

The green, green
grass of home p.44

Walking the line in
Chandler, AZ p.48

Frank Lloyd Wright
meets an LED p.59

IES Annual Conference
preview p.62

LED+A

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Park and Ride

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a freeway in Dallas

September 2013
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Taking on Taliesin

Lighting designer Christopher Thompson is set to bring Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic residences into the 21st Century



Taliesin West, Scottsdale, AZ.

What happens when you combine fine arts, theater lighting and electrical engineering? You get Christopher Thompson, founder and principal of Studio LUX Architectural Lighting Design. With offices in Seattle, Los Angeles and London, Thompson and his team at Studio LUX have established a formula for success—the goal for all their projects is “the successful interplay of light and the human condition.”

After earning a BFA, Thompson, fascinated by how stage lighting could dramatically shift an audience's reactions, studied theatrical lighting and became lighting director for a touring opera company. He then attained a degree in electrical engineering and has since gone on to earn more than a dozen awards for residential lighting and corporate projects, including the Barrier Motors Mercedes-Benz Autohaus in Seattle in 2012.

Aside from these typical corporate clients and home owners, Thompson's eclectic client list is also dotted with names like Bill and Melinda Gates, the Nordstrom family, Lord Browne, Howard Schultz and Sylvester Stallone. An even bigger name is now on the roster.

Thompson's latest work involves two of Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic structures: Taliesin West in Scottsdale, AZ, and Taliesin in Spring Green, WI. As project lighting designer, Thompson will contribute to “Energizing Taliesin West,” a multi-year project mixing energy-efficient lighting with solar power to create a grid-neutral campus. The same renovation goals have been set for Taliesin in Spring Green. Thompson has also been asked to teach at the Frank Lloyd Wright Schools on both campuses on advances in lighting design techniques.

In a way you are collaborating with Frank Lloyd Wright on two of the most iconic architectural structures of the 20th century, The Taliesin West and the Taliesin Spring Green, and the implications for creating something historical seem evident. Tell us about the nature of the Taliesin projects. Are they exterior, interior or both?

Thompson: Both projects have us introducing levels of lighting design services along with upgraded lamping, namely LEDs. The goal is to slowly evolve the lighting systems throughout both campuses to high efficacy lighting, while at the same time being acutely sensitive to the historic nature of the buildings and settings. When I say slowly, what I mean is some of the changes will be outwardly embraced, and some of it will take time. That's the nature of change, but it's also the nature of a technology that is still in a state of maturation and acceptance, and I'm referring to LEDs. So our job as lighting designers is not just to design and specify, but to also educate.

What I'm most excited about is the prospect of a teaching design process, to work with the students on what we intend to do and use, while at the same time educate them on the nature of lighting design in the 21st century and how much things have changed in just the last few years. There are many areas of the campuses that are under-illuminated along with just poor applications of lighting. So it's a constant walk between the areas where students are sitting at drafting stations or computers for many hours, and the lighting that this function calls for, against the concern that some of the changes we are proposing could change the nature of the buildings such that the character would be lost.

Are there any design restrictions, considering that these projects are landmarks?

Thompson: There are no restrictions that we have been made aware of, but if there were, it would pale in comparison to the sensitivity of the client who wants to make sure that the character of the buildings is not lost. Imagine, unlike a business, residence or hospitality projects, our client is both aware of the nature and science of

'Unlike a business, residence or hospitality projects, our client is both aware of the nature and science of lighting, and they both live and work on our project'

lighting, and they both live and work on our project. Add to this the iconic and historic value of both campuses as well as the intrinsic appreciation of what Frank felt and practiced as an architect, and you can imagine at times this is design and decision-making by committee. All that said, the underlying tenet of Frank Lloyd Wright as a teacher and architect was that his work was a sketch, one that he wanted to evolve as technology and practices changed, and it's with that focus that I find my inspiration.

What are the similarities between Taliesin West and Taliesin Spring Green?

Thompson: Both campuses are in dire need of being upgraded and given that these campuses are not-for-profit, any savings made through the lighting changes are going to greatly improve the bottom line. Both projects are in a state of disrepair, and in the area of lighting the average house in America has better lighting than in many places around both

campuses. That said, enthusiasm is palpable in their desire to upgrade and embrace 21st century technology.

How will you create a net-zero energy use? Tell us about some of the lamp sources and techniques used for each project.

Thompson: It's too early to answer this but suffice to say that we're in negotiations with one of the major lamp manufac-

turers to help us. Some of the lamps and technology that we're going to need is not currently available, so we're partnering to bridge the gap.

You've worked with some well-known celebrities and clients. So tell us, who knew more about lighting, Stallone or Gates?

Thompson: It's ironic that you ask me this. I'm a firm believer that good lighting design should not be for just the iconic project or a high-worth individual, and in many respects good lighting and lighting design is very affordable if you ask the right questions. Where it becomes expensive is when you don't, and mistakes are made. To answer your question, both did (smile). ■

—Roslyn Lowe

