



# TRIP ADVISER

*Nick Hoggett shares his hard-won wisdom on navigating the global market for architectural lighting design*



**WORDS:** In conversation with Carl Gardner  
**PICTURES:** As credited

**W**orking overseas is our bread and butter. We are used to it – 90 per cent of our work is outside the UK, and a lot of it is in restaurants and hotels. I believe there are real cultural and aesthetic considerations in different countries that lighting designers must understand – all too often a standard, international solution is rolled out across the world. Some lighting designers don't respect local variety. The problem is that international hotel groups encourage uniformity of style. However, if you get close to the client, you can bring in local variety. Preparation for overseas projects is part of this process. Research is important. If we get a new project in a city we have not worked in before, we look around for a few days at hotels, restaurants and galleries to get a flavour of the culture... and the competition. The lighting should always be part of a hotel's or

restaurant's personality. For example, hotel lighting in Japan and Scandinavia is crisp and gorgeously packaged, whereas in the Mediterranean you might offer a simpler, more rustic style.

With one-off owners, you can be quirky and individual. For example, we are working on a hotel in Nigeria that will have Nigerian art as its main stylistic influence... similarly the Hyatt Regency in Johannesburg also wanted an African style, down to the customised fixtures.

In recent projects we have worked much harder on the decorative elements of light fixtures, we have tried to reduce the number of downlights providing ambient lighting – and to make distinctive fixtures into ambient features.

Recently, we have been working at the historic Waldorf Astoria in Amsterdam, which comprises six canalside town houses joined together. We have broken the rules; for example, the lighting in the meeting rooms doesn't meet normal illumination standards, but the main thing there was to respect the historic interiors. ▶



Hotel restaurants are an important area. Again, in terms of stylistic differences, I would mention Africa and the Middle East. In Africa, the lighting has to have elegant simplicity so we cut back the layers of light, whereas in the Middle East, where the buildings are so elaborate, we have to put in layers of lighting, so that it can complement the architecture. Both these approaches contrast with Japanese restaurants, in which the lighting has a serene simplicity and is completely integrated with the architecture. In these places we are looking for something of the ambience elucidated in Tanizaki's book, *In Praise of Shadows*.

Product sourcing and procurement overseas is obviously more challenging than when you are working on home soil. In the US the procurement process has become very complicated, fittings go through too many hands – agents, wholesalers and contractors – and this makes it expensive for the client. On a recent project in Miami, we tried to get the suppliers to deal directly with the client to minimise costs. Also, the US has a lot of regulation and legislation that make it more difficult to find those elegant little products that are more common in Europe.

Local sourcing is crucial. When working in Holland we would aim never to specify English lights. I think US lighting designers specify too many US fixtures on overseas projects, which means they often get substituted. There has to be a local agent for whatever we use, which gives the contractor fewer opportunities to change the spec. It is no good having great products if the service is poor. In general I think it is simply polite to be respectful to local cultures. After all, it is a privilege to be asked to work there.

Local sourcing is also part of our effort to try to pre-empt substitution, although anti-corruption legislation in some countries does limit precise specification. We always specify a single product to set a benchmark that alternatives can be judged against. But to get the client or the project manager on side, we are happy to review any other products provided they have the right characteristics. A lot of the products that are presented as credible alternatives really are not and we reject them within a few seconds of review. The process often helps the client to recognise the difference. If the client sees the specified lights alongside the alternative, the differences are obvious, and that's why we always ask for working samples to be available for us to review.

I sometimes think designers are unnecessarily dogmatic and unwilling to even look at potential alternatives. In some parts of the world, this can make clients think the designer may have a vested interest in the supply of a particular product. If you embrace the situation, you ▶

Right: The Mandarin Oriental Hotel du Rhône, Geneva by Swiss architect Marc-Joseph Saugey. dpa lighting design was responsible for the lighting in the public spaces, including the dramatic lobby







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can sometimes find good local products that provide value to the project. I think it's important to make sure the clients get best value, so if a slight compromise that has only a minor effect on the quality of the light saves half of the capital cost, we have to be reasonable and consider such compromises.

Of course, the obsession with new technology can be a real bugbear. All clients want the latest technology, the greatest energy-saving LEDs and so on, but they don't want to pay the price. LEDs are still difficult to control, particularly in restaurants for low-end dimming down below 20 per cent. You can get perceivable flicker if you don't research and test the compatibility of all the components. If you don't have the budget, you are pushed to go for low-cost alternatives, and this can be really problematic. You are better off reducing the layers of light than having poor quality products that do not dim smoothly to low levels.

And then there are the control systems themselves – here the biggest issue is their compatibility with LEDs, which is different from country to country. However, in Africa control systems must be much simpler, mainly because of the unstable power supply, whereas greater sophistication of control and dimming is possible in the Middle East or the US. We find Japan is the best country in terms of quality and detailing of fixtures – I love working in Japan.

Much of the success of hospitality projects comes down to the client's valuation of design. People who come to us already clearly appreciate good lighting because they are talking to us at all. We are definitely not the cheapest lighting designers and nor do we want to be; what we believe is that we provide best value and add huge value to the projects we work on. For instance, in Nigeria, where we are working on four projects, the clients are appreciative and want high quality, creative lighting design.

Most interior designers also appreciate what we do, they need us more than ever for technical input as well as creativity. I believe LEDs represent the greatest opportunity for lighting designers to be recognised and valued, because of their complexity and the huge problems that can occur if there is not careful selection and co-ordination with control equipment. We have 50 people in the practice constantly looking at new products, in particular LEDs, their properties and usability. Even we struggle to keep on top of it, so what chance do non-specialist designers have?

Bedroom lighting is an important, but sometimes neglected, area of hospitality lighting. No matter where you are, the overall style of the hotel tends to drive the bedroom or bathroom lighting. The three universal essentials are a good reading light at the bed,

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a good desk reading light and good mirror lighting. With long haul travel, jet lag is an issue, so blackout curtains are important too, particularly for flight crew. In some cases, people have objected to indicator LEDs for switches or devices, and asked for them to be taped over.

Despite what we have all found in hotels, sophisticated, complex controls for bedrooms and bathrooms are not appropriate in my opinion – any lighting controls should be simple and intuitive, simple dimmer switches with, say, three circuits for different room ambiances. There should be two in the bathroom, one for a low-level relaxing ambience and a brighter setting for doing make-up or things like that.

Do we get paid adequately for all this knowledge and experience that we bring to hospitality design? It's a changing outlook. Back in 2007 fees were good, but in the 2008 crisis they regressed. It's a matter of supply and demand – more competition equals lower fees generally, although I believe the best lighting consultants that add value for their clients can achieve reasonable fees.

Northern Europe is usually more reliable, it has a better legal system, not that we use it often. In some countries you have to work through your relationships and use discussion and negotiation to get paid, as legal redress is not practical. We have had poor experiences in China, with low fees and late payment.

Hopefully the growing internationalism of the marketplace will iron these things out in the long run. It's an exciting area and we want to keep working in it. Using our experience we are able to maintain a financially solid business and that is important to enable us to provide the best creative and technical input for our clients. □

● *Nick Hoggett is a partner of dpa Lighting Consultants.*

At the EDITION hotel in Istanbul, the local design aesthetic has been echoed in the lighting





Courtesy of EDITION Hotels

