



MAN OF LIGHT

Paul Pamboukian, our country's foremost lighting designer and the winner of a special award at this year's Absolut VÍSÍ Designer of the Year awards, in his own words...

"architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light"

I came to the world of lighting via the theatre. I was working as an assistant stage manager at the old Arena Theatre in Rosebank and had groped my way into a pitch-black lighting control room looking to turn up the houselights for the cleaners. My hand came across the lighting console and, desperate to get some light on, I pushed up a slider. The empty stage leapt to life and I spent the next hour painting the space with colour and light. This was a turning point.

If I hadn't been a lighting designer, I would have been a musician. I studied music at UCT and later at the Guildhall in London. I started working ad hoc in the theatre to gain a better understanding of stagecraft as, at the time, I had ambitions to write music for the theatre. Little did I know at the time how my career would change.

There are not many lighting designers around because in South Africa, architectural lighting design has had a slow start. This is largely due to ignorance about what lighting designers can bring to a project in terms of quality of light, mood, atmosphere, efficiency and physiological and psychological health.

*Le Corbusier famously said in his book, *Towards a New Architecture*: "Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light." The importance of light in perceiving and experiencing architectural space, or any space for that matter, is inseparably linked to light. If the quality of the light is poor, the architecture will be "seen in a bad light".*

The definition of a lighting designer is an independent professional consultant (not allied to a manufacturing or sales company) recognised by a professional body, such as the Professional Lighting Designers Association (PLDA) in Europe, or the International Association of Lighting Designers (IALD) in the USA.

In other countries, lighting design courses are increasingly available. In South African architectural courses, lighting is still lumped in together with services such as air-conditioning and plumbing.

I have never designed a light but I have designed an object that emits light in a given manner so that the quality and the effect of the resulting illumination has function, presence and mood.

The most transporting lighting design I have ever experienced is the quality of the daylight in the 13th-century Geghard monastery in Armenia. The cupola, carved out of the rock, is lit through an oculus. There is no electric light and the walls are blackened by centuries of candles. The quality of the light on the simple rock is overwhelming.

Every person who is passionate about lighting design should visit any exhibition or installation by light artist, James Turrell.

The lighting project that I am most proud of is portions of the Shangri-La Hotel, Qaryat Al Beri, in Abu Dhabi. Not because it is the most beautiful but because it was so damned demanding!

Low voltage lighting is a phenomenon, prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s, that masqueraded as a lighting design solution.

The miracle of the Sandton City Protea Court is that the architect, Tia Kansakakis of MDS Architecture, managed to convince the client that lighting was a vital component of the architectural solution.

The lights that I most covet are the Achille Castiglioni lights made by Flos in the 1960s, and which still feature in its catalogue.

Candles are what one aspires to when designing any atmospheric space. Everyone looks good in candlelight, and candles still set the benchmark in terms of the quality of artificial light.

The sun is this incredible miracle, the essence of life, which we all somehow take for granted. The truly successful harvesting of sunlight is in its infancy and is something that all designers of buildings need to put a lot of energy into. Daylight design is a new specialisation in the lighting design field. The intelligent use of sunlight will eventually result in a total light and energy solution.

The love of my life is my family and my wife Lucilla, light of my life.

My all-time favourite colour is blue light. It is the most mysterious colour. I think of it in the same way as I think of the function of the bass line in music. It creates the base upon which any other colour can be contrasted or super-imposed, always adding depth and perspective. It is the closest light colour to darkness.

• Paul Pamboukian & Associates Lighting Design
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