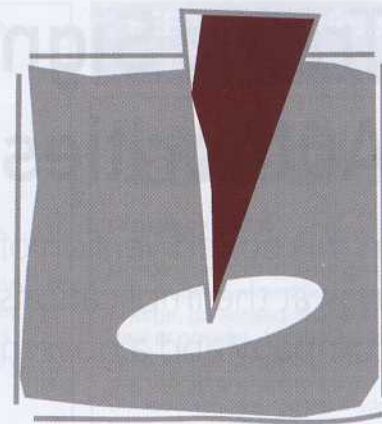


Time is the Enemy



PLDA

The PLDA's Graham Festenstein argues that curtailed design periods and bureaucratic delay are endangering high-quality lighting design projects, particularly in the public sector

The greatest enemy of good lighting design is not budget, ignorance or even environmental concerns, but time. It has been my experience over the past few years that the time available to undertake the design of projects, particularly those that are publicly funded, has reduced dramatically. To make matters worse, construction periods have also been reduced, quite often with a frustrating gap in the middle, where nothing happens, sometimes for an extended period of time, while clients, local authorities and funding bodies engage in bureaucratic procedures before funding can be agreed and work commence.

I have worked on projects where we have waited for several weeks or even months between the meeting that agreed the funding and the letter arriving with the client giving the go-ahead to proceed, not only delaying the start of the construction period but also compressing the programme, because the funding is subject to meeting the original finish date. These time-scales and procedures supposedly exist to ensure public money is well spent and projects do not over-run or over-spend – remember the bad press from big public schemes, such as the Scottish Parliament building.

Compromising Quality

However, this is a simplistic way of looking at things which can lead to a compromise in quality, stifle innovation and introduce a risk of higher public costs in the future, if things do not go as they should. And lighting isn't a special case – I am sure other professional disciplines express similar concerns. However, as a technology-driven industry and one struggling to come to terms with increasing levels of regulation, lighting carries with it additional risks and responsibilities that were not quite so challenging only a few years ago. Lighting offers tremendous opportunities and exciting developments and clients often insist on innovation and the use of cutting-edge technology. Ask any designer or engineer and they will say

new technology is great but it needs extra consideration to be used successfully and without risk (I am sure you will all be thinking of LEDs at this point).

By truncating the design period, we no longer have enough time to consider or discuss these complex issues – the all-important thinking time that enables us to deliver the quality we strive for. This at a time when we actually need more time to meet the new challenges we face – especially if we are to continue to promote and develop best practice. We also need time to consider how best to face these challenges alongside our colleagues from other professions and the wider industry – as well as the time to take part in meaningful public consultation.

'A reduction in the time available on projects brings other risks. It encourages us to take fewer risks ourselves, which in turn threatens to stifle innovation'

A reduction in the time available on projects brings other risks. It encourages us to take fewer risks ourselves, which in turn threatens to stifle innovation, for example in the implementation of new techniques or technology to combat environmental concerns. There is also a danger that inappropriate approaches are rolled out on schemes to save time – for example the principles of a lighting strategy from one city applied to another or a generic approach taken without a full consideration of the individual issues that may be involved. This is potentially a danger where a multi-disciplinary design practice does

not engage a lighting designer as part of its team, because there is no longer enough time for a lighting consultant to look at the scheme in depth. Of course this kind of thing is more likely in times when budgets are also tight. Rolling out standard documents is an approach that is never likely to fulfil the individual needs of a project.

Frustrating Scenario

A good example of this type of development is a scheme I worked on not so long ago. It included a period of testing for a new product designed especially for this particular project. This time was essential to the success of the scheme and the design approach was only chosen on the reasonable assumption that this period of R&D could be accommodated within the programme. By the time the contract was let this time had evaporated and the products went straight from the factory to installation... and then back again. This was an expensive and frustrating scenario for the designers, the engineers, contractors and manufacturers, but ultimately it was the project that suffered because it is always more difficult to put something right than it is to get it right in the first place.

A lack of understanding of the time required to fully develop and deliver a scheme devalues lighting design as a profession. It also contributes to the costs associated with delivering a high-quality project and ensuring the scheme fulfils its design life without unnecessary future expense. Of course, this is not to advocate an open-ended programme or unlimited budgets, but we should not risk compromising quality in this way. Prohibitive rules and bureaucratic delay are never conducive to professional design and solid project management.