THEATRICAL LIGHTING AND THE ARCHITECTURAL LIGHTING DESIGN PROFESSION
By Courtney Cebula and Jill Mulholland

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Theatre design educators know that their students have greater opportunities for employment if they look for ways to use their design skills, and their imaginations, beyond the limited number of theatrical jobs available. Exhibition design and game design are two areas that recent writers in TD&T have spotlighted (“Rockin’-and-a-Rollin’” by Raymond Kent, Winter 2012, and “From Plywood to Pixels: Career Transitions from Theatre to Video Game Design” by Catherine Bradley, Summer 2011; both articles are available on the Willard F. Bellman Digital Archives of TD&T—http://tdt.usitt.org). In this article, we use interviews with five crossover lighting designers to show how students of theatrical lighting design can expand their employment prospects by exploring the architectural lighting design profession.

Many award-winning architectural lighting designers began their careers in theatre and later discovered that they also enjoyed using light to permanently enhance the experience of the built environment. Architectural lighting designers work with architects to create ambiance through practical, working designs; conceptually, the two professions utilize many of the same skills. The Education Trust of the International Association of Lighting Designers, a charitable organization that supports education in architectural lighting design, invited five distinguished lighting designers—Katherine C. Abernathy, Larry French, Cindy Limauro, Mark Major, and David A. Mintz—to share their insight about both professional outlets.
KATHERINE C. ABERNATHY, FIATLD

We learn to tell a story with light

Kathy Abernathy and her husband, Chris Abernathy, founders of Abernathy Lighting Design in North Providence, Rhode Island, met while they were BFA students in stage design at Webster University in St. Louis. They began their careers freelancing for theatre and dance companies, but after the birth of their son in 1988, Kathy Abernathy said, “it became very hard to find daycare for the challenging hours we were working.” Peter Sargent, her lighting design teacher at Webster, hired her to draft and write specifications for Lueking/Sargent, a small theatre consulting firm. “In those days, it was all still done as paper drafting,” she said, “no computers!” Sargent introduced her to the IESNA (Illuminating Engineering Society of North America), and when the IES St. Louis section ran an ad for an architectural lighting assistant/support position at Randy Burkett Lighting Design in St. Louis, she applied and got the job. “The rest is history!” she said.

Abernathy Lighting’s portfolio shows how far-ranging architectural lighting can be. The work includes corporate offices, conference rooms, and lobbies; restaurants; exhibitions for children’s, science, and history museums; churches; private and multi-family residences; and specialty retail experiences. Their clients take them across the country and around the world and include Ferrari World in Abu Dhabi, the Greenbrier Resort, the Greenbay Packers Hall of Fame, the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum in Atlanta, Ripley’s Believe It or Not in London, the Cincinnati Reds Team Store, and the MIT Archives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Abernathy said her theatre background “is the foundation of who I am today.” Theatrical lighting designers succeed in architectural lighting “because they learn to collaborate as a member of a team. We learn to be vulnerable, to listen to clients desires, and to meet deadlines. We learn to tell a story with light.” She urges lighting design students to see that architectural lighting design is a real opportunity for them. “They should stay up to date on the current lighting and control technologies and computer
programs,” she advises. Just as her affiliation with IES led to her first architectural lighting position, she tells students to be aware of societies like IALD, USITT, IESNA, and AIA. “Learn from them,” she said, “network with colleagues, and give back to the profession.”

LARRY FRENCH, MIES, FIALD

*A thinking process that is about the light first*

“My lighting career started in the theatrical world,” said Larry French, a principal at Auerbach Glasow French Architectural Lighting Design and Consulting in San Francisco. His parents were involved in amateur theatre, and as a child he got to pull the curtain sometimes. He acted in plays and musicals in high school and college (Southern Methodist and University of California, Davis), which in turn led to technical work and lighting design. The tech and design took over, and by 1974 he was getting low-level professional work in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

After a gig at the Banff School of Fine Arts, he got what he calls “a great break” in 1977 as...
a recipient of one of the first apprentice grants from the National Opera Institute, sponsored by the San Francisco Opera Company. Lighting design for theatre, dance, and opera companies across the United States followed, with a bit of touring abroad. In the mid-1980s, he said, “I began stretching out a bit into consulting for some of the theatre companies I was working for, designing technical systems for their future expansions. This led to the realization that there was a bigger world out there.”

When he was home in San Francisco between design gigs, he explored that bigger world: television, commercials, film, and architectural lighting. Like Kathy Abernathy, French made connections to architectural lighting through his local IES chapter and what was then called the Designer’s Lighting Forum. “I started attending meetings whenever I was in town, took the IES ED100 series [a continuing education course on the fundamentals of lighting design for built environments], and met a whole lot of interesting individuals,” he said.

