

CAN LIGHTING'S PAST BE SAVED?



As we go to press, the Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York City has recently served its last dinner and its furnishings are currently being auctioned off. The iconic restaurant, which opened in 1959, is set to move to a new location, a few blocks away on East 52nd Street at Park Avenue, according to the restaurant owners Julian Niccolini and Alex von Bidder. But the Four Seasons as so many knew it, the preferred power lunch location of New York's rich and famous, will be a thing of the past. (A new restaurant is proposed for the space but its design and how it will incorporate the landmarked elements of the interior has not been released.)

It's a true shame, for the restaurant's interior was not only a stellar example of modern design, it was also one of the last existing examples of lighting designer Richard Kelly's work. Kelly's three main principles of lighting—focal glow, ambient luminescence, and play of brilliants—were on display inside the Four Seasons in a tour de force, with the gridded ceiling of downlights, the four uplight trees that anchored the pool in the center of the space, and the shimmering aluminum-beaded curtains at the windows.

Watching the saga play out over the past several years in the New York press has been frustrating, and one wonders why Aby J. Rosen, the Seagram Building owner, could not realize the value of keeping a signature interior in place alongside other iconic artworks such as the Picasso tapestry *Le Tricorne*, which hung in the lobby and was selected specifically for the building's interiors and installed in 1959. (The tapestry was acquired by the New-York Historical Society and moved out of the Seagram in 2014.)

And while the architecture community was vocal throughout this debate, the lighting community appeared silent. I wonder, if the lighting community had joined the conversation, could they have helped further the case that the restaurant was of design significance beyond its architectural merits? This is not the first time I've addressed the issue of preserving

lighting's past. In our Nov/Dec 2014 issue, I wrote about this topic and was disappointed not to have received any feedback from the lighting community on this issue.

So how can we go about preserving lighting's past? Can we, or is it too difficult a task, knowing that the lighting life cycle of a project operates according to a different timeline than a building and must more regularly adapt to new code requirements and lighting technology evolutions?

Regardless of the answer to that question, never has there been a more critical time to take this issue seriously. The current young generation of lighting designers has no reference point when it comes to historical precedents or what it was like to practice lighting design in a non-LED world.

I would like to see the IALD and IES come together on this. It's not an issue of professional affiliation but of preserving the legacy of the professions' practitioners. Further, there should be a greater emphasis on offering courses at both the degree level and continuing education level on lighting design history. Both practitioners and industry members have to be reminded that the history of lighting design is equally as important as the history of light sources and technology. Lighting's design legacy needs to be reinforced along with its technical achievements.

Richard Kelly had the great respect of his architectural colleagues of the day, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson, and Eero Saarinen. If today's lighting community wants to cultivate respect on the same scale and be seen on equal footing with design colleagues—as we continuously speak of doing—then the lighting community needs to step forward and map out a plan here. Without respect for one's own past, how can others be expected to show concern?

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