sound coming from a host of large antique clocks. He would talk to me in his soft, French-accented English about the great religions, spiritual philosophy and history. His knowledge, dignity and integrity have left a lasting impression on me. After his death we discovered that he was a lay-brother of the monastic order at the Greek Monastery at Mount Athos.

What inspires you?

Music is still a major inspiration in my life. I am inspired by creativity in all its aspects and in all disciplines. It renews my faith in humanity.

What advice would you give to someone who dreams of having a career like yours?

One has to have passion, conviction and knowledge, that comes through one's own experience.

Which is your favourite day of the working week and why?

I like working into the night when the phone has stopped ringing and I can work to the tones of BBC Radio3.

Where do you live and which is your favourite room in your home?

My wife Lucilla and I live in Parktown North. I enjoy the space and coolness of our open plan living area.

Where do you go to unwind?

Sunset and a good glass of wine in the Karoo, waiting for the transition to that indescribable night sky. Lucilla and I also often stay in a little hamlet in the Pre-Alp region of Piedmont in Italy. It is off the tourist track and ultra-quiet in amongst hilly, sprawling chestnut forests, lakes and mountains. It is a place where we can both really unwind.

Describe the most beautiful space you have ever seen.

The space that has made a huge impression on me was a small ninth-century church in the north of Armenia. The church has never been refurbished and the walls are layered by centuries of candle soot. It was like stepping into another era as there was no electricity, the church lit only by candles and an oculus in the dome.

What other career position would you secretly like to have?

I would have loved to light opera at the Met in New York.



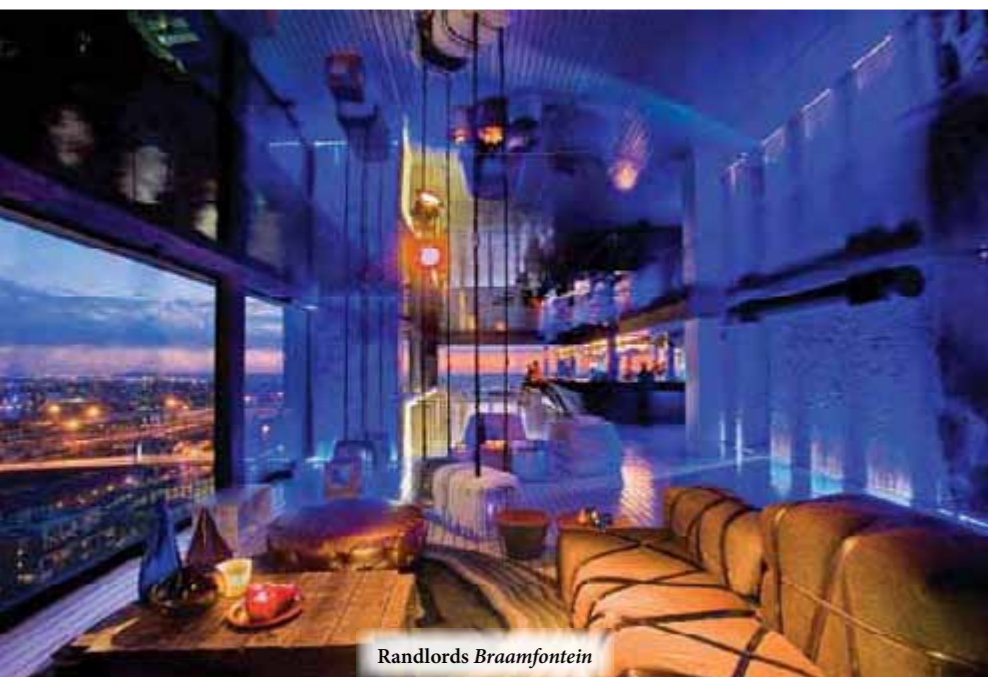
Protea Court – Sandton City

What is your favourite design object?

I think the Stradivarius violin is one of the most successful designs ever. It encapsulates the true ideal of form and function being one. I also recently visited Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. It is a compact minimal house with all the walls in glass. I like Johnson's statement that he had the "most expensive wallpaper on earth".

If you were to write your autobiography, what title would you give it?

I suppose, 'Light Music!' DW



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