

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN WORKING FOR AN OWNER VERSUS AN ARCHITECT? OUR ROUNDTABLE PANEL DISCUSSES WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN EACH SCENARIO

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# Who's the Boss

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Lighting designers truly serve many masters, whether they're architects, owners, facility managers, right on down to homeowners. So who makes the best "boss?" To help us gain some insight into what makes a client tick, *LD + A* asked a panel of five lighting designers to: "Discuss the differences in working for an architect, as opposed to working directly for an owner and describe the challenges in each scenario."

One panelist expressed a clear preference between architect and owner, others implied one, while each had a unique take on some of the trials, tribulations and triumphs common to each situation. The panelists, however, did seem to find some common ground:

- *Personality "match" is the thing.* Although it sounds like a cliché, each panelist emphasized that it's the personality of the individual—not the title or position they hold on the project team—that can ultimately lead to a successful collaboration.
- *Creative inspiration can come from either party.* On the one hand, architects and lighting designers are simpatico; kindred spirits who may share a similar design sensibility and speak the same language. On the other had, you will seldom get a "tabula rasa"—as one panelist put it—from an architect, whereas an owner with no preconceived notions and no technical background can help unleash the lighting designer's creative genius.
- *The message, not the messenger, is most important.* It really doesn't matter who is calling the shots, because at the end of the day, lighting design is a vehicle for expressing the "vision" for the project—whether the visionary is the architect or the owner.

— Paul Tarricone

# TED MATHER

*principal, Ted Mather Lighting Design*

## OWNERS

- *Can present a fresh viewpoint; often open to new ideas*

## ARCHITECTS

- *A keen eye for design can help prevent expensive blunders and nip bad ideas in the bud*
- *Express ideas visually; can transform verbal concept into an architectural form*

Ultimately, it comes down to the personality of the individual, and their combination of business sense and cultural enlightenment. If the design team is culturally informed, a common ground immediately exists in which to connect, dream and create.

If the architect or owner is sensitive to human needs, the next hurdle is the business side. "You get what you pay for" may be a cliché, but it's often true. I call it squeezing the balloon. You can squeeze the money out of the project up front, but it will only blow up somewhere else down the road, whether it's in maintenance, programming time or fixture failure. The ones who understand that it must be done correctly up front are the ones to work for.

Beyond these basic ideologies come the idiosyncrasies of profession. Architects are educated, experienced, share a common vocabulary and can usually think in spatial terms. A working meeting can actually get work done. An owner may be living through their first construction job and require a great deal of educa-

tion at every juncture. This can be both wearing and stimulating. Distilling complex product features into layman's terms helps me hone down the reason for having them in the first place, keeping the project in focus.

An owner with a fresh point of view can often be more open to new ideas and willing to take more risks. A lack of technical expertise can bring out the most creative thoughts in a design team and challenge the norm. If the budget can back it up, the results can be remarkable. When lighting designer David Hersey saw the original model of the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas, he said, "Wouldn't it be fun if the water feature turned into a volcano at night?" Steve Wynn was enthralled, ponied up the money and the result started a competition among hotels along the strip that has lasted over a decade.

On the other hand, working

**'An owner may be living through their first construction job and require a great deal of education at every juncture. This can be both wearing and stimulating'**

with a seasoned architect can prevent expensive blunders. Whether it's the second pair of eyes reviewing a drawing, or real life experience having attempted a similar idea, an architect can help nip a bad idea in the bud. I think of the building shaped like a giant compact case that Mike Brady

designed on "The Brady Bunch" for a cosmetic company (at the owner's request). Architects can usually redirect the sometimes wacky ideas into something more refined before it gets to me.

The biggest advantage I find with architects is their skill at expressing an idea visually. It's great to be challenged by "We want to create a new visual icon for the city!" but how does that manifest itself? An owner may have the vision and understanding to know an icon must be created. They might even have the financial resources to pull it off. But it's the experience of many projects that enables a designer to transform a verbal concept into an architectural form. Bob Segal demonstrated this with his elegant yet striking design for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. While the sphere instantly evokes the game of basketball, the building's other curves communicate a level of elegant sophistication only possible from the hands of a seasoned architect.

