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LIGHT ART LIGHT

ART AS LIGHT / LIGHTING ART

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SCOTTISH NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY • FESTIVALS OF LIGHT

interview

CHARGE OF THE LIGHTBRIGADE

Rhomney Forbes-Gray could qualify as a latter-day female Canadian pioneer, not by venturing into previously uncharted territorial expanses, but by establishing the country's second woman-owned lighting consultancy a dozen years ago, Lightbrigade Architectural Lighting Design. Vilma Barr reports.

“These are exciting times to be a lighting designer, albeit challenging. No past lighting technology has evolved at the rate of LEDs.”

“During my first year of studying to be an actor at York University, I was exposed to the backstage life of the theatre. I immediately switched direction to the world of theatrical lighting... architectural lighting came later as a result of taking an IES ED100 course.

“I started thinking about starting my own firm in 2000. But at that time, there was only one other woman lighting designer running her own private practice in Canada, Suzanne Powadiuk. So I contacted her to see what she could tell me about the opportunities out there. She urged me to go ahead with my idea. ‘That’s wonderful,’ she said. ‘There’s enough work out there for all of us.’”

So Rhomney Forbes-Gray redirected her career path from the fantasy world of the stage to the realities of competitive com-

mercial architectural lighting design. After earning her BFA in Theatre, she worked as part of stage crews, first as a spotlight operator and moving on to designing lighting for small shows and then on to larger productions in such theatres as the St. Lawrence Center, Toronto, and for the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. “Out of interest, I took the IES ED100 course which happened to coincide with the expansion of the lighting department at the consulting engineering firm of H.H. Angus. The director, Ken Loach, was in the process of convincing company management that there was too much work coming in and that it was time to expand the department to include someone from another avenue of lighting design. I joined the firm in 1988. Angus was the first Canadian engineering firm in Canada to have a professional light-

ing department.”

During her time with H.H. Angus, she worked on such major projects as the special function rooms at the Skydome Hotel in Toronto. “We integrated colour with changing lights and theatrical effects at a time when this type of installation was uncommon,” Forbes-Gray points out. It has won an IESNA/IIDA commendation, her first professional award program recognition. Most of her other assignments were for health care facilities and more utilitarian buildings. “I became interested in a greater variety of lighting projects than I was designing. My inner artist was feeling unfulfilled,” she says. “At that time there was a real stigma that because you were affiliated with an engineering firm you weren’t creative. It was assumed that you were all about numbers and came up short on the





Clockwise from top right Korean Gallery East at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 2005, Exhibit Designer: Philip Beesley, Lighting co-design: Sholem Dolgoy, Pic by permission of Royal Ontario Museum; Murale, Ottawa, 2008, Interior Design: burdifilek, Pic: Ben Rahn, A-Frame Inc.; Intercontinental Hotel, Toronto, 2006, Architects: Crang & Boake, Richard Dabrus, Pic: Michael Mahovich; Holt Renfrew, Toronto, 2007, Interior Design: burdifilek, Pic: Ben Rahn, A-Frame Inc.; Private Residence, Toronto, 2001, Marnie Mancini Interior Design, Lighting co-design: Glenn Boccini, Pic: Patrick Kennedy; W Hotel Lounge, Atlanta, 2009, Interior Design: burdifilek, Pic: Ben Rahn, A-Frame Inc.

creative side.” In 1999 and after nearly eleven years at H.H. Angus, Forbes-Gray established Lightbrigade Architectural Lighting Design in Toronto to maintain technical excellence while developing a diversified roster of creative services.

“There wasn’t much of a market then, and it was a tough haul to convince architects they needed a lighting design consultant, and to be added to the project’s budget as another design line item,” she says. With a population, now at 34.1 million, living in the world’s second largest country at 3.85 million square miles (Russia is the biggest), Forbes-Gray estimates there were less than ten full-time lighting designers in Canada when she opened her office. She is optimistic that within the next few years there will be an increasing number of architects and interior designers who will include their role at the time of bidding on a project. Her experience has been that it is difficult to market directly to an owner, as most require a push from the other members of the design team.

Forbes-Gray stresses the ‘light’ in the number of the members of her ‘brigade’. “We are a small office of three - a busy

three,” she indicates. “Jesse Blonstein has been practicing lighting design for fourteen years. Julia Vandergraaf comes from a twelve-year theatrical background before joining Lightbrigade five years ago, and continues to design small theatre productions. Our firm takes on assignments of different sizes with different schedules, from two weeks to four years, with six months the meaty part of the process,” she says. The project that jump-started Lightbrigade was the St. Bruno location of the La Maison Simons, a family-owned, Québec-only department store chain. It won commendations from IESNA, GE, and the Prix Lumiere Award in 2002 and 2003. Lightbrigade was also responsible for the Laval and Sainte-Foy locations of this retailer and is currently working on the new West Edmonton Mall location. Other award-winning retail projects include Holt Renfrew’s Toronto flagship store for the designer’s floor and the main floor, and the Murale prototype beauty boutique in Ottawa, later rolled out to other units in the chain.

