Paul Nulty Opinion: Lighting Legislation

I love light. Most of us that work within the lighting industry live and breathe light. Unfortunately right now maybe I don't love light quite as much as I used to, let me tell you why.

I studied lighting design for performance and was fascinated by the interplay of contrast and drama, dark and light, the ability to use light to tell a story and change a space captured my imagination. It was an epiphanic moment when I realised that these qualities of light could be experienced not just objectively as art, from the outside such as an audience watching a play, but could also be used to affect spaces people exist within, experienced subjectively from the inside, in an everyday context; all the world is a stage after all.

The key to this epiphany for me still is the word people. How light and space affect people. Deep down I have a growing sense of frustration that as an industry we are starting to forget who we are designing for.

Flicking through pages of lighting magazines it strikes me that many of the latest projects are (lighting speaking) spaces with little contrast, lighting is provided by a single layer of background fluorescent illumination with virtually no punctuation, accent or emphasis. It seems to me it's the latest energy regulations pushing us down the route of bland, soulless lighting. Lighting that is first and foremost designed to tick boxes rather than meet the needs of the user.

In the 1990s we suffered LG3 whereby we were persuaded that workplace lighting with cut-off and low glare was the key to successful lighting only to realise that we had gone too far when our workplaces started to resemble gloomy caves. We've come a long way since then as we now consider the visual comfort of the user (note the user, not the space or task). I fear there is a certain sense of history repeating itself.

I absolutely agree that we all have a moral and social obligation to respect and preserve our environment and minimising energy usage is key, but are we taking it too far, to the extent we forget the aesthetic requirements of people?

We are human after all and have thus developed culture and a clear requirement of our culture is design – we appreciate nice things! I didn't purchase my new suit because it uses the least amount of thread. I bought it because it served a number of purposes; I look good in it (well I think so anyway). I enjoy wearing it, it's style gives me an air of confidence and enables me to fit in with my contemporaries and ethically speaking it wasn't made in a sweat shop on the other side of the globe. It wasn't the cheapest suit in the shop but I could afford it and decided it was worth the investment.

Should we be installing a lighting scheme purely because it's the lowest energy it can possibly be? Or should we consider visual interest, drama, enjoyment and social and cultural requirements of the end user?

I'm certainly not suggesting we start getting all frivolous and demand a return of the 100W GLS bulb but I do believe we have an obligation to deliver the best solution for the user of any given space. Of course the end users requirement may be ultra functional, ultra low energy but should that not be the choice of the end user?

Of course I'm being a little dramatic here but I maintain that we really must not lose site of the need to light for people and not light to tick boxes.

If there is a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel (pun intended) it's the increased awareness that darkness within our night-time environment is as important as light. External lighting schemes are using less energy than traditional solutions but increasing contrast, drama and theatricality.

The importance of lighting control is finally being realised but I suggest even the latest energy codes could do more to accept and embrace the use of lighting control.

Of course LEDs also offer some hope, in that they will eventually come of age to provide genuine, good quality consistent low energy lighting solutions. But the real danger is that as lower energy solutions become available the energy codes will reduce accordingly and we'll still end up with a tick-box solution rather than truly considering the needs of the end user.