Finally, you get paid a lot faster when you work for the owner. The architect usually waits to get paid by the owner before they turn around and pay you, so I always prefer a contract directly with the owner.

Ted Mather, Member IESNA (2001), has been associate lighting designer on over a dozen Broadway and touring productions including "Oklahoma," "Swan Lake," "Art," "Beauty and the Beast," "Les Miserable" and "Miss Saigon." As part of MJLD, he co-designed the lighting for the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, MA, the NASDAQ Marketplace in Times Square, the Truman Presidential Library in Independence, MO., and the new International Spy Museum in Washington D.C.



# SUSAN BRADY

president, SBLD Studio

## OWNERS

- *Direct contact with lighting designer means issues/goals aren't filtered; no getting caught in the cross-fire*
- *Offer faster payment*

## ARCHITECTS

- *Give-and-take collaboration broadens range of lighting design solutions*
- *Lighting solutions better integrated with architecture*

Each option has its pros and cons, but generally I prefer working for an architect because of the collaborative nature of the relationship. The give-and-take process that evolves when working with another design professional certainly broadens the possibilities for design solutions. Lighting design is such an integral part of the architecture that it is often difficult or less fulfilling to go it alone. This collaborative process can be inhibited when working without an architect because as a lighting designer you cannot always control architectural elements. With many of our most successful lighting design solutions, one often cannot define exactly whose idea it was or who authored which piece, architect versus lighting designer. For me, the best solutions are those that are seamlessly integrated with the architecture.

The benefit of working directly for the owner is that you are directly addressing their priorities and issues, unfiltered by an architect or designer. Occasionally we find ourselves caught in the middle of a style clash, with the owner preferring, say, traditional, and the architect being opposed. This can create a no-win situation for us and ultimately affects our ability to control the efficiency of our efforts and fees, usually forcing us to design to the architect's wishes first and then re-design to meet the owner's directives. This happened to us recently at a point where we had to re-specify an entire decorative lighting package after issuing 90 percent of the construction documents. Not only did it occur very late in the game but the final fixture package included eight new custom fixtures in order to please both sides, which represented a tremendous time commitment on our part.

Without a doubt the most advantageous aspect of working for an owner is that we have one less step in the billing and compensation process. As a consultant billing through the architects, you can lose two or more months as they receive and then process your invoices. You can easily be missed in an architect's billing cycle or have your invoices held over. Since our invoices can be relatively small compared to the architect and MEP engineers, some architects allow them to "build up" before they re-package the bill and submit it to the owner. This dilemma is worse when it happens at both the outbound and inbound direction, with the architect not only holding your invoices but also holding your payment. When running a small business this can significantly affect cash flow.

Susan Brady, Member IESNA (1995), is founder and president of SBLD Studio. She has been practicing lighting design in New York City for 19 years and established the firm in early 1994. Ms. Brady has been responsible for the lighting design of a broad variety of project types including office interiors, trading floors, lobbies, conference centers, airports, museums, showrooms, recreational facilities, retail and mall projects, healthcare facilities, exterior facade lighting and site lighting.

'Lighting design is such an integral part of the architecture that it is often difficult or less fulfilling to go it alone'



# CARLOS INCLAN

designer, Studio Lux

## OWNERS

- *May force the lighting designer to have to act as “quasi-architect” (if one is not on board); scheduling could become part of your job*

## ARCHITECTS

- *Projects may have tighter schedule*
- *View lighting design as a vehicle for architectural vision*

Owners and design teams (architects/interior designers) all come with idiosyncrasies. Generalization by role is improbable, but some common threads are noteworthy when lighting designers prepare to best serve clients and prosper.

Three scenarios seem feasible here, and they have varying organizational, creative and economical repercussions.

1. *The job without a design team/architect.* The owner hires you in search of an inte-

quasi-architectural solutions. Establish a “time-and-expenses” contract to avoid trouble with recurrent changes of the client’s “vision.” Insist on a reputable, licensed contractor to carry out the installation. For example, you see the need to add skylights... this discussion will be easy to initiate, but the execution of your idea may be haphazard if deemed expensive.