“The new energy restrictions, not to mention those to come, will require lighting specialists to keep on top of the tech-

nologies and requirements in a much more in-depth manner than previously,” she believes. “Our role is becoming not only a design team member but also that of a researcher and mathematician.” Construction market activity has turned around from the recent downturn, Forbes-Gray observes. “Canada was not as severely impacted as the US. There’s currently a building boom in Toronto, mostly condos along the waterfront. We are presently working on two condos, a restaurant, art gallery, a university, a hospital, two retirement residences, a casino, a residential sub-division and two residences.”

“These are exciting times to be a lighting designer, albeit challenging” she says. “No past lighting technology has evolved at the rate of LEDs. Most of our clients start out wanting to use LEDs on their projects. We have to explain the energy load options to them of LED, metal halide, and fluorescent and let them make the decision if they want to invest in an LED system.” She notes that new LED lamps that are being developed may be a better alternative to the incandescent lamp than the previous attempt at compact fluorescent. “The colour quality



Rose Theatre, Brampton, Canada, 2007
 Architects: Page & Steele
 Pics: Shai Gil Insite Photography
 Lighting: Nelson & Garrett (custom luminaires)
 Lamps: GE



will be closer to incandescent and they fit existing fixtures much better.” Canada’s ban on the retail sale of incandescent lamps goes into effect in 2012. “As someone who makes a living creating atmospheric spaces, I lament the ban of the incandescent. Although I appreciate the inefficiency of the source, particularly for commercial applications, I have always felt that there was never the proper marketing of dimmers to the residential sector. Dimmers can reduce loads by half, extend the life of the lamp, and significantly reduce landfill waste,” Forbes-Gray states. “Even a \$6 line-voltage dimmer is still considered by many homeowners as an upscale, high-tech product. Our firm was recently interviewed by a reporter from the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corp.) who asked if we bought into the rumours that the banning of the incandescent was backed by a cartel of lamp manufacturers to sell higher priced CFL and LED bulbs. I could only wish that there was

that much thought or intelligence in the decisions revolving around energy and light source technology.”

Lighting education for design students is part of Lightbrigade’s professional outreach efforts. “We have taught at the Ontario College of Art and Design for the past few years,” Forbes-Gray reports. “Typically, the course is mandatory for students in the environmental design department. Most have never heard of a lighting designer. They come into the class with no idea about why the class has been imposed on them. We describe and demonstrate why the course is important to their studies and introduce lighting techniques that will enhance the structures they design. By the end of the program, many are quite interested in the profession. Several of our students have gone on to become talented lighting designers.”

www.lightbrigade.ca

HIGHLIGHTS

Projects that you would like to change:

A number of years ago, for a hospital with a lengthy construction process, the lighting products that were originally specified as part of the bid package had to be implemented even though better-suited products had become available. For the high-ceilings in the public spaces, a mercury lamp with a CRI of 62, which was considered acceptable at that time, had been the original logical choice. In the years it took for completion of the building, metal halide technology had made significant advances which would have made for a better environment.

Projects you dislike:

This isn’t one project but rather an outcome I’ve witnessed in the past. For some larger hospitality projects, it is commonplace for decorative lighting elements to be selected by the interior designer for projects on which we have done the architectural lighting. Too often, these decorative fixtures are out-of-context with the architecture and the environmental lighting design of the space. There should be more agreed-upon collaboration to examine options and specifications for this important illumination aspect of the overall décor. It’s frustrating to not want to confess to working on a space due to a poorly selected chandelier in the lobby.

Projects you admire:

I know that it is cliché but one of my favourite architectural buildings is Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. It’s not about the lighting - I just love its architectural movement, the way it catches the light and the reflection in the water. For some reason, I just want to touch it.

Lighting Hero:

Without a doubt, I consider Ken Loach of H.H. Angus as my mentor. While I had a comprehension of light from my theatre experience, I had no experience in attaching quantitative numbers to my lighting nor of the extensive library of lamps and luminaires that are the tools of the architectural lighting designer. Ken patiently gave me instruction while permitting me to draw from my previous background and experience. I spent over ten years working side-by-side with Ken and will always be grateful for his patience, friendship, and the opportunity to develop my career in lighting design.

Notable projects:

- Ritz Carlton Hotel, Toronto.
- W Hotel, Downtown Atlanta
- Murale, Ottawa, beauty products boutique, a separate brand owned by Shoppers Drug Mart chain
- Rose Theatre for the Performing Arts, Brampton, Canada
- Luma & Canteen Restaurants and Malaparte Event space, Bell Lightbox Building for the 2011 Toronto Film Festival
- Scarpetta Restaurant, Toronto

Current projects:

- La Maison Simons, West Edmonton Mall, Alberta, Canada. The chain’s first branch outside of Québec.
- Club Regent Casino, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
- Momofuku Restaurant, Toronto
- Monde Condominium, Toronto, designed by Safdie Architects