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*interview*

# THE BOTTOM LINE

*Lighting designer Paul Nulty met up with LED lighting pioneer Peter Earle on a damp Friday afternoon in a 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.*





Top Juicy Couture, Regent Street, London - as featured in mondo\*arc 70 (Pic: Nick Guttridge); Colbert, Sloane Square, London (Pic: David Loftus); Superdry, Regent Street, London (Pic: Supergroup & Precision Lighting)  
Above DKNY, Bond Street, London (Pic: Chris Gascoigne); Red or Dead 30 Year Anniversary Exhibition, Old Truman Brewery, London (Pic: Red or Dead)

Just under two years ago Paul Nulty founded his lighting design practice Paul Nulty Lighting Design (PNLD), based in London. Nulty and his team have a wealth of knowledge and practical expertise in providing the right lighting solutions for their clients, working in close collaboration with architects and designers providing creative and innovative lighting design consultancy. PNLD has appeared on seven awards shortlists in those two years, so it seemed a good time to ask Nulty about what he's been up to and what does 'quality of light' really mean to him? The designer was straight to the point. "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. If it works and people like it, then 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 might 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 and it's that difference that causes so many manufacturers who also offer 'lighting design services' to get it so wrong. Quality of light to me is lighting people and spaces to achieve a high quality of environment.

Everything else is just a means to an end." The tipping point question for disruptive technologies like LED is when do they become good enough to be the technology of choice. In reality specifiers have to take into account so many different factors. Nulty says, "It's not just quality of light - it's quality of light relative to other external factors such as capital expenditure. If you ask 'is it okay to have low quality of light' the answer is no, if the question is 'is it okay to spend less money and have lower quality of light', depending on the client brief the answer could be yes, if it's good enough then it's good enough." At the project level, there are many other factors to deal with like buildability, maintainability, customer service, cost. The question on what is quality of light is a difficult question to answer actually, as it's so subjective.

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Nike Manchester United Stadium Store, Old Trafford (Pic: Nike). The lighting scheme resulted in a low-energy retail environment - approximately 15W/sqm - which represents a 50% reduction when compared with the energy used by the previous store.

"The immediate answer for some (including a lot of manufacturers) 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." PNLD is becoming well known for its retail lighting design expertise, so what does Nulty think of how retailers perceive quality of light? "Quality of light is everything in retail. 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 must 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 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. 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 by creating a particular

environment?' 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! It's becoming even more important with the explosion in internet retailing. Now anyone can buy a product online so high-street retailing has to 'decommoditise' the product. It has to be about buying into a lifestyle or brand experience and lighting is a fantastic medium to facilitate this." But do all the lighting manufacturers understand that about the retailers? Nulty has a view: "The manufacturers are generally product driven, asking '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 designed purely by manufacturers, with no lighting designers involved, you will see how flat and dull it can be because they are thinking about the lighting product rather than the people and the space." There are lots of discussions going on now about whether LED is ready to be the volume alternative to the incumbent

technologies. Sometimes the answer can be yes, sometimes no. Nulty believes it's about finding the right solution to the challenge of the brief. PNLD has specified lighting on retail projects with 100% LED. They are one of the practices really embracing LEDs. Nulty explains: "I think there will always be a place for other light sources - LED is 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 colour rendering 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. 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. Actually it's also about luminaire design, the fixture manufacturers really need help with this."





Top Juicy Couture, Regent Street, London (Pic: Nick Guttridge).

Above The restaurant in the Montcalm Hotel, London as featured in mondo\*arc 66 (Pic: Tonik Associates).

When asked about current trends, Nulty says: “We notice that 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 as LED still isn’t a panacea.”

The use of daylight and controls in lighting designs is a real conversation point at the moment and Nulty and his team specify lots of controls. “We need a separate article on this! People really need to understand

what controls are used for and how the user ‘converses’ or interacts with them. 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.”

Nulty continues, “One of the most interesting products I’ve seen is the Philips Hue product (I’m not just saying that because you’re interviewing me). I don’t really rate

## HIGHLIGHTS

### Projects that you would like to change:

Since I started there’s one project that I found the most ‘frustrating’. It was a retail project and it shall remain nameless. Where the project failed was in the design and build contract. The contractor was responsible for the detail and implementation and completely changed our design, so we ended up with a poor interpretation of our concept. It’s a frustration with D&B contracts!

### Projects you admire:

I can’t help but admire the strategic planning and implementation of the Olympic Park lighting by Sutton Vane Associates and Speirs + Major’s body of work is second to none. I feel proud to have been a small part of Lighting Design Partnership, working on such projects as the Royal Albert Hall, the Albert Memorial and the now defunct Trafalgar Square lighting scheme.

### Projects you dislike:

It irks me that some lighting schemes tend to be product driven/centric - by that I mean projects where people are showing off the latest and greatest products and not actually concentrating on light.

### Lighting Hero:

I struggle to find one ‘hero’ in particular because I admire so many people and practices for their achievements, but I’d top the list with the likes of dpa lighting consultants for their business acumen; Speirs + Major for their body of work and brand; Paul Gregory of Focus Lighting is a phenomenal designer; Mike Grubb for achieving so much in what is by comparison to others a relatively short career; Andrew Bridge and Stephen Latham for blazing a trail 15 years ago with projects like the Hoover Building and Waterloo Station.

### Notable projects:

I just feel lucky to have worked on a whole range of interesting projects. I’m very proud of the body of work we’re building at PNLD and phenomenally proud of the seven awards shortlists we have received in just under the two years that we’ve been going - it’s unheard of.

### Most memorable project:

I don’t have a ‘most memorable’ but there are quite a few projects that stick in my mind. I’m proud of the work at Farnborough Business Park that won a RIBA award.

### Current projects:

Our workload has grown quickly and we’re currently working on a diverse range of projects, ranging from department stores in Asia, to private residences, to public realm, amongst many others. I’m extremely proud of the team and what we’re building here at PNLD as it continues to evolve.

the colour changing lamps themselves, they seem to be aimed at a particular type of consumer as they are a bit gimmicky. However, what is really interesting is the controls interface and architecture behind it; take that and use it within a white light, high CRI system and you have something very interesting indeed... Take note Philips!”

[www.paulnulty.co.uk](http://www.paulnulty.co.uk)

*Peter Earle MSLL has been working with LEDs for about a decade now. He works for Philips Lighting, spreading the word about innovative light source technologies.*