2. *Working with an architect (who tends to run the job’s schedule) and being paid by the architect.* A design team hires you to implement the “vision.” The design team will have an interest in a tight schedule; the job is less likely to lag. The project may emphasize architecture/interior design and become all about uplighting colonnades or highlighting brocades; you must address human factors essential for end users. You may have a full scope, from concepts to mock-ups, on to bid documents, etc. Not all design teams are economically savvy, so be alert for timely payments. Using the example from above, the team will ponder those skylights first, may embrace them or not, and the owner may never hear about them.

3. *The owner hires you to col-*

*laborate with his design team.* You quickly assimilate the team’s “vision” and help present it to the owner as desirable, feasible and legal. Other consultants’ contracts may have different cash flows; the schedule may run more intermittently. You will need to “sell” ideas and recommendations both to the design team and owner, who may be more directly accessible for discussions. Human factors of end users may gain preponderance, i.e.: the owner wants nice light for reading in bed, even if the roof truss work is not backlit. In this scenario, the owner may be more of a bean counter, timely or not with payments. Using the example from above, the skylights can more readily be discussed with decision makers, but may not get unanimous buy-in; their cost may greatly drive decisions.

Good people skills will always improve your lighting designer role. Develop your ability to nurture clients’ “visions”; be flexible. Share the design team’s purpose, or help an owner express his vision. These skills are essential for successful designs.

Carlos Inclán, LC, Member IESNA (1997), is a designer with Studio Lux. His 18 years of international architectural lighting design experience include projects that range in scale from civic and industrial, to hospitality, entertainment, retail, residential and private art collections. He has collaborated with design professionals in Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Canada and throughout the U.S.

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gral solution. You may carry the onus of scheduling the job. There may be a less defined “vision” or greater artistic freedom, or more budgetary restraint (the same that excluded the architect). Be ready to blur boundaries and knowledgeably advise on



## PAMELA HULL WILSON

*principal, PHW  
Architectural Lighting  
Design*

### OWNERS

- *May view lighting as a “cosmetic” applied during construction*

### ARCHITECTS

- *Greater appreciation of the impact of lighting*
- *Lighting addressed early, as part of schematic design*

Although 98 percent of my lighting designs have been commissioned by architects, I’ve had a wide range of experience working with owners. The primary differences between working with architects and owners are the level of knowledge about lighting design; the level of lighting integration in the schematic design phase; and the varying ability to effectively communicate with the lighting designer.

I have found that architects who routinely hire lighting designers understand and appreciate the impact that lighting can have on a project. Because of their training and design abilities, architects tend to possess a more holistic knowledge about lighting design than do owners. Specific courses in lighting and

continuing interest help to give architects a greater awareness of lighting design and its organic relationship to the entire project.

Of equal importance is the architect’s ability to introduce lighting ideas during the schematic design phase. This enables the incorporation of energy-saving techniques and the modeling of masses with light and shadow. Recently, I was hired by an owner to work on a pedestrian plaza. The project was moving at break-neck speed and the electrical engineer had already released drawings with locations of plaza fixtures. In addition, the light pole footings had been poured. The rush to complete the project drove the design, resulting in lighting being treated as a cosmetic applied during construction.

No matter who your client or what the nature of your business, communication is always critical, especially in the design field. Whether it is reviewing hand-drawn sketches or touring existing facilities, both architect and owner must understand the goals of the lighting designer. Because architects are continually aware of lighting design effects, they have greater skill in communicating with a lighting designer.

Good communication goes beyond the ability to talk about technical issues and design parameters. If the architect is managing the project, he must represent the client’s goals honestly and coordinate the efforts of the lighting designer. However, this is not always the case. Several years ago, I was working on a project in which the owner distributed his own sketches of the reflected ceil-

ing plans. When I insisted on alternate designs, I was asked to not contact the owner, and the architect failed to express my concerns to the owner. The results were unsatisfactory. Filing sketches and documenting correspondence saved my relationship with the architect, but my reputation with the client was damaged.

