



// Interviewer
Peter Earle MSL,
Specification Manager,
Philips Light Source
Technology

Q&A

Paul and Pete met on a damp Friday afternoon in a nice central London café, to debate the state of the industry, what quality of light really is and what the future might hold for lighting in general.



// How do you define quality of light? What does it mean for you?

Quality of light is about people and their perception, it isn't about ticking the boxes, it isn't really about whether it's 1 or 2 McAdam ellipses, or CRI 95, or luminous intensity, it's about how people relate to a space and the way a space is illuminated, and if it works and people like it it's the right quality of light. It's trying somehow to find a solution that fits. It's also a relative term, you need darkness to create contrast with the light, tonal and textural differences, you can't have light without having space. You try and light a space for people and in order to aid that relationship between space and people you use pigeon holes, like CRI or intensity, and we use those criteria as a guide to light the spaces. As a manufacturer you look at lots of factors like lumen output, efficacy, spectral output, colour rendering, colour consistency over lifetime, longevity, ease of installation. But for a designer that's not quality of light, that's quality of product or service. Quality of light to me is lighting people and spaces to achieve a high quality of environment.



// Interviewee
Paul Nulty,
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// Do you always have to have the best quality of light or can it be good enough?

The honest answer... we would love to have everything 1 McAdam ellipse, 100 CRI (chuckle, chuckle). In reality you have to take into account so many different factors as a specifier: So it's not just quality of light – it's quality of light relative to capital expenditure, to the programme. I suppose if you ask 'is it ok to have lower quality of light' the answer is no, if the question is 'is it ok to spend less money and have lower quality of light', depending on the brief the answer could be yes, if it's good enough then it's good enough. There are so many other factors to deal with, buildability, maintainability, customer service, cost. The question on what is quality of light is a real hard question to answer actually, as it's so subjective. The immediate answer is 'it's CRI' or 'it's spectral output', but that's not the answer in reality, because there are so many human factors and for me all of the technical data you get from manufacturers are just a pathway to achieving the real quality which is about people and spaces.

// How important is quality of light in Retail?

That's a good question. Quality of light is everything in Retail, everything. Retailers don't necessarily sit down and say I want really good quality of light, they say I want to sell more merchandise and it's got to look as good as it possibly can. Then they look at their bottom line and think 'I want that to happen and spend as little as I possibly can because every pound or euro I spend comes off my bottom line and I want as healthy a bottom line as possible'. Retailers are focused on the bottom line and managing their costs, and lighting is one of many tools they use to facilitate that. So as a designer, I have to have a completely different mindset when working with retailers – I have to think 'how can I facilitate this retailer in selling more merchandise?' Look at the latest fashion retailers, it's all about the brand, using light or in fact lack of light to create their brand and for you to buy into that lifestyle. It's all about bottom line!

// Do you find that all the manufacturers we know and love understand that about the retailers?

No not at all. The manufacturers are generally product driven, saying 'how do I get my latest fitting into the big supermarkets or fashion retailers', instead of thinking 'what environment am I trying to create and how can I achieve that'. That's why when you walk into some of the stores done purely by manufacturers with no lighting designers involved you will see how flat and dull it can be because they are thinking about the product rather than the people and the space.

// Here's a controversial question for you – what do you think about manufacturers who offer a one-stop-shop, that is they provide the products, they provide the lighting design, they do the maintenance, they offer a capital leaseback programme for example, in order to add value to what they provide to the end user? Here's a controversial response (smile)... I don't have a problem with that. Some designers might. But the question I would throw back at the manufacturers that do that is 'how can you guarantee that the product and the design that you specify is the right one for that client and the application?' How can they be completely and utterly unbiased in what they prescribe? So by definition one of the key value adds that the lighting designer or specifier can bring is independent advice. But at the end of the day, good design is good design, right design is right design and successful design is successful design, so I don't have a problem as long as it's done diligently, well and in an unbiased way. I only have an issue when it's done badly because it's about selling boxes and not about quality of light.

// Do you see differences in the quality of light of LED light sources compared to conventional light sources? What are they? Is LED lighting equal, inferior or superior to conventional light sources?

It's about finding the right solution to the challenge of the brief. We have specified lighting on Retail projects with 100% LED. We are one of the practices really embracing LEDs. Sometimes the LED light is a bit flat, especially in Retail, not quite the pop and sparkle you get with CDM. It's not any particular brand of LED, it's all the LED module manufacturers as we are using most of them in our specifications. I'd like to see more sparkle and pop.

// If you are not totally convinced yet by the quality of LED light sources, what are you still missing? What would convince you?

I think there will always be a place for other light sources – it's great, it's getting there but I think when you start using it in environments where quality of light really matters, fashion retailers for instance, this will be the test for LED. Arguably, in an office you have a grey carpet and white ceiling where the emphasis on quality of light can be different than perhaps in a Retail environment. In Retail, you put the light source under the microscope. I suppose in most applications LED is good enough, but in some higher end environments we need to be super critical of LED because it really does have to compete with other light sources. People want to raise the bar as well. But actually it's also about luminaire design, the fixture manufacturers really need help with this.

// Do you think that the current colour rendition system is good enough for LEDs. How do you see this being improved?

I think it is good enough for LEDs, I don't think LEDs are good enough for it. What does irk me, why do LEDs have to be treated differently to other light sources. Why can't we compare an LED directly to metal halide, why can't we just treat it as just another light source, just another lamp? It bugs me that people say, 'oh it's a semi-conductor it's different', but end users don't necessarily care what the light source is, it's just another source that emits light, they want to light a wall for instance and for it to look good. Photons are photons, the human eye perceives what it perceives.

// Do you see trends in lighting being driven by your clients and end users? What are they?

End users have an increasingly greater awareness of lighting and the effect of light, as an asset to be managed, so a trend is that people are more aware of a lighting system and what it can do. Then on the back of that people are phoning up and saying 'it has to be LED', based on hype. That's annoying.

// Total cost of ownership of an LED solution – is that important to you and your clients?

Yes to a point. They are interested in tax breaks, like the Enhanced Capital Allowance scheme. But again, bottom line is often the driver; if they can see a saving and enhance their bottom line they'll be interested. It's similar across office, Retail and other sectors.

// Daylight design and lighting controls – how are these elements used in lighting schemes?

There are many ways, specified by lots of different people, we specify lots of controls. We need a separate article on this! You need to understand what controls are used for. I suspect the future will be TCP/IP protocol with networked fixtures and end users are already familiar with this kind of infrastructure. Technology companies like Apple that are used to designing simple interfaces and who already work at the junction of creativity and technology will surely see an opportunity to engage at some point. Controls are very exciting at the moment.

Quality of light and the Bottom line