



MUMBAI LIGHTSCAPES

We talk to the director of DHA Designs, London, Peter Fordham whose experience in the lighting design industry stretches over 20 years. He has worked with architectural lighting design practices in New York, London, Sydney and Hong Kong, and is now working on a few projects in Mumbai. DHA Designs' project Everyman Theatre, which was in collaboration with Haworth Tompkins, recently received the RIBA Stirling Prize.

It rained on Camus's Algiers for five days. Satan fell for nine days straight on being cast down to hell. Somewhere between the devil and the deep sea, on the eighth day of having sent The email, my inbox is blessed. Peter Fordham has replied. Undaunted and ever prompt with the vertiginous questionnaire that follows, he takes time out to answer them in painstaking detail and, not in the I-talk-you-write manner either. More than a couple of thousand words, typed out, error free, numbered accordingly. Robbed of the experience of meeting him, he still turns out to be an interviewer's delight.

At a cursory glance it seems he's lived by the book. Engineering at Leeds, exchange student at Penn State, Intern at IALD (the birthing house of excellent designers in lighting), started working soon after graduating, and has been at it since then. But look closer and the straight jacket falls away. Just as the longish hair is tied back, hidden away from plain sight so are details like picking lighting design as a profession even though he was being groomed "for a structural engineering graduate program with Ove Arup." He credits a certain professor Craig Bernecker who taught lighting design at Penn State for inspiring him away from engineering and into the light.

Even the first big break is somewhere between sheer chance and predictability. In Australia, during an extended period of post-graduation travelling and struggling to make ends meet, he is introduced to Tony Dowthwaite, the head of NDY Light, Queensland. "Tony gave me a break and within a few days I travelled up the coast to meet him. NDY Light was swamped with a huge landscape lighting project in Brisbane (South Bank Park), a refurbishment of the park leftover from the World Expo in 1988. In addition to the park, I got to work on a number of large shopping malls, and took great



Luxury condominium Omarkar 1973 Worli, Mumbai, architecture by Foster & Partners and showsuite interiors by Hirsch Bedner Associates

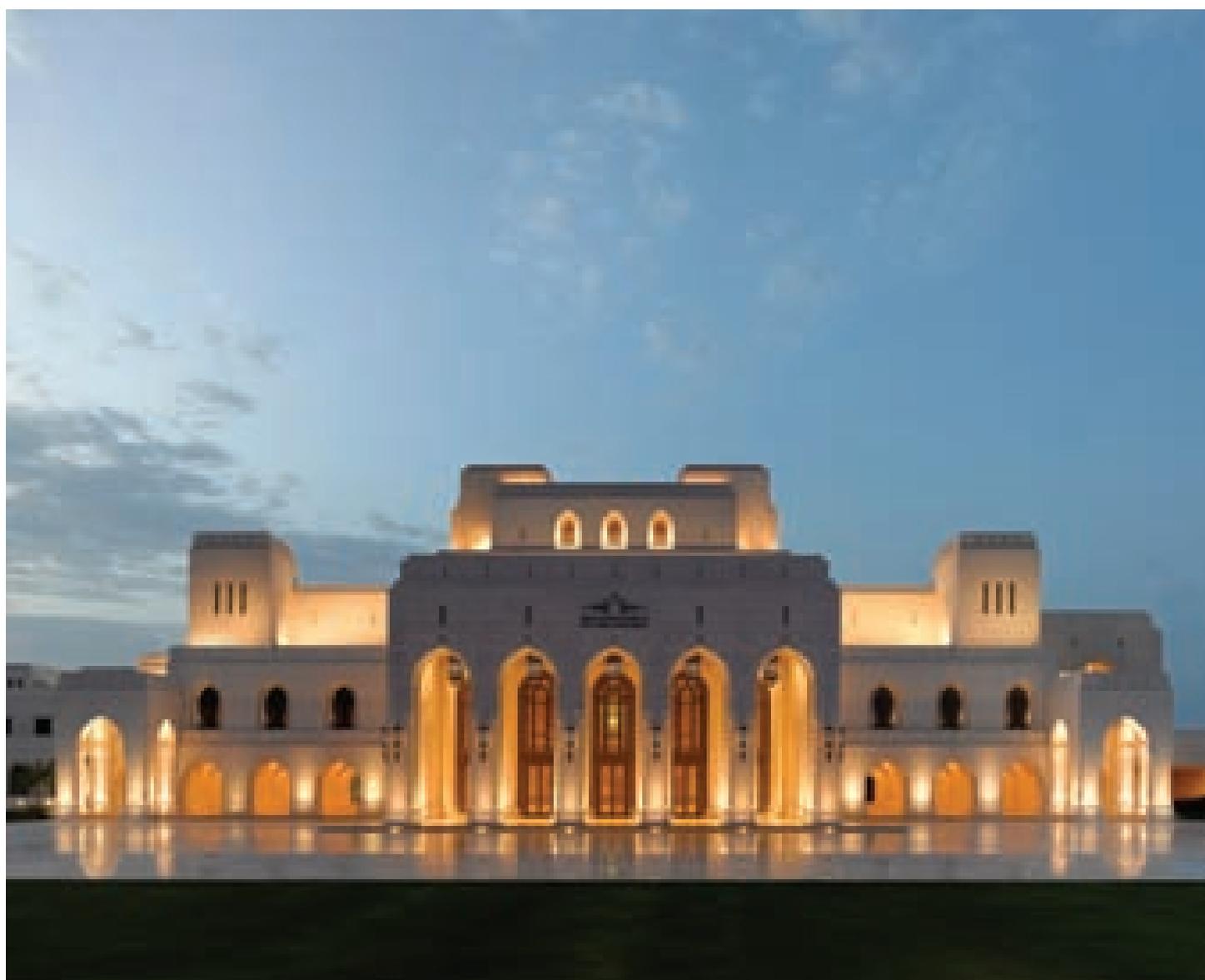
pleasure in presenting schemes to top-level directors at the young age of 22. Tony was the main reason I decided to follow the path of architectural lighting when I returned to the UK.”