A year later, “through sheer luck,” he learned about an opening at Auerbach and Associates. “I had known of Len Auerbach for some time and greatly admired his work and the work of Patty Glasow, who was then establishing the architectural lighting group in earnest, he said. In 1988, he accepted a junior-level position at the firm. “I have been here ever since.”

French ticks off some assets that a theatrical lighting designer brings to architectural lighting. “Work in the theatre starts a lighting designer in a thinking process that is about the light first,” he said. Then knowledge of instrumentation supports the concept in dimensional space. A young designer learns to work in a structured 3D environment where angle and light quality decisions are forced upon you. “The ability to think in 3D is critical,” French said, “even when presented with information in 2D format.”

Theatre work exposes a designer to historical periods and styles, along with a broad knowledge of music and composers. French calls a theatre designer’s knowledge of art history, literary history, and dance history “a library that can be drawn upon when working in design at any level.” Designing a sequence of presets and cues throughout a show—the “kinetic process,” French calls it—brings experience in the changing qualities of light and a decent knowledge of controls. “All of that knowledge comes to bear when I am conceptualizing,” French said, along with what he’s learned about architecture and landscape that are not necessarily part of the theatrical world.

Besides advising theatrical lighting design students to consider a career in architectural lighting, French says anyone thinking of working in architectural lighting would do well to gain some experience in the theatre. “Many people we have considered and hired over the years,” he said, “have some exposure to the theatre.” What theatre designers may lack in knowledge of the technical side of architectural lighting and the architectural process, they make up for in other ways as new employees. “It is harder to teach and learn design and aesthetic ability than it is technical knowledge.”

French reminds lighting design students of the realities of the profession. “Although fast-paced and often exciting,” he said, the theatrical world is hard and unforgiving. Unless you are very fortunate, the constant struggle for work and the pay scale can be punishing. “There are more graduates in theatre design than in architectural lighting, he points out, and as a result, there are potentially more employment opportunities for architectural lighting professionals. “It is a relatively young profession,” he said, “and the technological leaps in architectural lighting tools are abundant and exhilarating.”

He warns that a theatrical curriculum alone will not be enough to equip you for a career in architectural lighting. He suggests the IALD Education Trust website (www.iald.org/trust/) for information about what to learn and where to learn it. “Find a mentor and ask for help,” he said. “I think you will find that architectural lighting professionals are most generous with their time.”

For his own part, French believes his decision to shift career directions twenty-five years ago was a good one. “This career has been most fulfilling,” he said, “and better yet, I never feel like I have gotten to the bottom of it.” His final word to theatrical lighting design students: “Open your mind and explore an alternate and mostly parallel universe to the theatre. You might be glad you did.”
Cindy Limauro, Fellow-USITT

Say yes to any project that requires artistry of lighting

As head of the lighting design program at the Carnegie Mellon School of Drama, Cindy Limauro embraces the philosophy that she is training designers of light. “When they graduate,” she said, “I want the students to feel that they can say yes to any kind of project that requires artistry of lighting.”

That’s certainly the case with Limauro herself, who has said yes to designing for opera, ballet, and theatre, and with Christopher Popowich, her partner in C & C Lighting, has designed lighting for libraries, exhibitions, churches, educational facilities, and even a bridge. They recently masterminded the Gulf Tower Weather Beacon in Pittsburgh, which changes colors with the weather and has holiday light shows.

Limauro’s theatre background has definitely affected her practice of architectural lighting design. “I only take on projects that require a dramatic flair,” she said. She approaches each architectural project as she would a theatre design. Who are the people in this space? What should the mood be? Where is the primary focus? “Most people think of architectural lighting as white light,” she said. “I see it in color. Nature encompasses a full spectrum of color, and I use this as inspiration.” She cites the theatrical lighting designer’s expression that “we paint with light” and takes advantage of the palette of color.

Theatrical lighting designers are successful in architectural lighting design, she says, because they are used to working with light every day. “They understand everything about light: how it affects visual perception, materials, mood, human responses. They are also collaborators who work with a team, and they know how to support an artistic vision.”

Limauro teaches an architectural lighting design course for the Carnegie Mellon School of Architecture and School of Drama. Over the years, many students have successfully pursued careers in architectural lighting. “It is an easy transition from theatrical lighting to architectural lighting,” she said. “You use the same techniques of design, and many large firms take on student interns.”
“Designers Working with Light” is the slogan that Spiers+Major in London uses to embrace a range of services that includes architectural lighting, strategic branding, and product design. Mark Major, who founded the company with Jonathan Spiers, started out wanting to be a painter, but his love of science as well as art inspired him to train as an architect. He thinks theatrical lighting designers moving to architectural lighting need more than a theatre background. They need to know something about architecture.