Owners don’t always understand the importance of relying on the architect’s expertise through all project phases. There are those owners who think the way to save money is to remove the designers from the project as soon as possible, thereby leaving any lighting

**Because of their training and design abilities, architects tend to possess a more holistic knowledge about lighting design than do owners**

design problems to be solved by the electrical engineer or by the architectural representative on the job site. An instructive, personal example is one project where all the designers, (architectural, lighting and landscape), were released from their contracts and the construction was completed by the owner. Results were so unsatisfactory we were all recommissioned for a reconstruction phase.

Pamela Hull Wilson, IALD, Member IESNA (1979), principal, PHW Architectural Lighting Design, has been an independent lighting designer for over 20 years. Her work has included architectural lighting design for corporate headquarters, museums and public spaces.

# DAVID RODSTEIN

*principal, Rodstein Design*

## OWNERS

- Can offer “free rein” regarding aesthetics
- Residential owners may need to be educated

## ARCHITECTS

- Changing their pre-conceived notions can be a challenge

Working with an owner, facility manager, or architect each has its advantages and disadvantages.

In general, many clients think of choosing fixtures first and not the areas and tasks that are to be lit and their order of importance. I try to break that notion and work counter to that sequence.

An architect is essentially a generalist who has a vision. He is like an orchestra conductor and composer at the same time. He/she would like to do everything him/herself but can't. He/she will do the basic

rasa. One type of conflict is placement of fixtures to meet geometric criteria, which can be at odds with the best lighting performance. I usually work with them to break pre-conceived notions, explore different lighting themes to make sure the functional aspects of a project come together, while keeping the essence of the space.

In one example, I asked the



architect the theme she wanted in lighting an exterior courtyard. Do we have the ambience of an Edwardian London streetscape at night, or the festive Tivoli Gardens of Copenhagen? Either solution would still meet IES criteria for light levels and glare control.

Facility managers, meanwhile, are not always visually oriented. Many come in with energy, maintenance and task issues. The lighting designer is often given free rein for the aesthetics. Often in an industrial environment, the tasks are most critical; the lighting scheme and fixture pattern has to “design itself.” The result is usually an ordinary space with extraordinary illumination. The good aesthetics result from designing for pure function. If the engineering and planning is ordered and coherent, the visual order will result. The lighting look remains timeless since there

are no contrived styles.

One facility manager, who had previously used ESCOs and was hiring a lighting designer for the first time, was very pleased with the spatial aesthetics going from a “prison yard to a Cathedral [sic]” yet maintaining very low watts per square foot. The job won both an EPA Energy Star Award and an IIDA Honorable Mention.

When working with owners on residential projects, personal life dynamics that have nothing to do with the design often come into play. The biggest difficulty is to educate them that decorative fixtures are the lighting “to look at,” not the lighting “to see by.” Often, a house renovation, or brand new house results from life station changes. Living pattern analysis plays a key role here.

I took one client to a lighting lab. We looked at a vignette of a den with all the functional lighting turned on and the glare bomb off. We then turned off all the shelf lighting, up lighting, wall wash and just turned on the decorative glare bomb. The client was amazed at how the space visually died and now fully understands the importance of the functional/invisible lighting, and that the chandelier is unnecessary.

Overall, though, the success of a lighting job has more to do with the individual client rather than the position they hold.

David D. Rodstein LC, Member IESNA (1987), is the principal of Rodstein Design, which concentrates on fixture design, lighting design, and product strategy in the lighting field. He has held full time design positions with Lightolier, The Pace Collection and Simkar Lighting.

**‘One type of conflict is placement of fixtures to meet geometric criteria, which can be at odds with the best lighting performance’**

designs and schematics. The architect needs to bring in specialists of various disciplines and coordinate them to achieve the common goal.

Many architects have a pre-conceived vision in mind of how a space should be lit, and have decided the type of fixtures that are the appropriate style. It is rare to get tabula