And the UK seems to have returned to Mumbai to design luxury residential spaces, Omarkar 1973 being one of them. Comprising the British invasion are Hirsch Bedner Associates for interiors, Foster & Partners for architecture and design, LDA for landscape and DHA Designs, of which Fordham is director, for lighting design. Having done similar work around the world, this could have been a walk in the park for DHA Designs, but Fordham holds forth that the project was quite an ambitious endeavour; one of its kind at that scale for a relatively new developer, and he is particularly impressed by their vision. “Omarkar’s team clearly had the vision: they knew exactly what they wanted to achieve, but just needed help on how to achieve it.” Starting slowly, just on board for the show-flats and marketing suite, they also ended

up pitching for the main project. “Foster & Partners were already working towards detail design when we were appointed, so there was quite a bit of catching up to do.” Being from the same spot on the other side of the pond might have made negotiations easier. He says, “...the team at Foster & Partners were great to work with, and very open to our ideas to incorporate façade lighting within the skin of the building.” Talking about his work in Mumbai in detail, the various aspects of lighting design are seen from their minutiae to the larger picture. “...The three towers of the project are so tall, and together with the fact that the towers are residential, not commercial, our philosophy was to look at ways we could incorporate lighting within the architecture without having any impact on the future residents.” And the difference in experience from working in *Humara Bharat* and anywhere else in the world (and he would know) are visible in our social interactions, the uphill climb in avoiding *jugaad* and even in the special scorching favour of Ra, the

Sun god.

“The sun still rises in the east and sets in the west! Although in Mumbai, for example, there are over 1200 more hours of sunshine a year compared to London. That’s quite a difference. And when you consider the higher position of the sun in the sky above Mumbai, there is going to be a huge difference in how you perceive and react to daylight. This is an important consideration in our designs,” he says. In the battle against sunlight, the solutions serendipitously came to his rescue, all on their own. He explains, “One of our first projects was a marketing suite with a clear glazed entrance that faced directly east, and on the opposite wall, the client was considering a large-scale AV projection. Fortunately, we were able to introduce a shear drape to the glass wall to partially obscure the daylight, but what helped even more was the speed of construction opposite the main entrance. By the time the marketing suite had opened, the new buildings in front of the site helped to block



Royal Opera House, Muscat, Oman

out all of the early morning sunlight!” Ra appeased, there were logistical things to be dealt with. “We tend to spend more time during the procurement and value-engineering stages of our Indian projects, compared to other countries.” There are plenty of other issues too; in trying to provide value for money and yet having to use an alternative product that is not a perfect replacement for the designated one. “As an independent lighting designer, we also find that many of the larger manufacturers try hard to ‘muscle-in’ on some of our specifications, without really understanding many of the products we have specified,” among other things. He believes clients tend to be more understanding of the difference in the quality of the original product than the commercial agents. While these might be the frustrations, there are also things that pleasantly disarm. Fordham vacationed in India for his honeymoon (!) much before his work brought him here in 2010. “On all

