Improving Lighting Education

Graham Festenstein expands on an important paper on lighting education presented at the PLDC convention in Madrid in October 2011

In our report on the PLDC event in the December issue (page 13) I touched on a professional practice paper by Malcolm Innes entitled 'Learning about Light: How Lighting Educators are Contributing to the Professionalism of Lighting Design'. This presentation detailed important developments in the co-ordination of education for lighting designers worldwide. Malcolm co-presented this paper with Jean Sundin, Education Director for PLDA.

In April 2011 the first International Lighting Educators Summit was held in Milan, the outcome of an initiative begun and facilitated by the PLDA a few years earlier. The purpose of the paper was to report back on the outcome of this Summit and to demonstrate how this initiative was now running in its own right as an independent forum for those involved in lighting design education.

Seeking Recognition

Malcolm explained how although lighting designers themselves recognise their professional status, we still have a long way to go to be fully recognised in legislation and by other professions. He used as an example the inadvertent ban on lighting designers in the state of Texas, USA, where legislation introduced to protect consumers from rogue installers outlawed lighting design by anyone other than qualified architects, engineers and electricians. Seemingly this happened because legislators were ignorant of lighting design as a profession.

Malcolm discussed the professional status of architects, whose accreditation by recognised professional organisations offers a minimum standard in terms of skill level and competence. To gain this status they first undertake a long period of education and work experience, with professional exams -- as well as continuing their career-long CPD. Malcolm argues that this requirement for education sets architects apart and that this model is one the lighting design profession should follow.

This is not to say that most lighting designers are not educated and experienced individuals, but until recently the educational route to the profession was unclear (or even non-existent) with designers coming from many differing backgrounds. This diversity of backgrounds is a strength, but, as a consequence, lighting designers' professional status is mainly judged by peer review. As Malcolm explains, this only measures experience and not knowledge -- and in order to have the profession fully recognised, the requirement for an academic education is essential.

There is now a wide range of lighting design education courses around the world and the Educators Summit brought together 50 delegates from 17 countries to discuss how education and research can contribute to the professionalisation of the discipline. Prior to the Summit a survey was undertaken to ascertain the opinions of educators and researchers: for example if lighting was best studied at undergraduate or postgraduate level; what skills should be taught; whether daylighting should be included; and how international standards could be created for architectural lighting design education.

'In order to have the lighting design profession fully recognised the requirement for an academic education is essential'

The Summit felt that a degree of local control over courses was desirable to maintain the diversity of approaches, specialisms and cultures -- and that this variation within the industry strengthens it. But they also felt that a standard programme should exist for all courses to be measured against. They also felt that courses should require some form of validation from national or international lighting organisations. The PLDA has already produced a document 'Architectural Lighting Fundamentals' and this could be used to qualify the content of lighting courses. The summit also felt it was important that working lighting designers were involved in the process to help define what they require from future graduates.

Lighting research was another issue under discussion. It was noted that much of the research into lighting is done by other disciplines (e.g. medical research) and that the relatively little research undertaken by the lighting community is often funded by manufacturers, which can put constraints on the dissemination of results. Also, much of the research is focused on the science and quantification of light and does not address the 'quality of light' that designers work with. This may be due to an emphasis on standards and codes and the desire for results that 'focus on verifying the existing standards'. Again, the Summit felt that the profession needs to be actively and directly involved in lighting research -- and also with the dissemination of results to practitioners.

Database of Research

Jean Sundin presented a proposal for a 'Lighting Research Database', which is currently in development. This database would be an online resource designed to provide access to existing research, which would enable professionals, students and researchers to suggest or identify topics for new research and help them to find collaborators. It is envisaged that lighting design publications would also have a role in this process and that a working group of educators, designers, manufacturers, and researchers could oversee a 'wish list' of lighting related research projects.

As a working professional with an interest in raising the profile of the profession, and in lighting education, I feel that Malcolm's paper demonstrates some important developments. In particular the proposals for the database and call for more involvement by professionals in education is welcome. Given the recent dialogue in this journal regarding lighting research and funding, there could also be opportunities for the ILP, as an Institution already involved in lighting education, to be involved in this process as well as contributing to the database project.