“I have always had the greatest respect for theatrical lighting designers,” he said. “For me they not only have a real passion for light but sensitivity towards the medium that is rarely displayed by people coming from other areas of lighting.” His company’s studios in London and Edinburgh employ people from many backgrounds: architecture, art, interior design, lighting, graphic design, and theatre.

But there is a “but.” “For me, an architectural training still provides an ideal alternative design background from which to enter the field,” he said, “albeit that you need to learn the necessary technical skills associated with handling artificial light.”

Architectural education teaches a designer the methods of visual communication, how to work with form and space, and a knowledge of detailing and construction. It also helps a designer understand the legal and contractual frameworks of the construction industry.

More importantly, he said, “it gives you a real appreciation of the very thing you are working with—architecture! I have often been surprised how many people in the lighting industry talk about architectural lighting with so little interest in the history of architecture or its contemporary culture. For me it is a bit like going to work in theatre lighting without feeling the need to understand the world of the stage!”

Fortunately, he said, “many theatre lighting designers who enter architectural lighting have the requisite appreciation of how light changes the character of spaces and surfaces to be sensitive to the needs of a building and its users. At the same time I do feel that there are gaps that could be bridged by a better education system.”

While Major sees many parallels between theatre and architectural lighting, the delivery, he says, is quite different. “Certainly there is less flexibility in the construction industry. Once you have written the specification, produced the details, and agreed on the final lighting layouts, it is often very difficult—nigh impossible in some cases—to then change your mind!”

MARK MAJOR, RIBA, FRIBA, IALD, RDI
Architectural training still provides an ideal alternative design background
Granary Square, King’s Cross, London, UK. Lighting design by Speirs + Major. Photo by John Sturrock.


In architectural lighting you have to be right the first time

David A. Mintz, who retired in 2005 as the founder and principal of the Mintz Lighting Group, is unequivocal: “Theatrical lighting design is the best training for architectural lighting design,” he said. “Optics are optics. When you design lighting for the stage, you see the stage, and you try to create an effect—highlight there, shadow there—and if you don’t like it, you move it, try it again. You paint with light. That’s what you do in theatre lighting. That’s what you do in architectural lighting, too.” Theatrical lighting students also understand colors and textures and know how to read plans, which makes them stronger architectural lighting designers.

The difference between theatre and architecture? “In architectural lighting design, when it’s in, it’s in, and it isn’t moving. You have to be right the first time.”

Mintz started out as a directing major at Carnegie Tech, but when he was put on the lighting crew for a production his freshman year, “something clicked,” he said. After getting his BFA in 1955 and a stint designing lights for the Pittsburgh Playhouse, he served in the army in Europe. He then transferred to the State Department and soon became the resident lighting designer at the United States Theatre at the 1958 World Fair in Brussels. Returning home, he found “there was no living to be made in theatrical lighting design in New York. So, when I was offered a job in architectural lighting, I took it.” He also took courses in architecture at Columbia University “so I would understand what the architects were talking about,” he said. After another world’s fair gig as associate producer, technical director, and lighting designer for the AT&T Pavilion at the 1964 New York World’s Fair, he started David A. Mintz, Inc., that later became the Mintz Lighting Group. He currently serves as an independent lighting consultant for selected projects.

His advice for theatre design students who want to go into architectural lighting: take courses in architecture. “You have to know the lingo,” he said. He recommends spending time with manufacturers getting familiar with equipment. And, of course, “get an internship with an architectural lighting design firm. I’ve hired interns from all backgrounds; many of them were hired full-time.”

Mintz has a no-nonsense attitude: “Students should consider architectural lighting design because the reality of making a living in the theatre is minuscule. It is a dirty, bone-grinding business. There are greater opportunities in architectural lighting design, and it is no less creative than theatre lighting. Working in architectural lighting can be very exciting.” It can also sometimes be humbling. “When I designed the lighting for the Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, I was dealing with national icons. What could be more important than that?”

Courtney Cebula is the marketing and communications coordinator for the IALD Education Trust, and Jill Mulholland, PhD, is the IALD Education Trust coordinator. Founded in 1969 and based in Chicago, the International Association of Lighting Designers (IALD) is an internationally recognized organization dedicated solely to the concerns of independent, professional lighting designers (www.iald.org).