of my trips, including my first trip with my wife, we have always received warm and gracious hospitality from our hosts in India.” Surprised at the work culture, he says, “Working in the UK, there is a sense (for me at least) of a clear divide between your work life and life outside the office. But during my business trips to India, the boundaries are broken down: it is very common to be invited back to a client’s home to meet the family and experience the Indian hospitality. I love it! And I feel very honoured to be in that situation.” From *atithi devo bhava* to Holi, there are some stereotypes, good or bad, that India can’t get away from. Our fascination with colour defines our aesthetic; the same colour that lighting designers tend to stay away from. Fordham is quick to defend this assumption, “Strong colours can be quite evocative, and can totally change an atmosphere, particularly in an enclosed space. But I still say that in architectural lighting, it needs to be used sensitively... Coloured lighting on buildings is something

that you have to approach with caution today, especially since technology has made it so much easier to create, and to afford.” He says it is often considered ‘special’ in emerging markets where this type of lighting is relatively new. Recalling examples that champion the use of colour, he says, “...in its day, the floodlighting of the Lloyds building in a lavender/blue light was quite extraordinary. It was the first use of coloured metal halide lamps on a permanent lighting installation in London, and still looks magnificent to this day. This monochromatic light works particularly well on steel, which was used extensively in the building’s cladding.” This was done by Imagination, a design company based in London with its roots in theatre and live events, where Fordham has also worked. DHA Designs’s history is also in theatre - founded by the American lighting designer, David Hersey, and his business partner, Adam Grater. In theatre, light is most effective when you don’t realise its presence overtly. Also true of museums



Everyman Theatre, Liverpool, UK.
RIBA Sterling Prize 2014

HIGHLIGHTS

Indian projects that you'd like to change:

There are many, many monuments, palaces and fantastic examples of Mughal architecture that I would love to light in India. Taj Mahal (of course) is on top of that list.

Projects you admire in India:

I've been impressed with many of Babu Shankar's projects in India (Integrated Lighting Design) and was rather taken by his presentation at an ACETECH conference a few years ago in Mumbai. LPA's (Lighting Planners Associates) design for the Aman Hotel in New Delhi deserved its IALD award in 2011 and set a new benchmark. Unfortunately, most of the more notable projects in India are by overseas lighting designers, but I'm sure as the profession grows, that will soon change.

Projects you dislike in India:

How long have you got? I'll have to pass on this one.

Lighting hero:

This is the point where most lighting designers say James Turrell and Dan Flavin! I think it was really the lighting designers from USA that initially inspired me, notably Fisher Marantz Stone, Ross De Alessi and Howard Brandston, and still continue to impress me to this day. I'll always be indebted to Tony Dowthwaite of course (TDL, Australia), who set me on this path in the first place.

Notable projects:

We were delighted last November when one of our projects, the Liverpool Everyman Theatre, won the prestigious RIBA Stirling Prize award for architecture, and we'd like to think that our exterior and interior lighting design went some way to help achieve that award!

Memorable projects:

Winning my first design award in 1993 for the Hoover Building façade lighting in London was quite memorable, considering what we went through with the design. It was a shame I wasn't there to pick it up. I'd like to say that all of the projects are memorable, of course I would! Next!

Current projects:

Omkar 1973 (residential development), Worli, Mumbai
One Avighna Park, Lower Parel, Mumbai
Baha Mar Resort, Nassau, Bahamas (opening spring 2015)

- another venue where DHA Designs have distinguished themselves (in the decade they've been doing it). "We try to hide our fixtures as much as possible, and let the lighting effect, rather than the luminaires, create the atmosphere."

Speaking of the work at the V&A Museum alone, they have worked on permanent gallery lighting installations in about 75 rooms. "We lit the external façade of the museum and the crown of the building above the main entrance. It is a real treat to get so close to the objects during the final commissioning stages of the project. We feel very privileged."

It proves to be challenging work, the

objects must be revealed keeping in mind the constraints of conservation. But "...even in the smallest display case, there is still an element of flexibility we can work with during the final setting up of the lighting - using different sized lenses, or adding scrims or filters to adjust the intensity and shape of the beam from each individual fiber optic head," concurrent with the idea that the curator or the artist have in mind. The easily witnessed passion for his work spills on to initiatives outside the office. Whether it be his enthusiasm for **mondo*arc** spreading its wings to India or the exciting opportunity the UN International Year of Light (2015) provides. "The cynics will

tell you that these magazines rarely reach beyond the lighting fraternity, but I don't agree...magazines such as **mondo*arc**, and their distribution on a global scale, goes a long way in raising the profile of architectural lighting."

Making a presentation to a class of four-year-olds about light and shadow in the coming week, he is excited to start the International Year of Light on this note, hoping it will raise the profile of the profession. And does it get interesting when he is trying to explain what he does for a living to those that might not be aware? "It depends on who is listening."

www.dhadesigns.com